

# Craft groups: Sites of friendship, empowerment, belonging and learning for older women

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**Abstract:** *This article reports on a qualitative research project conducted in Victoria, Australia, with nine older women. The purpose of the research was to explore the women's experience of involvement in craft groups, and specifically, the impact of this involvement on their sense of well-being. Traditionally the health of older people has been examined in relation to medical markers of physical well-being, and often, decline. We were interested to widen this perspective to understand the impact of social connection, belonging and ongoing learning and development on the ageing experience. While the focus of the groups was on domestic craftwork, the process of coming together as a collective appeared to have significant bearing on the holistic health of the women involved. Consistent with feminist groupwork literature, the findings indicated that the women we interviewed experienced the group setting as affirming and generative in a number of ways. These include providing an avenue for mutual aid, addressing isolation, affirming individual and collective strength and wisdom, while acquiring new skills, and normalising concerns regarding health and family.*

**Key words:** *craft; women; health; groupwork; altruism; ageing*

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## **Introduction**

We know that in Australia 2.1 million people routinely engage in art and craftwork as a hobby on a regular basis (ABS, 2007). Even so very little is known about what factors generate individual ongoing interest in craft work and how engagement in these activities might promote health and wellbeing. A great deal of research and literature has been devoted to assessing the fiscal 'burden' increasing numbers of older people, particularly women, are placing on the formal health care system (Productivity Commission, 2005). However, very little attention has been paid to the restorative social support and health benefits older people derive from engaging in informal, low cost craft group activities. This inattention has been noted elsewhere...

The impact of the arts broadly construed on the overall quality of people's lives is without a doubt the most understudied and possibly most underrated issue in the field of social indicators research' (Michalos, 2005, p.12)

In our research we explored how older women perceived the relationship between their participation in craft gatherings and ongoing personal wellbeing.

As women interested in craftwork ourselves, and entering a stage of our lives where we have become more aware of our own ageing process, we were intrigued to find out more about the role of crafting in the lives of older women. We began this investigation with a general 'hypothesis' that older women's engagement with craftwork in a group setting could ameliorate the need for accessing formal health services. We wished to look beyond the medical model to notions of social connectedness to help explain the holistic health and lived experiences of older women involved in craft activities.

## **Ageing women in Australia**

Gender related differences in ageing are very apparent in the Australian population, with life expectancy being 77 years and 83 years for men and women respectively. Currently there are 22% more women aged 65 and over than men, and twice as many women aged over 85 years than

men (ABS, 2007). The feminisation of later life has increasingly become a feature of the new longevity (Russell, 2007, p.99). In conjunction with these demographic differences Australian women in the 65+ age group are far more financially vulnerable than their male counterparts on four accounts. Firstly, many have either not been employed in the paid workforce or have had significant periods of time out raising children. Secondly, where older women have had a history of employment in the workforce they were amongst a generation that received significantly lower wages than men. Thirdly, those women that did work were rarely linked into a superannuation scheme in their own right. Finally, since women live longer than men they need to financially support themselves during this time. Together these financial dimensions impact upon the ongoing social wellbeing of women as they age.

The longer life expectancy of women, coupled with the fact that women have predominately married men older than themselves, means that a substantial proportion of ever-married women experience widowhood in their later years (Russell, 2007). The majority of older people who have never married, divorced or widowed live alone, with the number of older women in Australia living alone outnumbering the number of men by more than two to one (Bishop, 2000, cited in Russell, 2007, p.107). These figures help us understand how significant notions of social connectedness and social isolation may be in terms of influencing wellbeing amongst older women. Taken together, factors related to life expectancy, employment history, living arrangements and financial status begin to help shape an holistic understanding of how the experience of old age will be influenced by a wide range of social determinants.

## **Social determinants of health**

Social determinants of health relate to the way in which structural, cultural and psycho-social factors beyond personal biology influence individual and community health outcomes (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006). These factors may include, but are not limited to employment history, educational attainment, health behaviours, degree of perceived control over life events, perceived social status, and levels of caring responsibilities. In particular, there is now clear evidence that levels of

social engagement and support are beneficial to health, while ongoing social isolation leads to ill health (Stansfeld, 2006, p.148). Social support in this context is defined as 'information leading the subject to believe that s/he is cared for and loved, is esteemed and valued and belongs to a social network of communication and obligation' (Cobb, 1976, cited in Stansfeld, 2006).

In this regard social ties beyond the family including friends and neighbours can play a considerable role in enriching the lives of older people. These particular relationships are rarely acknowledged as significant and life sustaining by service providers and policy makers (Russell, 2007). It is within this milieu that we see informal craft groups making the greatest contribution to individual and collective wellbeing amongst the older women we talked to.

In their commentary about older people and the social determinants of health, Watson and Hall outline five public health and personal strategies to enhance social well being in old age. These include: To plan for retirement to maximise financial capital and minimise loss of self esteem when leaving paid employment; to build social capital through involvement in neighbourhood and community activities; to build psychological capital by strengthening friendships and relationships; to build human capital by developing new skills; to use discretionary time in retirement to build human, psychological and social capital (Watson & Hall, 2001, p.25). We found each of these strategies clearly demonstrated by the nine women we interviewed in relation to their active participation in craft group activities. While the creation of domestic craft artefacts was important in and of itself to the women we interviewed, the process of coming together in a group to craft was most significant in terms of fostering social connectedness, enduring friendships and a very real sense of belonging.

## **Researching the groupwork process**

We first sought approval to carry out this research through making an application to the Deakin University Ethics Committee. Once this approval was given we made contact with two craft groups operating locally in Geelong, and sent group leaders a copy of the research Plain Language Statement and consent forms. We asked if we might meet

with the groups and then interview individual members privately using a semi-structured interview format. Both groups agreed to participate in the research. We conducted six interviews during November 2007 and a further three during February 2008. We quickly learned that the process of coming together as a group to craft was an integral activity in the lives of the women we spoke to. We decided to examine the groupwork literature while concurrently analysing the interview data. In this next section, we outline some of the practical aspects relating to each of the group's leadership, membership, structure, and rules.

### **Group membership**

The two craft groups we engaged with differed significantly in size and structure. Both groups were made up entirely of women, although neither had specified they would be gender specific as an overt membership rule. One group, The Purple Pixies began 17 years ago and emerged out of a class of women learning to spin. This group has open membership and started with nine participants. The Pixies have grown to 76 in number and include women of all ages. The second group started over 30 years ago as a gardening club with just six participants. After 6 years the focus turned to craft activities and the group formed an association with Red Cross, producing items for sale in the local fundraising shop. In this group membership has remained static at six, with just three new people being introduced after the passing of three original members. As such this group has closed membership and all are over the age of 70.

### **Leadership and purpose**

The impetus for starting both groups was derived out of the energy and informal leadership of two individual women. The principal focus for the Pixies was initially on learning a diverse range of crafting techniques including quilting, macramé, felting, beadwork and appliqué. While peer teaching and learning craft remains a key function of the group, the purpose has expanded to include a strong commitment to supporting women with cancer and resourcing local rest homes and hospitals through crafting personal care items and quilted bedcovers. Betty (not her real name) started the Pixies by inviting women expert in different

craft techniques to share their knowledge with a group of friends. This collaborative learning model has continued, but due to health problems Betty's daughter Susan (aged 54) has now begun to play a more significant role in organising the group activities. Betty however, remains the key contact person. As such there has been some informal 'succession planning' for the ongoing leadership of the Pixies.

Elizabeth (not her real name) started the gardening group to consciously address a number of social and practical issues including, the need for older people in the neighbourhood to get help with their gardens, to bring together a group of relatively isolated housewives, and to generate interest and fun around gardening. As the members of the group have aged themselves they have instead focused their energy on crafting. Even so, the purpose of using the group activity to make a contribution to community is still very much in the foreground, with an association now being formed with the local Red Cross. Elizabeth is the driving force behind organising the group and members refer to her as 'the Boss'.

### **Group meeting process**

Due to the differing sizes of the groups, the Purple Pixies and the Red Cross craft group had different meeting protocols. The Pixies all meet together at a local football club hall on a fortnightly basis. Large tables are set up for the day and members bring their own lunch. Tea and coffee is supplied and members simply bring an item of craft they wish to work on. During alternative weeks a small subgroup meet at Betty's home for the day and work specifically on sewing cancer comfort packs and hospital quilts. On these days about five women set up their sewing machines at Betty's long kitchen table and together they make carefully crafted cloth bags with embroidery and appliqué. These are distributed to local hospitals and are given to breast cancer patients to carry their X-rays, under arm support cushions, lavender bags and other personal items. Wool and sewing materials to make the contents of the packs are also distributed to three local nursing homes where residents knit beanies and small scarfs for inclusion in the packs. At any one time 20-30 people can be crafting contributions for the cancer comfort packs, both within and outside of the group setting.

The small group of six women crafting for the Red Cross meet once a

month, each taking a turn to host the days activities in their own home. In this group the members all work on crafting a similar item to sell, such as making a cushion or doll, crocheting doilies or knitting jumpers and babies clothes. There is not such a focus on learning new craft techniques in this group, and most of the members are accomplished at knitting and sewing. Throughout the rest of the month the six women contribute to the staffing roster for the local Red Cross fundraising craft shop. During the last few years the shop raised over \$130,000 from the craft work sold to contribute to national and international Red Cross projects (*Geelong Times*, 2008, p.2)

Both groups demonstrated a range of group 'rituals' or traditions in the process of carrying out their activities. Food played a central role in both groups with the women bringing and sharing their own culinary contributions for morning and afternoon teas and lunch. We noticed when we met with the groups that swapping recipes and sharing stories and knowledge about the preparation of food and growing fruit and vegetables were central conversation topics shared by both groups. Both groups also marked significant annual festivities such as Christmas and Easter through their craft work and using rituals such as gift giving.

While the women we spoke to did not make specific reference to a feminist framework or use language commonly associated with emancipatory practice, the relationship with principles of empowerment and self efficacy were unmistakable. Cognisant with early reflections on women- only groups (Hanmer and Statham, 1988), we found the women we spoke to perceived the craft groups as a place where they could learn from each other, validate feelings, discover their right for verbal and creative expression, experience autonomy, foster support and service each other as well as other women outside of the group. It was evident that inclusion in the group fostered the development of enduring personal friendships. These groups were without doubt sites for 'secret women's business'.

In the next section, we explore in some detail how involvement in craft groups contributed to participants' sense of well being. The reflections of our interviewees raised themes which resonated strongly with the literature. Together, an examination of the women's stories, alongside relevant craft, ageing and groupwork literature, teases out how the craft group experience makes a difference to the lives of older women.

## **Craft groups as sites of teaching and learning**

The group craftmaking experience has been described as one which provides an avenue for the development of personal skills and commitment, as well as a sense of active citizenship (MacEachren, 2004). All of the women interviewed in this project identified learning new skills as an important part of their craft group experience, often linking new skill development with their sense of well-being. One interviewee observed that interest in and connection to the group was sustained over time because everyone was continually learning. She contextualised this learning experience in relation to her own ageing process:

*... at my age in the mid 70s, you think you've learnt all you can learn, but [in the group] there is always another thing to get enthused about. (Betty)*

Volunteering literature generally, highlights that the development of new skills, coupled with a sense of altruism and desire for companionship, is a primary factor prompting many individuals to engage and continue in volunteer activities that provided new learning experiences (Baldock, 1998; Johnson & Wilson, 2005). Another group member commented that keeping interested in new things was vital to her health and well being, observing that involvement in the craft group '*... keeps your interests outside your own four walls*' (Thelma). Having interests (and being interested) has been described as comprising both an emotional state and a disposition, which creates flow-on effects to other experiences of well-being. Such '*a posture of curiosity and inquisitiveness*' brings not only immediate pleasure, but can lead to a more active life and a greater range of skills and sense of overall competence in a range of life activities (Dik & Hansen, 2008, p.95).

For some women who were interviewed, the opportunity to teach new skills to others was also a satisfying component of their group involvement. '*I enjoy helping people to learn things*' (Betty). When someone admires your work and asks you for the pattern, it

*makes you feel good, brightens you up, lifts you up... I love it when someone asks, you know, how did you do that?... and you feel, I suppose, a little bit important. (Elsie)*



Feminist groupwork perspectives identify this sense of accomplishment and empowerment as important. The group experience for women, whether coming together as a discussion group or around more task-centred activities such as craft projects, can be an important source of mutual aid and sharing, in which teaching and learning new skills provides acknowledgement and validation of women's strength and wisdom, as well as promoting the development of new interests (Beynon & Hall, 1997).

The reciprocity of both learning new skills and teaching skills to others was specifically commented on by some interviewees:

*basically we all contribute ... I contribute to them and then I've learnt things from them. (Alice)*

In discussing the well-being of older people in relation to social connectedness, Siegrist et al. (2004) suggest that a sense of reciprocity can be a particularly meaningful form of interpersonal exchange. Receiving the appreciation of others can contribute to a sense of individual agency and self-esteem with flow-on effects to greater health and well-being across a range of experiences (Siegrist et al., 2004). This is important at all ages, but perhaps particularly important in older age, when one's sense of oneself as a 'contributor' or with something meaningful to offer may have diminished due to role changes associated with ageing. At the same time, women in the group who felt they were 'one of the crowd' (Pat) and did not see themselves as teaching anything, felt comfortable in just going along and enjoying themselves.

## **Friendship, support and empowerment**

All the women interviewed in our study described the formation of friendships, and the mutual support this offered, as an integral part of their craft group experience and significant to a positive sense of self. Literature around healthy ageing and well-being in older age consistently affirms the importance of social connectedness, friendship and companionship. Group belonging and interaction can be an important way of reducing isolation and providing support for older women in an

environment where they can share and normalise concerns (Beynon & Hall, 1997). One participant put it like this: *'We are all women, older women, and we hear about operations, and husbands and grandchildren and children...'* (Betty). The women described how the group provided an opportunity to socialise for fun and laughter, and to share concerns and be involved in each other's lives:

*We take interest when one is having a grandchild or family stuff, or when one is ill... we enquire after each other and if there's anything we can do to help we certainly do it...we are just involved in the other members.* (Thelma)

According to Kinsel (2005, p.37), involvement with others provides a resource that can help ameliorate some of the challenges and losses older women experience. She suggests that *'finding ways to bring older women together to focus on relatedness and interdependence'* was an important ingredient in building on and extending women's strengths. One interviewee clearly stated the significant role of friendship in the group for her, saying *'friendship is the greatest part of all of it...'* (Thelma). Indeed, for some, the craft itself could become secondary to being with one's friends, with one interviewee commenting about her future involvement in the group,

*I think that I will snatch at little bits of craftwork so that I can stay with my friends... as long as you've got a little bit of something in your hand you've got the perfect right to be there!* (Pat)

Another participant linked the friendship experienced in the group directly to her own and others' health and well-being:

*Companionship and laughter, talk about your family, and things you can't say to them – it's great. I think, honestly, it adds to well-being, if you've got company; if you do nothing as you're getting older, you really feel terrible... [In the group] no one dwells on the fact if you don't feel well.* (Elsie)

Some connections within the groups had extended over many years; reflecting on 30 years of friendships formed in groups with other women, one participant commented that *'some days we didn't do anything, we just sat there and laughed'* (Elizabeth). It has been suggested that a

view of oneself as resilient, can sustain women through the sometimes challenging process of getting older (Gattuso, 2003). Gattuso describes a model of 'resilient ageing,' which, unlike 'successful ageing' paradigms, acknowledges and normalises the complexities and vulnerabilities associated with older age, as well as the wisdom and empowerment of later life. The development of narratives of resilience, drawing on past experiences of loss, change and coping, through a shared process of life review with peers, may be particularly important to older women, in 'providing an affirming story to live by as they age' (Gattuso, 2003, p.176).

The women described the groups as providing avenues for them to move beyond ill-health and engage productively with life and with each other. One woman described her own experience:

*I have a few health problems, and sometimes you get up and think I feel terrible today, and you can go really down when you feel like that...then I think to myself, I can't do this to myself, I'd be better off sewing.*

She also commented on how she had observed other women using the group to achieve greater well-being, reflecting on one group member who had been unwell, but through involvement with the craft group, had found

*a reason to get going... she only needed company...and she is not the only one... I have other members of the group who have been very ill and once they come along... they're laughing and talking and the main thing is when they're leaving they'll say I feel good ... (Betty)*

Another group member described the importance of keeping active and connected to her sense of well-being: 'If you do nothing as you're getting older...then you really feel terrible' (Alice). For her, the craft group figured in her long term plan for healthy ageing:

*'I'll just keep going, as long as we all can be healthy, that's the most important thing, we are all in our 70s and we don't know what's around the corner, we just keep going ...'*

Shearer and Fleury (2006) observed, based on focus groups with over fifty women aged 55-93, that social engagement and emotional

sharing amongst peers engendered a sense of collectivism which enabled women to 'weave a web' of protection as they aged. The women in their study observed that peers were, in some respects, able to see them more holistically than family: seeing them for who they once were, as well as supporting them in who they might become (2006, p.13). Specifically in relation to craft group participation, Schofield-Thompson and Littrell (2001, p.50) see involvement with others in handcraft guilds as a conduit to healthy ageing, consciously chosen by women as a means of preserving autonomy and dealing effectively with changing life conditions. Parr coins the evocative phrase 'geographies of belonging' to refer to craft making collectives as sites for empowerment, creative expression and connectedness (2006, p.162).

The women interviewed commented that the formation of new friendships around the love of craft engendered a much-needed sense of belonging at times when they had felt isolated during important life transitions, for example, upon being widowed. One woman commented that with the death of her husband and the busy-ness of her adult children, the craft group provided a vital opportunity to '*meet people and be in company with other ladies.*' This helped to dispel loneliness and preventing her from '*thinking too much*' or dwelling on negatives (Ailsa). For another woman, her involvement in the craft group had been the start of a new social life with women her own age. The craft group, she described, was '*a reason to change dress, to think tomorrow I go to work...*' and to enjoy the diversity of other women (Helena). An older participant, in her late eighties, reflected on craft group members' ageing and passing away, and new members arriving: '*three of our ladies have passed away and then we bring other ladies in who are on their own*' (Muriel). '*When you live on your own*', she observed, '*the company and being "there for each other" was important*'; in fact, from the group's inception several decades previously, '*it was the companionship that started it*' (Muriel).

## **Altruism, purpose, and mattering**

Coming together to create craft was also an altruistic act for the women we interviewed, whose group involvement produced tangible results for the benefit of others, often whom they would never see or know. Hinterlong et al. (2007) describe how altruistic work as an unpaid

volunteer or provider of informal social assistance not only helps others, but provides the giver with access to a range of needed resources such as social support. These resources then create buffers against stress, and provide a source of empowerment and emotional gratification, which generates well-being and improved health (Hinterlong et al., 2007). Somewhat paradoxically – although understandably, from a feminist perspective highlighting gender role socialisation – a study by Baldock (1998) revealed that women who engaged in volunteering also described this work as ‘selfish,’ as they derived a great deal of enjoyment from it, away from their home and family caring roles.

Acts of altruism can create an experience of mattering to others, possibly a fundamental human need, which in turn can generate a sense of purpose in life, which may be strongly related to older adults’ subjective sense of wellbeing and lower levels of depression (Dixon, 2007). This sense of purpose, mattering, and achievement, with its tangible outcomes, challenges dominant social views that being old is negative and that older women are to be pitied (Kinsel, 2005). As Beynon and Hall observe, challenging negative stereotypes around women’s ageing, and affirming women’s creativity, wisdom and strength, is an important source of individual and collective well-being (1997).

The women who participated in our project spoke of their sense of enjoyment and fulfilment in doing creative work that benefited cancer patients and others experiencing vulnerability and/or ill-health. The creation of ‘cancer comfort-cushions’ for women receiving chemotherapy for example, involved a number of women, including frailer women in nursing homes, as well as those in the craft groups who organised the project, in an activity that was both altruistic and personally rewarding. Engaging in these activities collectively also provided a sense of solidarity amongst the participants:

*We tend to do a lot of charity things... We’ll stand up at [the craft group] and say, ‘right girls we’ve got a whole lot of quilts that need to be put together,’ and the girls will come up and take some [pieces] home and bring them back the following fortnight all done. They’ll always put in and help out. (Elsie)*

This dedication and effort was, according to another interviewee

*a lot of work, but you get something back ... I look forward to coming and making*

*and doing the work to give something back.* (Francis)

*Everybody gives a little, regardless of what it is, and I think it's just a matter of self importance, to know you have contributed to whatever it is...at the end of the day you have achieved something.* (Elizabeth)

By making an item that is useful to another, the craft maker experiences a sense of active citizenship and communitarianism (MacEachren, 2004). In a sense, this is potentially a form of women reclaiming and validating their nurturing social roles on their own terms (Kitzeinger & Wilkinson, 1997). Indeed, as Johnson and Wilson (2005, p. 115) point out, textile handcrafts in particular, have historically been the 'most visible result of women's labour,' expressing identity and leaving a 'trail of artefacts' valued by family and friends. Art that is created communally and appreciated in the public sphere can be a particularly empowering form of representation and expression (Parr, 2006), bridging the public and private divide that so often has marginalised women's lives and work, and which older age may intensify.

## **Conclusion**

This article has focused specifically on the 'we' in craft working (Schofield-Tomschin & Littrell, 2001): that is, women's involvement in craft groups. In another article the authors, explore more fully the benefits of craft working at a community level (Maidment & Macfarlane, not yet published).

For the women we spoke to, carefully hand making individual artefacts was without doubt a meaningful activity. However, the process of belonging and contributing to the craft group was a major source of personal support for these older women, where reciprocity, friendship, learning and empowerment were derived from being part of the collective. Together, both of the groups we engaged with for this research contributed vast amounts of time, energy and expertise to raise money and support local charities and people in need.

While much of the policy literature on demography focuses on the fiscal burden emanating from an ageing population, there is a counter story to tell. We believe the support, strength and health promoting

qualities of these naturally occurring community networks contribute a great deal to the health and well-being of older women. These self sustaining low cost groups operate throughout the country, quietly making significant contributions to the social and cultural capital of our community, while nurturing the lives and achievements of older women.

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