

The relationship between quilting and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Background Within public health, activities that promote and maintain wellbeing remain limited and relatively unexplored. In particular, little is known about the relationship between creative craft hobbies and wellbeing in the general population.

Methods Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with women from a local quilting group. Ideas and experiences of quilting in relation to wellbeing were explored with participants. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.

Results Cognitive, emotional and social processes were uncovered, which participants identified as important for their wellbeing. Participants found quilting to be a productive use of time and an accessible means of engaging in free creativity. Colour was psychologically uplifting. Quilting was challenging, demanded concentration and participants maintained and learned new skills. Participants experienced 'flow' while quilting. A strong social network fostered the formation of strong friendships. Affirmation from others boosted self-esteem and increased motivation for skill development. Quilts were often given altruistically and gave quilting added purpose.

Conclusions The findings illustrate how creative craft hobbies such as quilting can be a meaningful vehicle for enhancing wellbeing. This study sets the foundation for further research into creativity, creative hobbies and hobbies in general.

Keywords health promotion, mental health, public health, wellbeing

Introduction

Studies on what fosters wellbeing in the general population have largely focused on the use of green space and exercise.^{1–4} Less attention has been paid to other leisure activities, including craft hobbies. However, creative craft hobbies are becoming increasingly popular for women of all ages⁵ and the craft industry contributes around £3 billion pounds (GVA) per annum to the UK economy.⁶

Creativity

The relationship between creativity and health is complex and poorly understood. Creativity has often been linked negatively to health. Many talented writers, composers and painters have suffered mental illness.⁷ Conversely, creativity has been associated with healthy states of mind and being.⁸ Moreover, as a therapy, arts and crafts have an established role to help people understand their problems, improve physical and mental functioning and divert attentions from pain and anxiety.⁹

Leisure activities

In the elderly, leisure activities have positively been correlated with mental wellbeing.^{10,11} Research into the meanings of arts and crafts activities in the elderly suggest that art in older age contributes to wellbeing in a number of ways. Reynolds found that art undertaken as a hobby engendered feelings of personal growth, mastery, confidence and social connectedness.¹² Additionally, art offered opportunities to experiment with aesthetically pleasing colours and textures and heightened awareness of nature. Likewise, another study identified that artistic activities in older age created direction, affirmed ability and encouraged personal development.¹³

Creative craft hobbies have received some attention within occupational therapy and textile research but less in the public health literature. Piercy and Cheek¹⁴ explored

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how quilting contributed to social relationships in predominately older vocational quilters. Participants identified that relationships were created and enhanced through teaching skills and giving quilts to younger family members, developing friendships with other quilters and establishing connections with the wider community through charitable donations of quilts. Others have found learning and validation of female identity as important aspects of quilting.^{15,16} Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell¹⁷ described older women's experiences of textile crafts as providing a sense of accomplishment, a sense of purpose and social contacts.

This qualitative study explored the meanings of quilting in order to identify its potential for enhancing cognitive, emotional and social wellbeing. While other studies have largely recruited people of an older age or with chronic health problems, this group of quilters was from the general population.

Methods

Setting and participants

The study was conducted with a quilting group in Glasgow which has existed for 8 years and has 55 women members, the majority being white, British, middle aged and older, and middle class. It meets monthly, in the evening.

Each member of the group was contacted by letter with full details of the study. When they returned a consent form, they were contacted (E.B.) to arrange an interview.

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule explored participants' experiences of quilting in relation to their wellbeing. With little background literature on the subject an interview schedule was constructed based on knowledge of the area (J.A.) and narrative research.¹⁸

Two pilot interviews were conducted (E.B.). Afterwards, the interview schedule was only minimally refined and therefore pilot interview transcripts were included in analysis.

Procedure

Twenty-nine interviews were conducted between February and June 2010 (E.B.): 25 in person and 4 by telephone (at participants' request). Interviews lasted between 26 and 100 min. Twenty-seven interviews were audio-recorded; notes were taken for the remaining two (at participants' request).

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. Four lengthy transcripts were analysed by both authors and used to develop themes, connections and overarching

theme titles. These themes were validated and added to while analysing the remaining transcripts (E.B.). When a new theme was unveiled previous transcripts were scrutinized to determine whether it featured previously. Following detailed analysis, themes were studied and interpreted to elicit possible meanings.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research with Humans.

Results

The majority of participants (retired and working) were from professional backgrounds—predominately scientists, teachers and health professionals. One participant taught quilting vocationally; three held quilting classes/workshops with negligible monetary gain. Six participants held City and Guild qualifications in quilting, mostly undertaken in retirement (see Table 1).

Themes

Themes identified related to: the practical process of quilting; the social side of quilting and the end product (see Table 2). While there were no discernable differences in the practical aspects, the social side of quilting appeared to have greater meaning for retired participants. Similar experiences were reported by beginners and established quilters. Verbatim quotes have only been altered to preserve anonymity, for brevity or for clarity. Pseudonyms have been used. The only negative mentioned was potential cost, although no-one saw this as a deterrent.

The practical process of quilting

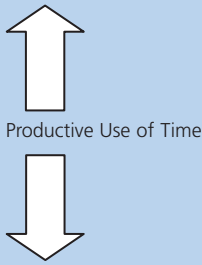
Creativity and control

Quilting was an accessible means for participants without an arts background to be creative, to work with their hands,

Table 1 Background characteristics of participants

Age (years)	<40	41–50	51–60	61–70	71–80
No. of participants	2	2	5	14	6
Employment status	Student	Unemployed	Employed	Partially retired	Retired
No. of participants	1	0	7	1	20
Years quilting	1–5	6–10	11–20	21–30	30+
No. of participants	5	5	11	6	2

Table 2 Identified themes

The Practical Process of Quilting	
Creativity and Control	
Colour	
Flow, Distraction and Relaxation	
Challenges	
The Social Side of Quilting	
Friendship, Support and Sharing	
Affirmation	
The End Product	
Purposeful	

explore and incorporate different colours and textures and to produce something tangible that displayed their talents, efforts and skills. Participants perceived this as different from the rest of their lives, offering a source of wellbeing which they did not find in their jobs. Participants felt in control of their creative journey. Many participants expressed that creativity had been stifled, tasks externally defined and end products less tangible in their day-to-day lives.

'I like the idea of having something to show for my time because most of my life I haven't been able to say that's a product [of my work]... I've always thought of myself as very pragmatic... things have to be done in a set protocol but doing these [quilting design] classes I have become aware that a scientist can be creative as well and I'm being allowed to be free and easy with things and to explore things like colour and shape...'. (Morag)

'It's [quilting] a good way for me to express... [work is] very regimented... someone is always going to dictate results but I think it's quite nice to have some control.' (Iona)

Colour

Participants identified that the use of bright colours had uplifting effects on mood. This was particularly important in winter.

'... when we came back to this country the sky was grey... many of the houses hadn't been stone cleaned... they were a very dark grey... it was deeply depressing... so when you go for something like patchwork and quilting where there are all these colours it really gives you a lift.' (Ailsa)

Flow, distraction and relaxation

The majority of participants reported that the creative process captivated them, distracted them and they described an experience analogous to 'flow'. There was loss of self-consciousness

and lack of awareness of things going on around them, which displaced anxieties and facilitated relaxation.

'It [quilting] helps me detach myself from life... I just put myself in a little bubble... I become totally absorbed in it... because I have to concentrate, other things disappear, forget what else I'm supposed to be doing, forget that time is passing... you become detached because you've got something to focus on'. (Heather)

'you get out of yourself... you forget what you are worrying about... gives you something to focus on... it helps me relax which is good... when I've been stressed out... about other things going on in my life I tend to resort to something like sewing to just take my mind off things'. (Skye)

The psychological benefits from 'flow' lasted after participants had stopped quilting.

'... it [quilting] just puts it [anxieties] into a different perspective, you are viewing it in a different light... you are doing something that you are enjoying... are a bit lighter in what you are thinking... when you come away from it [quilting] you are not in the same mood'. (Maggie)

Challenges

Measuring dimensions, designing patterns and incorporating shapes required problem solving. Even those with extensive quilting backgrounds continued to find challenges in new techniques.

'most people are stretching themselves with most pieces... you stretch yourself mentally and grow in order to complete a piece.' (Isla)

Mastering new techniques and overcoming challenges led to feelings of satisfaction and boosted self-esteem particularly for those whose social roles had changed. Older participants identified that quilting helped to maintain mental agility.

'I think it [learning new techniques] keeps your brain active. You feel that you are still valuable and I think when having had a family... you do miss that... once they are away they don't need you anymore... that was part of my wellbeing to do something creative... I suppose it brought back confidence... because you begin to learn new skills... you begin to become a person again rather than a machine.' (Flora)

Use of time

Entangled within most themes was a sense that while quilting was relaxing, time was spent productively. Participants were keeping busy, developing skills at the same time as producing something with a function and purpose.

‘... I have this notion that I’m actually quite a lazy person, having something at the end of it kind of soothes that ... last Sunday ... I finished a book and that was just “ahh” [sigh of contentment] but it was such a wasteful way to spend a day ... whereas if I had some sewing done it would be “ahh and look” ... quilting definitely gives me something that I don’t get from any other hobby.’ (Isla)

Social side of quilting

Friendship, support and sharing

The majority of participants quilted alone and in groups. Participants formed strong friendships with other quilters. Their common interest smoothed the early stages of establishing friendships. Participants shared ideas and skills. For some participants not all aspects of producing a quilt were enjoyable and the encouragement from other quilters was motivating and helped them progress towards goals. Seeing other people’s quilts was an inspiration to develop skills. Although some participants liked to enter pieces in competitions, this was mainly done to exhibit pieces and rivalry did not feature.

‘... it’s the social aspect of quilting that I think is one of the main benefits ... I think I would be quilting anyway ... quilter’s are a very friendly crowd ... very supportive ... we show each other a quilt, you get ideas from other people, so you get stimulus from showing other people what you’re doing ... it’s a lot easier if you have somebody helping you along just with ideas ... I’ve made some really good friends.’ (Agnes)

Support extended to other aspects of their lives.

‘when I lost (my friend) ... it was a big loss ... the quilters rallied round me ... I’d get a wee phone call to say “how are you doing, I’ve tried this and it’s no[t] working” and you thought you could tell me better than I could tell you this ... [it was] just letting you know in the background there’s somebody thinking about you.’ (Rhona)

Affirmation

Finishing a quilt and receiving praise from others boosted confidence. Having close contact with other quilters meant that all quilts, including beginners, were valued. At each group meeting there was a ‘Show and Tell’ session where all members were encouraged to show finished quilts.

(On finishing) ‘I feel a great sense of satisfaction ... I’ve accomplished something. And preparing to “Show and Tell” ... it’s such an affirmative thing, it’s counter Scottish culture ... we are so good at saying “oh no we don’t do [that]” but to say “yeah that’s fantastic” ... it’s important and that’s a part of wellbeing, yeah to get affirmation from other people ... to get appreciation back is good’. (Morag)

‘[Exhibiting quilts is] something that an ordinary person can do ... when you see your quilt hanging up you are just so thrilled ... it’s that proud moment ... your picture up on the wall in the classroom’. (Flora)

The end product

Purposeful

Participants produced quilts for themselves and others. Making quilts for charity, particularly Project Linus, was central for most of this group, giving the hobby a worthwhile purpose. [Project Linus is a children’s charity to which quilters donate quilts for chronically and terminally ill children. [http://www.projectlinus.org.uk/.](http://www.projectlinus.org.uk/)]

Catriona made a quilt for a charity: ‘you could see in their face they were so delighted ... that does make you feel good because you think I’ve done something that makes a difference to other people.’

‘... when I discovered not just the patchwork and quilting ... but the fact that there was an outlet for these quilts to the Linus project ... gave some purpose to it all and that was probably quite good for me.’ (Jessie)

Discussion: main findings of the study

A range of cognitive, emotional and social benefits were uncovered that participants attributed to quilting. The findings closely correlate with theoretical wellbeing models such as Ryff’s six-dimensional impression of psychological wellbeing,¹⁹ Ryan and Deci’s²⁰ self-determination theory and Seligman’s²¹ description of a full life (see Table 3).

Table 3 Theoretical models of wellbeing

Ryff and Keyes ¹⁹	Psychological Wellbeing Theory: Self-Acceptance Positive Relations Environmental Mastery Autonomy Purpose in life Personal Growth
Ryan and Deci ²⁰	Self-Determination Theory: Autonomy Relatedness Competence
Seligman ²¹	The Full Life Theory: Pleasant life: Positive emotions Good life: Absorption, engagement, flow, using strengths and virtues. Meaningful life: Using strengths to help others.

'Flow' is a state of optimal activity enjoyment when an individual is fully immersed in a meaningful and challenging activity causing loss of self-awareness and distortion of time.²² Although causality has not been proven, a reciprocal association between enjoyable states of 'flow' and psychological wellbeing has been shown to exist.²³ The more people experience flow the more satisfied they are in life.^{22,24} Reynolds and Prior's²⁵ detailed analysis of 'flow' in art hobbyists with cancer identified that 'flow' enhanced quality of life as well as diverted attention from anxieties. This study extends these findings to the general population.

Personal appraisal following time spent quilting enhanced feelings of satisfaction, mastery and confidence. Self-esteem was also boosted through affirmation from other quilters. Participants felt that quilting helped to maintain cognitive abilities, which is in agreement with empirical evidence which demonstrated that participating in hobbies (quilting used as one example) reduced the rate of cognitive decline in older individuals.²⁶ Giving quilts, particularly altruistically, added purpose and allowed participants to help others, which have been described as important factors for wellbeing.^{19,21,27} Giving art and quilts as gifts and for charity have been identified elsewhere as important in maintaining and strengthening community connections in chronic illness and older age.^{14,28}

Participants' quilting experience was enhanced by the people they shared the craft with. Of all factors that affect wellbeing, quality relationships are reported as one of the most valued.²⁹ The support from other quilters extended to their wider lives. During sewing groups participants had the opportunity to chat, laugh and discuss problems in their outside lives as much or as little as they wished. This was a flexible and understanding support that was not intrusive. Social capital was emphasized more by retired participants. The majority of sewing groups/classes were held during the day and may be one explanation. Employed participants may also have found sufficient social support at work.

What is known so far

Substantial evidence exists which supports the relationship between physical activity, greenspace and wellbeing.¹⁻⁴ The therapeutic use of art for people with mental health problems and long-term illness is well established and the experiences of arts and craft hobbies in people with chronic illness and of an older age have been explored.^{12-17,25-28,30-33}

What this study adds

This study has explored the cognitive, emotional and social meanings of quilting in a group of women of a fairly wide

age range and who were not selected on the basis of a physical or mental health diagnosis.

Quilting seemed to possess some distinct properties for enhancing wellbeing that would not be replicable through physical/outdoor activities. Furthermore, employed participants believed that quilting gave them a different kind of satisfaction to their employment. This is an interesting and new perspective from previous studies that have focused on the experiences of the retired. In the post-industrial world, many people are employed to deliver information or services that stifle creativity and where end products are more difficult to define and people are less aware of them.²⁴ People have intense workloads. Any recreational time left may be spent managing home life or in passive activities such as watching the television.³⁴ Modern life may be seen as suppressing creativity and yet creativity may be something that humans intrinsically desire.³⁵

Creative crafts also offer important choices for people who either are not interested in outdoor activities or who have problems which make this difficult. A lot of these people may be of an older age. Quilting (and probably other creative hobbies) appears to be useful in maintaining wellbeing in older people, which may become increasingly important as our nation ages further. Additionally opportunities for further education in creative hobbies have implications for maintaining cognitive function in the ageing population.

Whether it is growing vegetables, knitting a jumper or discovering a new scientific formula creativity may be fundamental for wellbeing and has received little attention so far within Public Health. Exploring creativity and what people do in their everyday lives, which they deem creative, may be an important avenue for wellbeing promoters. Additionally, more consideration needs to be given to all hobbies, from reading to train spotting, and their potential for enhancing wellbeing.

Limitations of this study

Participants were selected opportunistically from one group although there is no reason to suspect that these quilters were not on the whole representative of quilters who attend groups in the UK or elsewhere. Experiences may differ from solitary quilters who may be housebound, may not have a group in their area or may not want to attend groups. Although there was no information on the members of the quilting group who did not take part, from our own knowledge (J.A.) it is probable that the study sample reflects the demographics of the group.

The majority came from favourable economic circumstances and it is possible that results are not transferable to other social groups. This may reflect the costs associated

with quilting and/or the quilting group. There is a small fee for attending the group. This may deter less affluent quilters and introduce selection bias. Cost was mentioned by most participants as a downside of quilting.

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Conflict of interest: J.A. is a member of the quilting group. She did not conduct/take part in any interviews and does not know which members were interviewed.

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