Purls of wisdom: motivational factors of contemporary women knitters

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Purls of Wisdom:
Motivational factors of contemporary women knitters

by

Catherine A Hunt

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillments of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Textiles & Clothing

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2005

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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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ABSTRACT

Until recently, little attention has been paid to the importance of textile arts in women’s lives, and virtually no research has been done on the effects of knitting. This study sought to understand the motivational factors of contemporary women knitters and illustrate that knitting is an important part of their lives. Information was gathered from 13 women of the greater Des Moines – Ames, Iowa area, through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. While half of the knitters learned to knit in their youth from family members, others learned when they were older from friends or as part of a class. Women knit extensively while waiting for appointments, attending meetings, visiting friends, watching television, and relaxing at home. The motivations for women’s knitting and the importance of knitting in their lives emerged under two main themes. The first theme highlighted that knitting had positive effects on the health and well-being of the women, as a calming activity and through connections with others. In a second theme, knitting was also an important part of women’s lives because it was empowering. Women felt accomplishment in their knitting; it was viewed as a legitimate and valid use of time and served as an expression of self. Through their knitting, women were contributing to changes in societal preconceptions about knitting. This study showed that knitting was important to these women. They believed that knitting yielded positive effects on both their physical being and mental states of mind. They also considered knitting to be a significant part both of who they are and of their lives. A model was developed to describe the relationship between the two research themes and the importance of knitting to the women knitters.
ABSTRACT

Until recently, little attention has been paid to the importance of textile arts in women’s lives, and virtually no research has been done on the effects of knitting. This study sought to understand the motivational factors of contemporary women knitters and illustrate that knitting is an important part of their lives. Information was gathered from 13 women of the greater Des Moines – Ames, Iowa area, through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. While half of the knitters learned to knit in their youth from family members, others learned when they were older from friends or as part of a class. Women knit extensively while waiting for appointments, attending meetings, visiting friends, watching television, and relaxing at home. The motivations for women’s knitting and the importance of knitting in their lives emerged under two main themes. The first theme highlighted that knitting had positive effects on the health and well-being of the women, as a calming activity and through connections with others. In a second theme, knitting was also an important part of women’s lives because it was empowering. Women felt accomplishment in their knitting; it was viewed as a legitimate and valid use of time and served as an expression of self. Through their knitting, women were contributing to changes in societal preconceptions about knitting. This study showed that knitting was important to these women. They believed that knitting yielded positive effects on both their physical being and mental states of mind. They also considered knitting to be a significant part both of who they are and of their lives. A model was developed to describe the relationship between the two research themes and the importance of knitting to the women knitters.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Knitting has been an integral part of women’s lives for countless generations. In the past, women knitted to provide for their families. But their textile work was much more than simply providing a good and performing a service. The items made by women expressed who they were; knitting portrayed an individuality as well as an affiliation to a tribe or clan (Lydon, 1997). The women who knit in the 21st century still retain a mode of expression. No longer needing to provide warm clothing for their families, the women who knit find much deeper meaning in their crafts. They use knitting as a method of reclaiming identity and space. Some feminists have embraced knitting as a means to get together and support each other. Known as “feminist knitting,” this new manifestation of the craft has developed as a means to create a space for women where they are able to support and learn from each other (Hickman, 2003).

In the early 21st century there are many varieties of knitters. No longer is the typical knitter a granny sitting in her chair after dinner, her needles clicking over the sound of the television. Knitters today are young and old. They are conservative but also cool, funky, and fashionable. Students, both college and high school, can be seen knitting on campus (Grace, 2003). Knitting has been called “the new yoga” (Hickman, 2003). The repeat motions and the concentration of knitting leave knitters with calmness and a renewed energy. Hollywood movie stars have taken up this craft as well. Julia Roberts and Sandra Bullock have both been featured in magazine articles saying that they are avid knitters (Cohen, 2001). There are also countless list serves, blogs, and Internet sites devoted to knitting. People can find
information about technical questions, patterns, yarns, and needles or they can share their experiences with other knitters.

For other knitters, knitting has been used as a medium to convey faith and healing. Knitting ministries are comprised of knitters, usually members of a congregation, who knit prayer shawls. While making a shawl the knitter will offer prayers and think of healing for the recipient of the shawl. Well wishes and healing energies are interwoven with the physical comfort that the shawl provides. The shawl is then given to a person who needs to feel the warmth of prayer. The recipient of the shawl may be dealing with the loss of a loved one, a chronic illness, or undergoing chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or surgery. The wearers of the shawls wrap the shawl around themselves when they are feeling a need for love and support. They remember the prayers and the healing that is interwoven into the shawl and thus they think of the prayers and healing as being wrapped around them (Izard & Jorgensen, 2003).

Across the United States there are groups of women who meet on a regular basis to knit. They use their time together to share thoughts and ideas with each other. Whether organized formally by a yarn shop or community center, or informally as a group of friends, these groups bring women of all ages and professions together. The women support each other, using knitting as a common medium which draws them together (Hickman, 2003). In informal discussions, knitters said there are many reasons they take up the craft, ranging from its calming effects to being able to sell items, donate them to charity, or give them as gifts. They also like the sense of accomplishment when a project is completed. This research is designed to explore these reasons through an empirically based, systematic study of knitters in the early 21st century.
Research Questions

In order to explore how and why knitting is such an important part of so many women’s lives and to recognize knitting as legitimate in shaping who these women are and how they deal with the pleasures and trials of life, the following research questions were posed:

- When did women learn to knit? Who taught them? What was the experience like? Did they stop knitting at some point in their lives? When did they start again? And why?

- How often do women knit? When do they knit (i.e. evenings, when they are feeling down, in times of joy)?

- What motivates women to knit? How have they used knitting to cope, connect, enlighten, understand, empower, learn, and be creative? How has knitting helped women in times of stress, duress, sadness, loss, grief, and anger? How is knitting connected to women’s happiness and joy?

- What meaning does knitting hold for women? Why is knitting important to them?

Limitations

The following were limitations for this research.

1. Data collected were limited to the informant’s willingness to openly and honestly respond to interview questions.

2. Since interviews and observations were limited to the greater Des Moines – Ames, IA area the full range of motivations for contemporary women knitters may not be revealed.

3. The data were collected from Caucasian, middle-class women which also may effect the motivations that are revealed.

Operational Definitions

The following are terms that are used throughout the thesis:

Meaning: How a person understands things. It is important to recognize that the context, the time and place, in which a meaning is established must be taken into account (Johnson, 1987). Meanings are a byproduct of experience, and
through that experience they are how an individual constructs their understanding in their world. Therefore meanings are a dimension of individual identity (Cerney, 1987).

Motivation Why people behave in certain ways. The general forces, urges, or drives that shape a person’s behaviour (Faules & Alexander, 1978)

Knitting A technique where an inter-looped textile is created by horizontally manipulating a yarn with two or more needles (Gillow & Sentence, 1999)

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter One has introduced the study. Chapter Two is a review of the literature that pertains to knitting both historically and in contemporary settings. Chapter Three describes the methods used in conducting this research. Chapter Four discloses the results of data analysis, including emergent themes and a proposed model for the motivations of women knitters. Chapter 5 is a discussion of the results and suggests recommended opportunities for further research as well as summarizing the study.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review on historical and contemporary aspects of knitting has provided a background for this research. Beginning with earliest archaeological evidence, to the spread and adaptation of knitting technologies by different regional groups throughout Europe and the Americas, to the societal contribution of nineteenth century knitters in America, to its current incarnations, this section discusses the history and contemporary manifestation of knitting.

History of Knitting

Archaeological Evidence

The origins of knitting as a technology are not precisely known. Knitted fragments were found in a late 2nd century grave of a woman in South Holland (Rutt, 1987). These pieces, made of a thick woolen yarn, appear to be made using a stockinette stitch. However, because the fragments have deteriorated so severely since their discovery there is no way of knowing exactly if they were actually knitted or not.

Fragments of fabric with the appearance of knitting were also excavated from the 3rd century CE city of Doura Europos, in the Middle East. However, these small scraps of ribbing were produced by nålbinding rather than knitting (Rutt, 1987). Nålbinding creates a fabric that looks very much like knitted stockinette stitch, but is formed using a single eyed needle rather than multiple rods. In addition, Romano Egyptian or Coptic socks from the 4th and 5th centuries CE have been mistaken as knitting but in fact turned out to be nålbinding as well.
Sometime between 500 CE and 1200 CE, nalbinding appears to have given way to knitting (Rutt, 1987). Knitting at that time was done mostly in the round, for footwear. The earliest pieces of true hand knitting are now known to come from Islamic Egypt. Socks dating no earlier than 12th century CE were almost certainly knitted with rods. These socks, which were usually cotton, were worked from the toe up and decorated with Arabic script and motifs. Another example of early knitting was found in Northern Spain. Knitted cushions found at the Monastery of Las Huelgas near Burgos in Northern Spain are dated around 1275. These two cushions, which were knitted in a close stockinette stitch feature multiple coloured yarns and complex trellis-lozenge pattern (Rutt, 1987).

The most concrete evidence of early knitting processes are featured in several paintings known as the knitting Madonnas. The paintings, executed by mid 14th century northern Italian and German painters, show virgin Marys knitting in domestic scenes (Rutt, 1987; Stoller, 2003). In all of the paintings, the Mary figure is knitting in the round, with multiple needles and several spools of different coloured yarn. The Marys are knitting with the needles held under their palms, and working the yarn with their right hands. It can be concluded that, since knitting was accurately depicted, it was known in Europe as a woman's occupation at the end of the 14th century. However it cannot be discerned whether knitting was a leisure activity or an activity done out of necessity.

Knitted liturgical gloves or gloves worn by bishops also offer evidence of early knitting. Gloves dating from the 13th century have been found in Toulouse, Bonn, Savoy, Barcelona, Oxford, and other cathedrals and tombs throughout Europe. These gloves are both solid and multi-coloured, and patterned both by stitching in texture and multi-coloured motifs (Rutt, 1987). These knitted liturgical gloves, although evidence of knitting
technology, do not reveal exactly when or where the gloves were made, or even who made them.

Moving to the 16th century, samples of knitting were found on the wreck of the Mary Rose, which was Henry VIII’s flagship that sunk in 1545. Hats and an item that could be either a detachable sleeve or a stocking offer evidence of excellent craftsmanship, shaping in decreasing stitches, and uniform gauge (Rutt, 1987).

In the late 16th century an Englishman named William Lee invented a knitting machine specifically for knitting stockings in the round. Queen Elizabeth I rejected his patent application in order to maintain the livelihood of the many stocking knitters in England who would become beggars once this machine became available for stocking production (Macdonald, 1988; Rutt, 1987).

**Knitting Between 1600 and 1900**

By the 17th century, the knowledge of knitting had spread throughout Europe and by the early 19th century knitting was well established throughout Western and Eastern Europe. European knitters developed regional specializations. For example, Balkans knitters developed twisted stitch patterns, similar to small cables. Scandinavian knitters made solid and multicoloured garments using multiple strands of yarns, as did knitters in Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries (Pagoldh, 1987).

Some British knitters also developed colourful knitting patterns. Knitters of the Shetland Isles developed rich, multi-coloured patterns for knitted items (Starmore, 1988). Other British knitters produced dense, weather-resistant sweaters. These sweaters, called ganseys, were decorated using various knit-purl stitches and simple cables. The knitters of Ireland’s Aran Isles also used cable patterns in their heavy fishing sweaters (Starmore, 1988).
With westward exploration, Europeans brought with them knitting technologies to the Americas. Colonists and missionaries shared knitting crafts with local indigenous peoples, who then adapted it and incorporated local cultural elements into designs (Reith, 2003). In South America, natives of the Andes produced intricate multi-colored stranded patterns in their Ch'ullas or hats and sweaters. The West Coast Salish Native peoples in British Columbia were taught to knit by European settlers. They developed a style referred to as Cowichan, and were known for the sweaters of naturally coloured wool with designs of animals, birds, sea creatures, and geometric shapes (Liscomb, 2000).

Knitting was deemed to be the activity of varying social classes in different countries. In some places knitting was only done by the working classes; in others it was considered appropriate for ladies of the upper classes. These two social groups performed different types of knitting. Among the working class both men and women knit, supplementing meager incomes eked out of nature. In contrast, upper class ladies, using daintily held knitting needles, knit decorative household items and delicate garments using fine yarns (Reith, 2003; Stoller, 2003).

During the colonial era in the United States, hand knitting was ubiquitous. Hand knitting began to be conceptualized as a definition of the female character (Ulrich, 2001). Knitting as an activity showed a commitment to household production and industry. It was indicative of the colonial woman’s diligence and assiduousness. As the American Revolution approached, women knit in support of revolutionary efforts. Women knitted and spun in support of the boycotting of British goods in response to the Stamp Act of 1765. Women knit socks for the rebel soldiers and, in the absence of the male head of household and
After independence was won, women in the United States took it upon themselves to be the menders of society’s problems. Engaged in temperance and other social reforms as well as shaping their children to be productive and responsible adults, women hoped to change society for the better. One way that they were able to contribute to this social change was by knitting. Women would knit for charity causes; they would dole out warm knitted stockings and hats to impoverished children and families (Macdonald, 1988; Woloch, 2000).

Once again during wartime in the 1860s, when women heard of the hardships that their men folk faced during Civil War maneuvers, they took up their needles and yarn to knit socks. Church groups, ladies circles, and other relief societies sent in many pairs of socks that were deemed far superior to the machine knit variety.

Although women knit for practical reasons, the restorative and soothing nature of knitting did not go unrecognized during the late 1800s. *Dorcas Magazine* which was in publication from 1884-1886, reported in its March, 1884 issue that “the quiet, even regular motion of the needles quiets the nerves and tranquilized the mind, and lets thought flow free” (Macdonald, 1988, p. 341). In 1902, *Stitches; a Journal of Needle Craft* reported that knitting was recommended for rheumatism of the hands, its gentle action comparative to the same beneficial effects as a massage (Macdonald, 1988).

**Knitting After 1900**

During WWI women rallied once again and became part of the war effort. Gathering in churches, homes, and Red Cross community centers they knitted socks, mittens, helmets, sweaters, balaclavas, and other comforts for the soldiers in France (“Knitting for the Red
The Red Cross also distributed pamphlets containing knitting instructions to their community centers across the country. Women who did not knit before the war, learned so that they would be able to contribute. Elderly women who knitted for soldiers in the Civil War took up knitting once again as a patriotic past time (Macdonald, 1988).

During the 1930s knitting became even more popular. Especially noted were the college girls who knit (Macdonald, 1988). College girls would knit during their classes when professors tolerated it. They were known to rig contraptions that enabled them to knit while riding the trolley to class, or while visiting friends in the dormitories. Girls knitted sweaters and socks for themselves as well as for their romantic interests. If the relationship ended before the garment was finished, the girls sized up potential new interests in accordance to the size of the garment being made. Knitting was not just an activity seen on college campuses; women knit at the movies, family picnics, parties, clubs, and even in courtrooms. Knitting was such a popular past time during the 1930’s that there were even columns in newspapers dedicated to knitting. For example, knitters shared patterns and instructions in the Boston Globe’s “Household Department” column (Macdonald, 1988).

When WWII began, women picked up their needles and yarns yet again, and contributed to the effort. The Red Cross reinstituted relief knitting. Women came into the Red Cross offices to knit for soldiers and refugees (“Knitting for the Red Cross,” 2003). Macdonald (1988) reports that one woman who lost her son in World War I knit for the soldiers in World War II because she felt that by knitting she was somehow keeping her own son warm. Knitting was one way that women could contribute to the war effort. It was reported that knitting as an activity was beneficial for women. It was said to “soothe the
nerves and is a splendid outlet for pent up war emotions and an acceptable morale builder” (Macdonald, 1988, p. 304).

After World War II ended, many women moved from the workforce and retreated into the homes of suburban development. As with earlier sanctifications of women’s household role, knitting enjoyed the fruits of revival and became synonymous with home and motherhood (Macdonald, 1988). Women knit for their families. They knit baby and children’s clothing. Argyle patterns were inordinately popular; teenagers and college students knit socks for boyfriends, and magazines carried patterns for argyle vests, stocking caps, mittens, and drawstring bags (Macdonald, 1988). Women’s magazines of the 1950s emphasized the glory of femininity through an involvement with the home and family, stressing the charming nature of serving one’s family (Macdonald, 1988), but author and feminist writer Betty Friedan unveiled the fact that women were bored and dissatisfied with their retreat back into the home (Friedan, 1997; Woloch, 2000). Macdonald (1988) reports that many women knit out of boredom, now that they no longer were welcome in the workforce.

The 1960s movement away from the conservative 1950s resulted in significant cultural changes in American life. The millions of children born during the post war years had grown to be vociferous teenagers (Brinkley, 1998). A new style of knitting known as quick knitting, or knitting on giant needles, became popular in the 1960s (Macdonald, 1988). Women were able to finish a complete garment in less than six hours (Macdonald, 1988). Jeanne Damon, a knitter and designer of the time, created patterns geared towards women with “fast moving lives...busy, modern women on the go, career girls, college girls, young mothers, anyone who loves the look and has learned to do just a few simple stitches”
Knitters following this “knit-kwik” (Macdonald, 1988, p. 332) fever were the restless and busy young. Despite the fad of speedy knitting there were very few young knitters (Macdonald, 1988; Weitzman, 1996). In addition, other older knitters refused to follow this trendy mode to the point where they stopped knitting completely. This caused such a marked decline in knitting that in the 1960s *Vogue* discontinued its knitting book that had been printed consistently since 1932 (Macdonald, 1988). However, knitting did not die out completely. Some of those who had learned to knit in earlier years continued to do so. Some women still knit constantly, filling in the time spent on familial duties with their knitting projects. Women knit while waiting at doctors’ appointments, at PTA meetings, and at little league games (Macdonald, 1988). Women also knitted in their cars while waiting in line for gasoline during the shortages of the 1970s (Macdonald, 1988).

It could be surmised that women did not knit as much in the 1970s and 1980s because knitting was categorized as something solely for women, and the women of that generation may have felt it necessary to reject stereotypes in order to prove their worth in the male oriented corporate business world (Payne, 2004; Stoller, 2003). During the 1980s there was a significant decline in the popularity and prevalence of knitting. By 1988 many department stores discontinued needlework departments, and yarn stores had gone under or packed up their inventory and followed their knitting clientele south as they retired (Macdonald, 1988).

Although knitting was far from prevailing, the knitting business did not disappear completely in the 1980s. Nearly twice as many women were working in the 1980s as had been during the 1960s; the quick rate of completion became the criterion by which they chose their projects (Macdonald, 1988). Projects, patterns, and instructions were now designed with the working woman in mind. Designers tuned to the “fast-paced modern
lifestyle” and suggested weekender projects that could be started on Friday and completed and worn on Monday (Macdonald, 1988, p. 340). Vogue began to print its knitting book again in 1989.

By the late 1980s knitting had transformed almost completely from the necessity that it had once been into a pastime and opportunity for creative outlet. Lola Ehrlich, Vogue Knitting’s senior editor, reported that people no longer knit to be thrifty, since clothing articles could be purchased so inexpensively. Knitting had become something fashionable that was done for recreation and creativity (Macdonald, 1988).

**Contemporary Knitting**

**The Knitters**

Since the late 1990s, knitting as an activity has enjoyed a resurgence. The knitters of the early 21st century are not solely matronly sorts, gazing at their knitting over the rims of bifocal glasses, moving back and forth in a rocking chair. Rather, new knitters tend to be young, hip, urban, and sophisticated (Cohen, 2001; Marer, 2002; Payne, 2004). According to Marer (2002), the number of knitters less than 35 years of age doubled between 1998 and 2000. This new generation of women knitters are often savvy professionals with graduate degrees and high-powered careers who use knitting as a form of stress reduction as well as a way to be fashionable (Murphy, 2002; Steiner, 1998).

Knitting has been labeled as “the new yoga” (Hickman, 2003, p. 1; Marer, 2002, p. 76), indicating both recognition of the benefits it can provide and its popularity and trendiness. Knitting has also been referred to as a feminist activity (Hickman, 2003; Murphy, 2002). Third-wave feminism now allows for expression of self as a woman. Knitting is not about retreating back into to the home and tending the hearth; rather it is considered a valid
expression of who one is, and shows the creative side of oneself (Murphy, 2002). Knitting also brings women of different professions and ages together to support each other in their interactions.

Hollywood celebrities and other famous people in the media have been seen knitting. Monica Lewinsky knit during the impeachment trial. Cameron Diaz and Julia Roberts are known to knit during down time on movie sets (Grace, 2003). Abra Edelman's *Celebrity Scarves* (2003) features actresses such as Daryl Hannah, Julianna Margulies, Rosie Perez, and Eartha Kitt, modeling their own creations. The actresses discuss how they made their scarves, the yarns and stitches involved, and briefly their experiences as knitters. After September 11th 2001, Goldie Hawn knit together blue, red, and white yarns creating a star-spangled banner (Cavendish, 2002). Murphy (2002) notes that this celebrity knitting seems to make the craft more valuable to their followers.

Today, students can be seen knitting on college campuses and in high schools. Children have also taken up knitting. Teachers at Waldorf elementary schools teach first graders to knit before they are taught to write or manipulate numbers (Murphy, 2002). Women can be observed knitting in coffee shops and on public transportation systems. Women knitters of all ages gather together to share experiences, stories, and knitting tips at group meetings.

An old craft, with unknown beginnings has found a place in the modern technology of the 21st century. When the word "knitting" was typed into an Internet search engine, results yielded over 1,500,000 hits or resulting web pages. Through Internet sites, knitters can find information on knitting materials, books, and clubs. Knitters communicate with one another through message boards, blogs, and even chat rooms on the Internet. Knitters are
able to share stories about knitting experiences, projects and gifts they have made, and share tips that they discovered about how to knit. Knitting activities also serve as a venue for political activism. One online site, knittersagainstbush.com, took on a political stance and encouraged voting and activism. The website, which attended to knitting and knitting projects, also provided links to additional resources for the activism.

**Reasons for Knitting**

Women in the 21st century knit for many different reasons. Bernadette Murphy (2002), in her book *Zen and the Art of Knitting*, outlined several reasons why women take up needles and yarn to knit. Some women appreciated the connection to family members through knitting, specifically “grandmothers, aunts, mothers and other loved ones” (p. ix). Women knit gifts for loved ones, expressing to them just how important they are. Some women mentioned the health benefits and relaxation of knitting. Women knit to ease heartbreak, battle anxiety and “cope with serious illness” (p. xi). Other women recognized the spiritual and meditative qualities that knitting can provide, even knitting to “access a higher consciousness” (p. xi). Some women knit for fun; it was the colours, yarns, patterns, and possibilities that are most stimulating for them. Some women knit only as a hobby; they used knitting as an activity to pass the time in waiting rooms and lobbies.

**Creativity**

Some women who knit are stimulated by the creative possibilities that this activity offers. Yarns come in a myriad of textures, colours, and weights. A million different patterns for hundreds of different projects can be purchased, or if the knitter has the skill, patterns can be developed, changed, and manipulated to create something more suitable. It is this process, the act of creating something so unique and individual, that is gratifying for
many knitters (Roghaar & Wolf, 2002). In a world where the same item can be purchased in
Paris or Poughkeepsie, it is appealing to be able to create something that will be completely
unique and individual (Deckert, 2003; Stoller, 2003). Other women, a writer and a
filmmaker whom Murphy (2002) interviewed, talked of knitting as a way of stimulating
creativity in other areas. For them knitting was a way to sit back and think their way through
writers block or creative stoppages in their work.

**Giving and Gifts**

Some knitters enjoy giving their completed projects away. Giving something away
that they made themselves transfers love and caring from giver to receiver in a tangible
medium. Picture the pregnant woman knitting for her soon to be born baby; with each stitch
she says “I want to keep you safe, I want to keep you warm, I love you” (Roghaar & Wolf,
2002, p. xi). Mothers knitting for sons and daughters, grandmothers knitting for new
grandchildren, even girlfriends knitting for beaus, express caring, love, and well wishes for
the recipient of the knitted project.

Many women knit for charity and social causes. Groups across the country are set up
to make and donate knitted goods to those in need. Some organizations such as *Afghans for
Afghans*, the *American Red Cross*, and *Special Knitting Forces* knit blankets, clothing, and
toys for families in areas that have been affected by war. Other knitting groups, such as
*Operation Toasty Toes* and *The SHIPS Project*, focus their efforts and knit slippers, socks,
and hats for US military personnel who are serving overseas.

Some charity knitting groups work to make goods specifically for babies. Booties,
hats, blankets, and clothing are knitted for newborns, premature babies, and babies in
intensive hospital care. Knitters also make items for families who have suffered the loss of
an infant through miscarriage, stillbirth, and/or early infant death. Knitters provide the families with memorial keepsake items, blankets in which to wrap the deceased, and then to later hold onto in the difficult times ahead.

Some knitting groups focus on cancer patients. Hats are made to add to the comfort and to comfort patients undergoing chemotherapy treatments. The Hat Box group provides hats for children that have lost their hair due to cancer. Other charity knitting groups knit specifically for children. They want to provide clothing, blankets, and soft knitted toys to children in long-term care, those who have undergone trauma, and those who are in crisis.

Children in Common is a group that knits clothing for children in orphanages in Russia and Eastern Europe. Many groups knit to provide mittens, hats, and scarves for needy school children, and others knit clothing and blankets not only for needy children but also their families. Hats 4 the Homeless, Warm Up America!, and Warming Families are groups that knit items, blankets, and warm clothing to donate to homeless shelters.

Charitable Crafters, a group based in Duluth, MN, seeks to inspire those who knit to make items for charitable donation. The group works in conjunction with many local charities, hospitals, social service organizations, and public schools to disperse donated goods to those that need it most. Their aim is to have craftspersons create items that they enjoy making while producing something that the community can use. Some of these craftspeople enjoy making only one type of project while others switch to new types of projects every few months. Handmade toys, chemo caps, baby blankets, and winter hats are made. The group was started for several reasons, one of which was the need in the community and the surrounding area. Tina Shaddox, the founder of the group, indicated that she is an avid knitter and loves being around creative people and seeing their beautiful
creations; but, she also believed that knitters can benefit from the simple act of giving. Shaddox stated, “We all have something to offer our community. If everyone found a single way in which to make their town or neighborhood better, life would indeed be better for all” (Shaddox, n.d, p. 1).

Some charity knitting organizations even knit for animals. Groups such as Cage Comforter Program, Hugs for Homeless Animals, and Stitches of Love make blankets, play toys, and even sweaters for dogs and cats and other animals living in animal shelters.

In Ames, Iowa there are several groups who organize to knit goods specifically to donate. At Mary Greeley Hospital, groups of knitters make hats and booties for newborns. The Knitting Connection accepts donations of yarns and needles as well as knitted goods that are to be given to needy children. The Seasons of Giving Program, which is connected to the Volunteer Center of Story County, accepts knitted caps, mittens, and gloves, in sizes infant to adult, to help people in need stay warm in the winter.

Some groups combine religious worship with creating goods for donation. Churches across the country are involved in Prayer Shawl Ministries. These ministries seek to provide comfort for those in need and blanket them in prayer (Ragsdale, 2002). While a shawl is knit, the knitter fills it with prayers. When given away, the shawl becomes an item symbolizing God’s love. The receiver can wrap the shawl around them to provide warmth, support, and comfort (Ragsdale, 2003).

**Health Benefits**

Knitting as an activity can provide mental and physical health benefits for the knitter (Cohen, 2001; Grace, 2003). In her book *The Knitting Sutra: Craft as Spiritual Practice* (1997), Susan Gordon Lydon wrote of her journey into spirituality through knitting. She
took up knitting again as physical therapy to prevent small muscles from atrophying as the result of breaking her arm. As she knit, and her arm healed, and she traveled to share other knitting experiences, Lydon came to terms with her individuality and found her own spirituality. Murphy (2002) also talked about how spirituality and knitting can be combined. The relaxed, calmed state of mind that one woman experienced while knitting allowed her look at the world that God created and to try and emulate some of the beauty of his creation in her work.

Knitting has a calming effect on the women that engage in it as an activity. Murphy (2002) noted that knitting activity, the repetition of motion and sound, and calming thought processes, are conducive to meditation. She discussed how knitters have related stories about how the activity was calming and soothing. This “relaxation response” (p. 37), or lowered heart rate and blood pressure, can induce a meditative state in the brain and thus promote mental wellbeing. Knitters are able to relax, their thoughts flow calmly in and out of their stitches, they sort out events, and they think of possible solutions to life’s problems. Knitting can be especially beneficial for cancer patients (Marer, 2002). The repetitive action can help to relieve emotional stress, which in turn helps the body’s ability to tolerate chemotherapy and thus make the experience less unpleasant.

Knitting as a social activity also has benefits. Women gathering in these knitting circles can act as a sort of group therapy. Knitting in groups brings women together to share experiences and ideas. It is in these settings and support groups that knitters were able to relieve anxiety and depression (Cohen, 2001; Marer, 2002).
Summary

Archaeological artifacts and illustrative evidence have shown that knitting, or using two or more rods or needles to create a looped fabric, has been around for over a thousand years. Over the years knitting technologies have spread throughout Europe and the Americas. Each region has developed its own methods of manipulating yarn to create local traditional forms of knitting. Regional differences are identified by designs using colourwork and stitch patterning.

In the past, women knit to provide for their families. They clothed and supported their families by knitting. Women also helped those outside of their families by knitting. Women were counted on to supplement garments -socks, hats and blankets- for soldiers in each of the United States military endeavors, including the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World Wars I and II. During the 20th century, knitting gained and lost popularity and eventually experienced a significant decline at the end of the century.

In recent years, the beginning of the 21st century, knitting has enjoyed a resurgence. Knitting is thought of as popular, hip, and trendy. Celebrities in Hollywood and young urban professionals are the new knitters; they are considered to be fashionable and savvy. The motivations for a woman’s knitting were no longer a need to provide for one’s family. Women knit to express creativity, or to express love for another by giving a completed project to someone dear. Like the knitters from the centuries before, contemporary knitters also engaged in knitting as a means to contribute to charitable organizations. More attention has been paid in recent years to the possible health benefits of knitting; the calming and relaxing effects of knitting have been recognized. Knitting also allows for women to gather together, sharing experiences, stories, tips, and techniques and build and develop lasting
friendships. In this chapter, the references on contemporary knitting used anecdotal stories and informal conversations as their evidence for the motivations of present-day knitters. This research moves beyond the anecdotal toward an empirical, systematic study of knitters in the early 21st century.
CHAPTER THREE
METHOD

The purpose of this study was to describe the various motivations that compel women to knit. It examined the roles and meanings that knitting assumed in women’s lives. This study contributed to understanding the importance of knitting in the lives of women living in the Midwestern United States. As a qualitative research study, the sampling method, instrument, data collection, and data analysis techniques were selected to facilitate the discovery of themes as they related to the research questions posed in this study.

Researcher’s Perspective

Throughout history, the work that women carry out in the household, including textile work, has been marginalized and devalued because it is conducted within the private sphere of the home. However, there is so much more involved in these arts or crafts. The textile work that any group of women does is very much a part of who they are. It is part of how they shape their identities and how they portray themselves to others. In conducting this research, and as a knitter, I wanted to share with others that women’s textile work is an important and legitimate part of their lives. Recently there was an excerpt from Quilting Lessons, a short autobiographical book about coping with depression through quilting, published in the Chronicle of Higher Education. The book was written by Janet Catherine Berlo, a professor of Art History at the University of Rochester. Berlo reported in an interview (Leonard, 2002) that after the publication she received letters and email from all over the country. Berlo said, “It was totally unexpected to have all these people writing – vice chancellors and tenured professors – who say ‘I read your piece, I closed my door and started to cry’ … I’ve tapped something that’s hard to describe” (Leonard, 2002, p. 3).
These women responded to the article in such an emotional manner because their needlework was an important part of who they were and yet it had no place in their professional lives. It was something they felt they had to hide.

Due to the increase in the popularity of knitting in the early 21st century, I decided to focus my research on knitting rather than quilting. There has already been considerable research and literature that focused on women's quilting. I wanted to add to the body of knowledge by exploring another textile art that is an important part of women's lives.

**Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is multi-faceted in focus. It involves a naturalistic and interpretive approach to its subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena as related to the meanings that phenomena hold for people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Interviews, which are a primary method of data collection in qualitative inquiry, allow the researcher a comprehensive level of communication with the respondent. The manner in which things are said, as well as nonverbal clues, allow the researcher to learn of issues and matters that are implied/assumed and therefore better understood. In qualitative research, participants are selected in a purposive manner in order to generate a range of perspectives on a topic. Generalization, through a random sample, is not a research goal.

In qualitative research there is an ongoing debate about how to maintain credibility (Merriam, 2002; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Since the traditional methods of reliability, validity, and objectivity cannot be applied to qualitative research, other methods must be employed. Instead, trustworthiness and credibility can be maintained by member checks, triangulation, and peer review. Member checks consist of asking participants to comment on
the interpretations of the data (Merriam, 2002). Triangulation is using independent investigators or multiple sources of data to establish validity (Merriam, 2002). In this research I collected data from interviews, observations, and personal reflection notes. I used the information from interviews, the data from any observations, as well as notes from personal reflections as a form of triangulation to fully understand the phenomena present. Peer review, or having a classmate or a professor scan the raw data to determine whether or not the findings are plausible based on the data, was also conducted (Merriam, 2002).

In qualitative research, a grounded theory approach is often employed. In a grounded theory study the data are collected and analyzed as a basis for developing a set of propositions, model, or theory (Creswell, 1998). The model or theory is inductively generated from the data, or if there is an already existing theory, it may be elaborated and modified (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Grounded theory, or theory generated from the data, gives relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations, and applications (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As related to this research a grounded theory approach allowed for understanding the importance of knitting for a group of women knitters in a specific context.

**Study Location**

The sample of women knitters who participated in this study lived in the Greater Des Moines – Ames area in Iowa. Des Moines, Iowa’s capital city, has a metro population of nearly 500,000. Thirty miles north of Des Moines is the city of Ames and Iowa State University. Opening in 1868 as a land-grant institution focusing on agriculture, Iowa State University now has expanded to programs of research and study in agriculture, engineering, veterinary medicine, and family and consumer sciences. Students, both domestic and
international, come together at Iowa State University to make a student population of over 27,000 in 2004 (Iowa State University).

There are several stores in Ames where knitters are able to buy their yarns and supplies. However, there is only one store devoted entirely to fiber arts. The Rose Tree Fiber Shop opened over ten years ago and has changed locations three times (Ekins, 2002). The shop, which carries supplies for spinners, weavers, basket makers, crocheters, felters, and tatters, as well as knitters, is a hub of local fiber activity. Customers are drawn to the shop because it carries specialty equipment as well as high quality natural yarns, unlike the blends that are found at other larger craft stores in the area. The proprietor offers a wealth of knowledge and willingly assists customers with any questions or needs they may have. The shop becomes a gathering place every Thursday afternoon for a small group of two to six women who come together to knit or spin. They sit and chat, discussing their lives, politics, projects, or whatever else may come to mind as the conversations develop.

The proprietor has observed a change in her customers over the last few years. Knitting interest has increased considerably. More young people, university and high school students, are coming into the shop looking to buy needles and yarn and wanting to learn how to knit. More people in general are coming into her shop, so much so that the proprietor felt unable to close the shop for a week this past August for her summer vacation, whereas in previous years there were so few customers in the summer that closing wasn’t a problem.

Sample

A variety of women were interviewed. The purposive sample consisted of 13 women who varied in age and met several criteria: those who knitted for charity, those who participated in a group knitting activity, and those who knit solely on their own time. All
participants actively knit on a regular basis, or at least six times in a year. Participants were recreational knitters who did not knit full time for pay.

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. I attended a monthly meeting of the Ames Spinning & Weaving Guild and asked if any knitters would be interested in talking to me about their knitting for my thesis research. Some respondents were recruited by a snowball technique, or learning of new, potential participants from previous participants. I went into the above mentioned local yarn store on a day that I knew knitters gathered for social knitting and again recruited participants for interviewing. Two interviewees were found in newspaper articles about prayer shawl ministry knitting circles in two Des Moines churches.

**Interview Schedule**

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, which is the predominant process of data collection used in qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The semi-structured format allowed for a common set of information to be gleaned from all of the participants. Open-ended questions allowed for follow-up questions to be asked as the conversation evolved across the interview. Rather than a forced response format, the semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was conducive to the natural flow of thought processes.

The interview questions were developed to assist interviewees in talking about their knitting and the relationships, motivations, feelings, and attitudes that they associated with knitting (see Appendix A). Interviews began with basic survey questions about the women’s lives. I asked the women to relate their age and where they grew up. I also asked about their families and occupations. These questions were intended to describe the women
demographically. The questions were also to generate a level of comfort where the women were willing to talk to me about themselves and to gear them towards opening up and discussing potentially personal issues.

The next series of questions was geared towards when the women knit, to get them thinking about the circumstances of their knitting and perhaps why. Questions about issues and ordeals that the women may have faced were addressed. Participants were asked about the actual knitting that they do, the projects they complete and abandon, whom the projects are intended for, and where they get their supplies. These questions were intended to uncover emotions, those that they may feel while working on a project and emotions felt towards others by giving knitted gifts to them. Questions about others in the women’s lives who knit were also asked. The idea was to uncover the connections that knitters might have with these people and how knitting was a conduit for those connections.

After they had answered the questions designed to allow them to think about the reasons and motivations for their knitting, the women were then asked what knitting meant to them, hoping they would be able to come to some sort of summation. The women were also asked if they had anything else to add that we hadn’t covered, offering opportunity to discuss or present ideas that were unique to their individual circumstances.

The interview questions were review by my program of study (POS) committee. After revision, the interview guide and project description for the participants were submitted for review to the Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Board and subsequently approved. A copy of their signed approval is included in Appendix B.
Procedure

All but one of the interviews were conducted in the women’s homes. It was preferred that interviews take place in the home of the knitter so that she was able to show off her projects, patterns, or supplies. It was also anticipated that being amongst her knitting would spark the woman’s memory, thus encouraging her to elaborate her narrative with detail.

A small battery powered handheld digital voice recorder was used for all but the first two interviews. This allowed for the equipment to be carried around as women opted to show me their projects and knitting supplies. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 50 minutes; a majority of the interviews took approximately 40 minutes.

Interviews were conducted until respondents did not relay any new information, and redundancy had been achieved. Redundancy in qualitative research is the point at which theoretical saturation is achieved, or no new information is gleaned from the respondents (Law, et al 1998). For this research redundancy was achieved with 13 interviews.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher and then submitted to content analysis. A set of coding procedures guided the data analysis. To begin, three of the most subjective questions from the interviews were chosen to code:

1. Were there ever any significant periods in your life where knitting helped you deal with stress/illness/family problems/personal issues? Can you tell me more about that?

2. How do you feel when you are working on a project?

3. What is knitting to you?

The answers from five of the respondents were compiled together under each question.
The answers were read, with units of analysis highlighted. A unit of analysis included a single theme or idea related to knitting. The highlighted sections were then sorted according to similarities, and through constant comparison, themes were derived from these units of analysis. Themes were then grouped to form two higher order themes. A coding guide was developed for the responses to these three questions.

In order to assess reliability of the coding, inter-rater agreement was measured between the researcher and another coder experienced in qualitative analysis. Inter-rater reliability analysis is a method of measuring the agreement among coders in their analysis of the data. Inter-rater assessment acts as a cautionary step, guarding against the introduction of subjective bias in the coding and analysis of qualitative data (Morse, 1997). The aforementioned questions were coded individually by the two coders, and results were compared using the following equation.

\[
\frac{\text{number of agrees}}{\text{number of agrees} + \text{number of disagrees}} \times 100
\]

**Figure 1. Equation of Inter-Rater Reliability**

The coders achieved inter-rater reliability of 98%. The researcher then coded the remaining questions and interviews, making minor additions to the coding guide as she progressed. A copy of the coding guide is in Appendix C.
A variety of women provided their stories and thoughts for this research. The 13 participants ranged in age from 21 to 83 years of age, with an average age of 54.8. One of the women was in her 20s, two were in their 30s, two were in their 40s, three were in their 50s, one was in her 60s, three were in their 70s and one was in her 80s.

Seven of the women were married at the time of the research, two were divorced, two were widows, and two were single. Ten of the women had children, six had grandchildren, and two had great-grandchildren. This sample was a very educated group of women. Only 2 of the 13 did not have the opportunity to go to college and more than half of the women (n=9) had graduate degrees, master’s and PhD’s. The respondents had a variety of different occupations. Some of the older women were retired (n=4), but kept busy with senior college classes and involvement in their churches. Of the women who did work and were finished with their education, seven had professional jobs, such as university professors, library administrators, storeowners, and political campaign managers.

Two overarching themes emerged from the interview data. The first called Health & Well-Being, illustrated that women recognize that knitting is related to their general well-being. The second theme, Accomplishment & Empowerment, showed that women were stronger because of knitting. Following a descriptive overview of knitting in the women’s lives, the two themes will be discussed in detail.

Knitting in the Women’s Lives

When did women learn to knit; who taught them; what was the experience like? Did they stop knitting at some point in their lives; when did they start again; and why? How often
and when do women knit? Answers to these questions were used to describe the experiences of knitting in the women’s lives.

The women learned to knit at a variety of ages. Seven learned when they were young children, ranging from 6 to 10 years of age; three learned in adolescence, 12, 16, and 18 years of age; and others learned as adults, 20, 25, and 36 years of age. The women who learned to knit as children were all taught by family members, except for one woman. Her family members did not knit, so she taught herself by watching others. Although it was not only the older women who learned to knit as children, many did not specifically remember the experience because it was quite a long time ago, and they were very young. However one woman was able to recall the experience when her grandmother taught her to knit,

I just remember that I didn’t get to see her very often. She lived in a different town and she was quite elderly … and I remember sitting on the couch next to her the first time she taught me how to knit and just thinking it was really neat that I got some one-on-one time with … I thought it was neat that she would sit down and teach me how to [knit] (Respondent A).

The women who learned to knit when they were older learned from a variety of sources. One woman, Respondent L, learned to knit as part of her 4-H club’s activities. Two women learned to knit in college; one was taught by a girl living down the hall in her dorm, while the other was taught by her best friend. Respondent E learned how to knit from her best friend when she was 25. Another woman was taught by an elderly neighbor to knit when the woman was 36, and pregnant with her 3rd child. She said that the neighbor was, “determined that I was going to learn to knit because she loved knitting” (Respondent K).

Once the women learned to knit, only three have knit consistently since they first learned. Of those who discontinued knitting for a significant period of time, women listed several reasons for stopping. Three were too busy finishing up Master’s and PhDs; some
were too busy working and achieving professional advancement to knit. One woman didn’t knit because she was starting her own business,

We were starting a business and we were just very, very, very busy with that. I was working a lot and when I wasn’t working, I was usually exhausted so I was sleeping. So I just didn’t have time to knit and kind of let it go. It wasn’t a priority at that time (Respondent A).

Two of the women who learned to knit when they were young children were just not interested during high school and college. One woman was so discouraged by her first clumsy attempts at knitting that she stopped until she was a teenager,

After my grandmother showed me the knitting and doing my first sort of clumsy stitches, I had knit several inches. And then a friend of my mothers was visiting and she picked up my knitting and knitted several rows on it. It looked so perfect that I just gave up because mine compared to hers looked so bad, that I just thought, well obviously I’m not very good at this (Respondent F).

When the women who had stopped knitting decided to start again, they did so for a variety of reasons. Two of the women resumed knitting as nesting behaviour and knit while pregnant with their first children. Some women mentioned renewed interest in fiber arts. One woman began knitting again after a very long time when her church started a Prayer Shawl Ministry where women in the congregation prayed while knitting shawls. The shawls, which symbolized God’s love, were then given away to those who were ill or unwell, offering warmth, support, and comfort.

There were considerable similarities among the women in the times and frequency that they knit. Many of the women knit every day, or at least weekly. For some of the knitters, the level of knitting productivity changed with the seasons, as they didn’t want to deal with hot woolen yarns in mid-August Iowa heat and humidity. However, one woman commented that she knit consistently year round because of air conditioning, but wouldn’t
otherwise. Other women mentioned that they were busier in the summer with gardening and outdoor activities and that resulted in their knitting less in warm seasons. For some knitters, it was the project that changed with the seasons rather than the amount of time spent knitting. Socks and other small projects occupied the women’s time in the summer.

The women knit at home and also took their knitting when they ran errands, attended meetings, and traveled. The women knit in the evenings while watching television or movies. Many women took their knitting wherever they went and would knit while waiting at appointments. One woman told of what happened when she forgot to take her knitting to an appointment,

My ‘92 Camry needed its hundred thousand mile check so I drove it down to the Toyota place knowing that they would give me a ride back on the shuttle, and so I didn’t take a book and I didn’t take my knitting. But the shuttle was half an hour away and so I wandered out into the car lot and discovered, with the help of the salesman, that they had exactly the car I wanted, which is now sitting in my garage (Respondent C).

Some women also talked of knitting while at meetings and lectures. Respondent F said that she may knit in meetings but is conscious of being appropriate,

If it isn’t going to insult a speaker or a group I will knit during the meeting or during a talk, but I assess that to see if its going to be offensive in any way (Respondent F).

Many of the women also mentioned knitting on long car trips, having little else to do while on the road. Respondent C had additional incentive for knitting in the car,

My second husband liked to drive long distances and liked to drive the car, and I had a certain amount of motion sickness and I found that if I knit while he was driving it centered me and I didn’t get sick (Respondent C).

Some women mentioned taking their knitting with them when visiting with friends. Five of the women gathered together every Thursday afternoon to sit, knit, and visit for a few hours.
In summary the women learned to knit at different times of their lives and were taught by women both inside and outside of their families. A majority of the women did stop knitting for a significant period in their lives and when they decided to get back into knitting they did so for a variety of reasons. The women knit all manner of different projects, ranging in size and function. There was significant similarity amongst the women as far as when and where they knit. Many of the women’s knitting was portable; it was picked up at a moments notice and taken with them while they were out and about.

Despite the differences that the women may have had in who taught them to knit, when they learned, whether or not they stopped, and when and where they knit, their stories all contained detailed information as to their motivations for knitting and how they benefited from their knitting. These two major themes of Health & Well-Being and Accomplishment & Empowerment emerged as women answered the more subjective questions of the interview schedule. These questions addressed how the women used knitting to cope, connect, enlighten, understand, empower, learn, and be creative; how knitting has helped women in times of stress, duress, sadness loss grief, and anger; how knitting was connected to women’s happiness and joy; and why knitting was important to the women.

Health and Well-Being

Knitting was beneficial to participants’ health and well-being. They felt better because of knitting. It offered textural reassurances; many women thought knitting was comforting. Knitting also helped some women stay focused; they were able to listen and learn better because of knitting.
**Knitting as Therapy**

**Calming, Soothing, and Therapeutic**

For a majority of women (n=9) in this research, knitting provided a form of therapy. Women recognized that knitting has soothing and relaxing properties. Knitting in the evening was a way to relax and unwind. One woman said that she wouldn’t sit down to knit specifically to relax but more that knitting was a preventative or prescriptive habit. She also noted that she thinks the repetitive motions of knitting are what are particularly relaxing.

There’s something really relaxing about it. I think that’s relaxing about that repetitive motion and also you can say it’s similar to in my field, in psychology. People talk about sort of self-soothing behaviours and things like rocking and stuff like that that are really relaxing and I think knitting is kind of like that (Respondent E).

Another woman compared knitting to yoga,

It kind of allows you to relax in a way that is, the only other thing that I can compare it to that I’ve done is yoga. I do yoga and I find that I can just completely detach all the other stuff that’s been going on when I’m knitting (Respondent A).

Several of the women (n=7) had stories where knitting helped them through a particularly difficult time. One woman recalled that there were several times throughout her life when knitting played a significant role, especially during traumatic and stressful events. She said,

It’s usually in a hospital room or something like that. What do you do? Sit there and stare at the television when you have to be there. And then it’s wonderful for keeping your hands busy and your mind occupied (Respondent F).

The same woman shared a story about how knitting helped her with a particularly traumatic event in her life. Her stepson was in a fatal car accident and while she was at the hospital she had her knitting with her,
I had my knitting with me... I just remember having my knitting there. And he died, he ended up having massive head injuries and so he was on life support. But the whole time I was there I had my knitting. There were just these awful things going on, it was just awful. The worst thing that I’ve ever been through and I just remember I had my knitting. Like what are you going to do? So I think there’s something tactile that is very nice about it. But I think it also takes your mind off the problems (Respondent F).

She used knitting to stay occupied. By “just kind of having something to do, and some kind of goal, and getting something done” (Respondent F), she was able to cope with the traumatic event of her stepson’s car accident. She was able to focus on something other than the trauma and the emotions.

Another woman, Respondent C, knit while at home with her late husband who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. She used knitting to help her be patient in dealing with him and his illness. Knitting allowed her to stay occupied in the home, not worrying about things she couldn’t do while at home, as well as being in tune with her husband’s needs.

Respondent K’s husband was suffering from a memory problem and at the time of the research she would knit when she was frustrated, “My husband has a memory problem, ... when I am frustrated, yes, I pick up my knitting and for me it’s a stress reliever”(Respondent K).

One woman also mentioned the beneficial physical effects of knitting. Respondent G talked about her mother’s knitting, and how it helped diminish stiffness in her hands when she started to develop arthritis,

My mother started to develop a little bit of arthritis in her fingers and she was not a stenographer or typer so she knit 25 sweaters that year, just to keep her fingers nimble. So knitting can be utilized for a lot of different things; both to relax you and for the exercise of your fingers (Respondent G).
These women’s knitting offered an outlet for sorrow and frustrations. By taking time to knit they were able to reduce their stress levels and establish calmness. Through knitting these women were able to work through very difficult, personally traumatic events, as well as improve physical functions.

**Helping to Focus**

Several of the women described how knitting helped them stay focused and pay attention. They talked about being able to stay focused during class lectures, committee meetings, and other talks. Respondent H recognized that with her learning style, knitting helped her stay focused when attending lectures,

> I felt that my learning style fit so much better if I had my hands busy with something and could listen fully to the lecture. I hope that she kind of got that I wasn’t sitting there knitting instead of paying attention (Respondent H).

She also said that she if she was knitting in the lectures she was more able to listen fully, “if I’m knitting I’m not doodling and I’m a lot more available to listen and remember what’s being said” (Respondent H).

**Comfort**

Knitting evoked feelings of comfort for some of the women (n=4). In describing their knitting, the women used words like “heartwarming”, “comforting”, “wonderful”, “pleasant”, and “good feelings”. Examples include,

> Its sort of a textural reassurance... it’s comforting. It’s in a sense it’s a rocking chair. Its not demanding and it’s not judgmental, it’s comforting warm [and] pleasant (Respondent I).

> I think in the wintertime it’s definitely fun to snuggle up with a bunch of yarn and knit (Respondent B).
Whether it was the soft, pliable, and yielding physical aspects of the yarn, or the heartwarming associations of knitting, it was apparent that knitting evoked comfy cozy feelings for the women.

Connections with Others

Women connected with others through knitting. They made friends through knitting. They shared experiences and fostered friendships by means of knitting. They showed love and caring for people in their lives; knitting gifts for family was a manifestation of their love. Women knit gifts for loved ones, expressing to these loved ones just how important they were. The women all knit gifts for friends and family members. In fact some of them knit mostly for their family and seldom for themselves. Women also showed compassion to those they don’t know; by knitting for charity through prayer shawl ministries women were able to extend connection and caring to others that they had not yet met.

Connecting with Family

Knitting was a way for women to connect to their families. Knitting for their family offered women an outlet to express their love. Some of the women (n= 4) remarked on the traditions of knitting within their families. Eight women learned to knit from family members, either as youth or adults, and seven had taught family members in turn how to knit. Respondent B felt especially pleased and proud about the tradition of knitting within her family,

It’s kind of exciting to feel in my family it’s definitely kind of a family tradition. I think that that’s probably what drew me to knitting and what’s helped me continue doing it. It’s something that’s both a tradition that I can carry on and teach, hopefully, to my kids and other relatives. It’s something that I can continue to share with my older relatives (Respondent B).
Respondent J who only learned to knit last year from her mother echoed similar sentiments, “It’s kind of like bonding for us; I can say that my mom taught me and maybe I can teach my daughter” (Respondent J). By carrying on family traditions, women shared and strengthened bonds within the different generations of their families.

All of the knitters had knit gifts for members of their families. These gifts were a physical manifestation of the knitters’ love for their family. By knitting gifts for family members they were able to express love and support towards that person. The women had knit gifts for their children, grandchildren, husbands, parents, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and assorted in-laws. One woman told a story about a sweater that she knit for her teenage daughter. The daughter, still in high school, was president of the gay and lesbian student alliance group at the university.

I had trouble dealing with it. I don’t I mean I don’t think I have as much trouble as most parents do, but good grief she was in high school so I figured out, because pink triangles were big, that I could knit a pink triangle sweater, and I did. Doing that sweater meant something to me, it kind of meant something to her. She wore it quite a bit and some of her friends in the gay and lesbian student organization, when she complained about parental censorship, would say, ‘if my mother had ever done that to me, it would have meant so much.’ And so I guess that’s kind of something special (Respondent C).

Another woman told a story about a sweater that she knit for her husband when they were still dating in college,

I made him a sweater and it wasn’t anything really spectacular but I made it for him and he’s still got it. I think that the fact that it’s lasted this long and that he still likes it and he still gets it out and wears it to shovel the walks and things like that and he won’t let me get rid of it, he won’t give it up, its kind of cool (Respondent A).

Another woman also relayed a story about knitting for her husband. She had a bit of trouble finishing projects, but was able to complete one sock for him,
My husband, poor guy, I once made a sock for him, but only one and I never finished the other one. And he says, ‘Are you ever going to finish my socks’ and I tell him, ‘well you never wear the one I made you!’ (Respondent B).

Another woman, while still in college, knit her grandfather a lap robe,

He had just gotten out of the hospital and I made him a kind of a lap robe on really huge needles, I used 4 strands of yarn and a size K needle so they were practically as big as broom sticks. And that’s probably the most special thing I’ve knit, a lap robe for grandpa (Respondent L).

Respondent K, who knits prayer shawls, gave one to her nephew who has cancer. She told of how, after receiving the shawl, her nephew wrote a beautiful letter of thanks and how he occasionally sends emails saying that he is sitting with the shawl wrapped around his shoulders. She felt that this was a really special knitted gift, and one that she remembers above all other projects.

Connecting with Friends

Besides being able to connect to their families, women knitters were also able to connect to one another and develop friendships through their knitting. They were able to share commonalities with one another as well as express that same caring and importance that they felt towards their families. Respondent E related a story about her friend Deidre, who taught her to knit,

I would say that it’s also kind of a language for the friendship that I have with Deidre. We talk about knitting and that’s nice cause we don’t see each other all that often but we get along very well and it’s kind of the frame for that friendship, so that’s nice (Respondent E).

Respondent J told a story about an exchange of scarves between herself and her best friend.

The scarves knitted for each other were symbolic of their friendship. Respondent J said,
I think that was special and it’s just so significant of our friendship, we’re just giving to each other, we just love each other so much and it’s just another thing that we can use to express that (Respondent J).

Women were also able to establish and foster friendships through group knitting.

Respondent D shared her experiences with a local group that gathers weekly to sit and knit,

People, while they’re knitting, very often will tend to talk about parts of their lives and sometimes good parts and sometime bad parts and I have shared with this group. I share it with a lot of people how I felt when I got divorced after 40 years of marriage. And what I’d done with my life since. You know, stuff (Respondent D).

Knitting groups cultivated and nourished these connections that women may have with one another. Respondent F talked about her experiences within a group of which she was a long time member,

[It is] appreciating what each of us was doing, taking an interest in whatever projects people brought. So in that way we validated the importance of one another’s work. And then it was stimulating to see the projects that they were working on. So there was the pleasure in doing, and then there was pleasure in sharing what we were doing and having other people appreciate it and also appreciating what they were doing (Respondent F).

Respondent M told about how knitting allowed her to meet and interact with new people as a result of her knitting. She told a story about being on a bus tour in Peru and meeting the other women on the bus,

And so off we went and I had my knitting and pretty soon the women on the tour group were asking me what I’m doing and what I’m making … and all those kinds of things and then pretty soon they begin to talk about their lives and then I can find out more information about what they’re doing there on the tour and why and. And so it’s a really good entrée into lots of things (Respondent M).

Respondent G has also made new friends as a result of her knitting with a needlework group at her church. The group, by sharing common interests among church members
has offered Respondent G the opportunity to make new friends, “I’ve gotten to know several people that I wouldn’t have known otherwise” (Respondent G).

**Knitting for Charity**

Two of the knitters were involved in charity knitting, specifically prayer shawls. A prayer shawl is one that is knit while a prayer is being said. The shawl is then given to people who are ill or in poor health. Respondent K shared her experiences about being involved in the Prayer Shawl Ministry:

> It’s just such a wonderful thing, … we pray while we’re knitting. Then when we’ve finished with the shawls and go to the meetings at the church once a month we spread them out on a u-shaped table and we all stand up and hold hands and a minister comes in and blesses the shawls. We sew a little label on saying from the West Des Moines United Methodist church, knit with love (Respondent K).

The same respondent told a story about being able to give one of the prayer shawls to an elderly member of the church who was not able to get out of her home very often,

> Oh it is so heartwarming! And I myself, along with other gals, have delivered shawls too. One lady was so active in our church for so many, many years and now she’s not able to get to church but she lives in her own home all alone. So we took a shawl to her one day and she was so thrilled because after a certain age and you become inactive, people tend to forget what you’ve done. It’s a sad thing but it’s a fact. They forget how active you were at church and how busy you were. So we’ve tried to pick up all those people and present shawls and its just kind of a mountaintop experience (Respondent K).

**Responding to Change**

Several of the knitters offered philosophical thoughts on knitting and its place in today’s rapidly moving society. They believed that knitting, although time consuming and not as immediate as buying a knitted product, held a different sort of gratification. They thought that knitting was a very ancient skill that needed to be preserved. Some of the
knitters also recognized that knitting provided an opportunity for slowing down and better understanding the processes and products that are completely enmeshed in today’s lives and lifestyles.

Respondent A recognized that knitting was something that women have been doing for centuries and hopes that it will continue,

This is part of a process and it’s part of something that women have been doing, … for centuries and hopefully the art isn’t going to get lost and people are going to continue to do it (Respondent A).

Respondent J recognized that knitting was a skill that needs to be preserved, “there’s so many skills that we as a society don’t know anymore” (Respondent J). Respondent B likened the knitting groups of today with the quilting bees of yesteryear, offering women a chance to gather in relaxing tasks while they shared experiences and built friendships.

Respondent E recognized that knitting allows a person to slow down and take time to reflect upon what they are doing,

I think that [knitting] reflects kind of a need that people have for doing something that requires them to slow down and sit and not be working on a computer (Respondent E).

Three of the knitters believed that taking a step back and better understanding the processes that are involved in the creation of useful knitted products was a reaction to the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center of New York City. They talked about a need to get back to the basics, learning how to do things oneself, and establishing the cocooning activities that one may do at home. One of the women noted that since September 11th, 2001 people are more interested in getting back to the basics,

I do think that since 9-11 I think that probably has an impact on people being more interested in knitting, just kind of wanting to do something that’s basic and you know its been around for centuries (Respondent B).
Another woman talked about the resurgence of the interest in knitting being connected to the terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001. She said that,

I think it's undergoing a resurgence. And I think part of that might be with the reaction from September 11th and the terrorist issues. People are a little bit more into cocooning and knitting is one of those cocooning kinds of activities, that they can take a lot of solace from working with your hands and working with fiber (Respondent L).

In summary, the women's stories revealed that knitting had several beneficial effects as they pertained to their health and well-being. The women recognized that knitting yielded positive outcomes for their mental and physical health. Knitting also allowed women to foster connections both with friends and family, reinforcing bonds of caring and attachment. The women recognized that knitting was an important skill, indicative of a possibly simpler way of life that had to be preserved. They hypothesized that the realization of this importance was due to the traumatic terrorist attacks on the US in 2001.

Accomplishment and Empowerment

The second overarching theme, Accomplishment & Empowerment, deals with women feeling good about the knitting they do, and how this good feeling evolved from their making something and accomplishing something that is valuable. The women were able to make their knitting project something that was their own, something that had a part of them in it. They enjoyed seeing the progression of the project and felt that they were using their time wisely, with something of value to show at the end of it all. Some women also recognized that knitting now has helped change the stereotypes associated with knitters.

Pride in Accomplishment, Progress, and Doing

All of the women had a knitting project of which they were particularly proud. They felt good about projects that they had made, whether it was because it was a particularly
difficult project and it showed their level of skill, or because it was something that they came up with themselves.

One woman described a christening gown that she made for her grandchild. By mentioning this gown, Respondent D conveyed her level of knitting skill and her pride in how it turned out,

In 1970 I knit a white lace christening gown. It took a long time. I must say so myself it’s quite lovely and it has little lacy things in it. It has lacy ruffles around the sleeves, along the neck and along the bottom so I think that is probably the most significant thing I've ever knit (Respondent D).

Many of the knitters enjoyed seeing how the project progressed. They felt good in a sense because they saw it coming along. Respondent J described a scarf she was making and how she liked to stop every so often and wrap it around her neck and see how long it was getting, “I get excited when I see the progress... its exciting to see how far you’ve come” (Respondent J).

Some knitters took pleasure in the “doing” of the project. They specifically mentioned the actual knitting as their favorite part of working on a project. Various participants described,

The actual process of doing it, actually sitting down and just working on [a project] (Respondent E).

I’m not doing this for creativity, I’m doing this to keep my lap warm in the wintertime, so I don’t do fancy stuff. They are just plain sweaters that I can knit and not have to think about (Respondent M).

[It’s] nice sometimes just to sit there and knit (Respondent B).

Other knitters exhibited the desire to finish a project. Some of them chose projects that were small and therefore more easily finished. Respondent L enjoyed knitting socks because they were “something I can knit and be done with” (Respondent L). Respondent E,
who was working on finishing her PhD dissertation, noted that a knitting project was
“something that you can finish which as you know as a graduate student, finishing anything
feels really good” (Respondent E). Another woman was knitting an afghan blanket. The
project consisted of several smaller squares that were knit separately and then stitched
together. She mentioned that she “always feel good when I get one of the squares done”
(Respondent G). She was also looking forward to finishing the entire afghan, “it’s also
rewarding to have a finished product and I’ll feel good when I get all those squares put
together” (Respondent G).

Knitting is not always an easy or simple way of creating a garment out of yarn. Some
of the knitters did mention that some knitting projects can be difficult and frustrating.
Sometimes a project is put aside because the pattern is too difficult, or the size and fit isn’t as
desired. Often the project is abandoned because it isn’t turning out as the knitter envisioned.

Respondent H described a sweater that had been “on hold” for at least a year,

I guess [I stopped because] I just wasn’t satisfied with my adjustments. I
wasn’t knitting it exactly per pattern instructions... I was playing with the
needle sizes and when I finally got the gauge that I wanted for the feel of
the fabric my row gauge was so far off the written pattern that I was going
to end up with 6 foot sleeves if I knit all the repeats in the pattern and
everything

Frequently knitters have to start a project over again because something isn’t working
the way they envisioned it. Respondent E comments about learning to accept the need to “rip
out” her stitches and begin the project again,

I used to not rip out as readily as I do now but now I recognize having
done sweaters and stuff like that, that I ended up not liking afterwards, that
getting it right matters because if you don’t then you won’t wear it and its
kind of silly then to have made it.
Some knitters cited boredom as a reason for stopping work on a project. Respondent A mentioned a project that she had, “half done and got bored with it.” Respondent G said she “lost interest” in a vest that she was making. Respondent B seemed to abandon almost as many projects as she started. She would get excited about trying a new technique, or a novel yarn, or a project for someone special, but then for some reason or another she would abandon the project,

I think I’m always really attracted to something new, trying a new technique and then maybe its like attention deficit disorder when the novelty wears off I move onto something else.

When the project becomes difficult or frustrating, she will set it aside, “Occasionally I think I just hit a wall where it’s like something technical that I’m just not at that point that I want to deal with it”.

Despite the frustrations that a knitter can face when completing a project, they still find it to be an enjoyable pastime. For them, the benefits achieved through and by knitting, outweigh the aggravations and disappointments.

Part of Oneself

The knitters enjoyed knitting because the resulting project was their own design. Respondent D, who has been knitting for a very long time and has developed her own patterns for hats and mittens and gloves, talked about not wanting to follow someone else’s printed directions,

I don’t use patterns for socks or hats anymore, trying to follow the precise picture in a book is like painting by number as far as I’m concerned (Respondent D).
Another woman was really excited about the idea of making things all herself. When it was mentioned to her that getting to the point of being able to develop one’s own patterns, the product can then become truly one’s own, she said,

When you’re not only making the garment, you’re doing the design, then you’re at a whole other level. It isn’t what somebody from a company came up with. It’s something that you came up with and that’s cool (Respondent A).

Another knitter, although she sometimes bought knitting kits with the yarn and pattern packaged together, was able to make the kit project into something her own. She described a kit for a Christmas stocking. She incorporated a pattern of her own into the instep, using different coloured yams to replicate her husband’s fraternity insignia. Another woman talked about not wanting to take knitting commissions for people outside her family, saying that having someone else make the decisions would take the fun out of the project,

When I'm doing something for somebody in the family, usually I’m putting something together that I think would work for them of what I have here, rather than dealing with a pattern that somebody gives to me, with yarn they want it knit in and so forth, and that’s not fun (Respondent C).

Creativity

Seven of the knitters talked about knitting as an opportunity to express their creativity. Knitting was an outlet for imaginative processes, “An opportunity to be a little creative” (Respondent G), and “an outlet of creativity” (Respondent J). One woman compared knitting to sculpture, “It’s creating, it’s like sculpture because you take a string and you shape it into something” (Respondent H).

Another woman also enjoyed the creativity that was involved in completing knitting projects. Although she indicated that she knitted for practical reasons and was “not doing
this for creativity, I’m doing this to keep my lap warm in the winter time, so I don’t do fancy stuff” (Respondent M), she got particular enjoyment out of playing around with and choosing colour combinations. She has been knitting a series of sweaters for the young women in her family. These sweaters, inspired by a pattern known as the Julia Roberts sweater, had bands of colours of varying width that went across the body of the sweater as well as across the sleeves. Respondent M summarized, “I’ve been having great fun doing that.”

**Have Control Over the Process**

Two of the women talked about the knitting process as something that they had control over within their lives. They mentioned that in this age of automation that knitting is something that they have control over, from the very start to the very end. It was something that they knew exactly what each step entailed. One woman described,

> In the time when everything is so mechanized including messages, ... to have something that you can do yourself, and have control over yourself must have a much greater pull than it would normally, when everybody had to spin (Respondent I).

Another woman talked about the total control of the hand knitting process,

> Its something that you’ve got total control over because you’re doing it yourself and it is something that you have to put a fair amount of time and effort into but you’ve got something, you’re producing something (Respondent A).

**Time Usage**

Seven of the women remarked on how knitting allowed them to utilize their time well. They believed it important not to waste their time. Women would knit while sitting and watching television or waiting for appointments. They were multitasking and accomplishing two things at the same time.
Respondent I said that knitting was, “a productive thing to do.” Another woman mentioned that while she is knitting she was not wasting her time, “usually I feel I’m using my time wisely when I’m knitting” (Respondent H). She also said, “I feel like I’m accomplishing something with time that would ordinarily be wasted.” One woman pointed out that, “it’s a way to better utilize your time, you don’t feel like you’re just sitting” (Respondent G). Another woman suggested, “knitting is becoming recognized as a way that people can constructively use their leisure time” (Respondent L).

One woman emphasized that if she knit while watching TV she was aware that her time was well utilized,

I feel like I’m not wasting time by, like at night when we watch television I can knit and keep one eye on television. I feel like otherwise I would just sit there and do nothing and so I accomplish a lot in the evening (Respondent K).

Respondent E pointed out that she felt particularly good if she was able to knit and do something else at the same time,

If I’m sitting watching a movie or something, that can really easily feel like a waste of time, but if I’m [knitting] something at that same time and so then I don’t feel as much like I need to go do something else, like I need to go work on my dissertation or do some other thing, because I’m doing two things at once and that’s pretty good (Respondent E).

The knitters believed that they were accomplishing a lot when they knit. This made them feel good about themselves, that they were being productive, and effectively utilizing their time.

Changes

Breaking Down Stereotypes

Two of the younger knitters talked how the stereotypes associated with knitting were changing, that knitters were no longer solely grandmothers sitting in rocking chairs. One
woman noted that she was enjoying the new popularity of knitting and that she hoped that more young women would try it.

I’m glad that it’s become very popular. And I love of course that there are celebrities who are into it and have sort of popularized it, because that sort of takes away the granny in a rocking chair stigma. I mean if Julia Roberts does it then it’s got to be pretty cool. And that’s neat to me that, I think it gives young women the freedom to try it because they don’t feel like this makes them fuddy duddies (Respondent E).

The same woman also shared a story about her husband’s band recording a song and shooting a video about “gangsta knitters.” The inspiration of the video was she and her friend Deidre, who would sit and knit while their husbands wrote and practiced their music,

Deidre and I would always sit and knit and they would be making music and at some point they started joking that they were going to write a rap about us about the ‘gangsta knitters’. And they did. And so they wrote this song and they recorded it and then they made a video last year ... they showed it somewhere and it won some prize. But it’s hilarious, its so funny. And Deidre’s in it, kind of doing this little rap that they wrote. It’s very, very cute (Respondent E).

The other woman talked about looking at knitting blogs and knitting web pages on the Internet. These web pages really helped change the idea of who was knitting and the different types of people interested. Respondent B said,

I think a lot of them are really interesting cause they have this sort of radical, you know they’re very quirky and arty and different. There’s like a queer knits knit bloggers ring and just all kinds of different groups. There’s one called crafty bitch, you know, just kind of like people that are a little bit sassy I guess. So it’s definitely breaking down stereotypes about knitters being old ladies (Respondent B).

These younger knitters illustrated that who was knitting was changing. By seeing celebrities knit, as well as utilizing the Internet to share knitting projects and experiences, stereotypes of grandmother knitting in a rocking chair were no longer exclusively applicable when describing a knitter.
Recognizing the Value

Two of the knitters mentioned that they knit because of the value of the product that they ended up with. Respondent J compared making an item with buying it,

It’s just a lot different when you make it yourself and I think it’s much more fulfilling than just buying it (Respondent J).

Respondent E also remarked on the value of her completed knitting projects. She believed that with the renewed interest in knitting there were more people recognizing the skill and time involved in completing a knitting project. She said, “I think there’s something really neat about having people recognize the value in it” (Respondent E).

In summarizing the second theme, women expressed significant pride and accomplishment when they knit. They recognized that they enjoyed the progress and the actual doing of the knitting. The women were also empowered by their knitting. It was something over which they had complete control; by using their time in what they felt was a wise manner, the women were also able to put a part of their selves into their knitting through their creativity. Through these forms of empowerment the women were also bringing about changes as far as general societal perceptions of knitting. The value and importance of knitting was being recognized, as were the ideas of a stereotypical knitter.

Summary

Based on the answers the women gave during the interviews it can be discerned that women recognized the healthful, relaxing, and calming effects of knitting. They also were able to connect with one another, friends, and family through knitting, giving gifts, knitting for charity, and meeting weekly to sit and knit. Many of the women’s most cherished or special projects were given as gifts to loved ones and family members. The women felt pride
in accomplishing something that really was their own and in recognizing the work and subsequently the value of the object. Given the realization of the positive effects that knitting had in these women’s lives, it was evident that knitting was connected to a woman’s happiness and joy. Because of that connection to her happiness and joy it became apparent that knitting was important to women.

Proposed Model of the Importance of Knitting in Women’s Lives

Figure 1 presents a proposed model of the importance of knitting in women’s lives; the empirically based model emerged from women’s responses to interpretive questions. Beginning in the center of the model, knitting is portrayed as playing an important role in the lives of women. Women knit because it leads to health, well-being, accomplishment and empowerment, as depicted in the left and right boxes. Knitting is important to women because it has beneficial effects on their physical and mental wellness in several senses, as therapy, by forging and strengthening connections with others, and as a means in which to respond to change (Arrow #1). Knitting is also important because it fosters a sense of empowerment and self-actualization for the women through accomplishment, wise and efficient use of time, and changing views of knitting (Arrow #2). Accomplishment and empowerment and feeling proud of oneself can in turn have an effect on one’s health and well-being (Arrow #3). Arrow #4 illustrates that mental health and well-being can lead to or encourage the possibility of accomplishment and a woman’s subsequent empowerment.
HEALTH & WELLBEING THROUGH KNITTING:
• Therapy
• Connect w/ others
• Responding to change

ACCOMPLISHMENT & EMPOWERMENT THROUGH KNITTING:
• Pride in accomplishment
• Part of oneself
• Times usage
• Changes

Figure 2. Proposed Model of the Importance of Knitting in Women’s Lives
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Thirteen women of varying ages, backgrounds, and professions were interviewed. The women ranged in age from 21 to 83 years of age with the average age of 55. Most lived within the city limits of Ames, IA, but three lived in the surrounding countryside and two were from Des Moines, IA. Four of the women were retired, seven were working professionally, and two were finishing up their university education. Only two of the women did not have the opportunity to go to university, choosing instead to start and raise families. Of the women who did go to university, nine had graduate degrees. Ten of the women had families of their own with children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. The women knit a variety of items; at the time of the research their current projects included socks, shawls, sweaters, afghans, children’s hooded sweaters, and scarves.

The Importance of Knitting in Women’s Lives

Question #1 asked about women’s first knitting experience, when they learned, and who taught them, to see if one of the reasons for their knitting was a familial connection or tradition. Although one-half of the women did learn to knit when they were children and were taught by family members, their answers to interview questions about their desires, needs, or wants related to knitting did not differ from the women who learned when they were older, from friends, or as part of a class. When a woman learned to knit and who taught her appeared to have little effect on the significance of knitting in her life.

Question #2 asked when and how often women knit, trying to uncover if they knit when they were in certain emotional states or to quell certain negative feelings, or if it was simply a matter of knitting during free time. It was more of the latter. Women would not knit
because they were happy or sad, but when they had some free time and picked up their knitting, they felt good about it. Women knit during every possible moment of free time. Many of them had portable projects that they could take with them to work on while waiting for appointments or during particular meetings. Women would knit in the evenings, while watching TV, waiting for dinner to cook, or while visiting with others.

Question #3 went on to ask about women’s motivations to knit and the emotional support knitting provided. The question asked how women have used knitting to cope, connect, enlighten, understand, empower, learn, and be creative; how it has helped them during times of stress, duress, sadness, loss, grief, and anger; and how it was connected to their happiness and joy. Question #4 asked what meaning knitting held for women and why was it important to them? The two inductively generated main themes of Health & Well-being and Accomplishment & Empowerment that are resultant from the data of this study answered these questions. Knitting was important to women because it had beneficial effects on their physical and mental health and their general well-being. Knitting, as an activity, was therapeutic; the repetitive motions and relaxed state help to calm and soothe the women. Although the women did not sit down and knit specifically to relax, they noticed that when they knit they were more relaxed. Knitting also allowed some women to be able to better focus. If they were knitting during lectures or meetings for example, they did not lose interest and allow their minds to wander. Knitting was also very comforting for women. They enjoyed working with soft, pliable yarns. They enjoyed the cocooning activity of staying at home on winter evenings and knitting with some warm snuggly yarn.

Part of a woman’s well-being as a result of her knitting pertained to her connections with others. Women connected with their families through knitting. Many of the women
were taught to knit by family members and hoped to one-day pass on the knowledge and skill to someone of a younger generation within the family. They expressed love and caring to family members through the knitted gifts that they made. The sweaters, socks, or mittens were a physical manifestation of the knitter’s affection and concern for the recipient of the gift. This sense of connection was also extended to others outside the knitter’s family, both friends and people they did not personally know. Knitters showed caring and affection to their friends by knitting gifts. They also built friendships and shared experiences with other knitters, fostering that sense of connection. Some women even extended that same caring and concern to others who they do not personally know, through charity prayer shawl knitting.

Knitting was also important to women because it furthered their feelings of accomplishment and empowerment. Women were proud of their knitting; it exhibited a level of skill and an accomplishment. Women enjoyed seeing the progression of the project; they liked to stop and look at how far along they had come. Many of the women believed that when they were knitting they were using their time wisely and had something of value to show for their time. Another empowering factor of knitting was that the women were able to make the project into something that had a part of them in it. They had control over the entire process and used their own creativity to make their projects. Whether it was designing the entire project or simply choosing the colour of yarn, the women put a part of themselves, their own personal touch into each piece of knitting.

Another part of a women’s empowerment through knitting came from the changes of how knitting was viewed. Many different types of women knit. Through their own knitting, women of all ages and backgrounds were effectively changing the idea of the stereotypical knitter. They served as examples for others to see that knitters were not all grandmothers in
rocking chairs. Another part of women’s empowerment through knitting was contributing to more people becoming aware of the value of knitting. Having others recognize not only the level of skill required to actually complete a project, but the high quality and craftsmanship of each knitted piece, changed the way that knitting was thought of and helped to make knitting a more valid part of women’s lives.

Do women knit for the tradition of it within their family and the connections that they can make with others? Do they knit for the development of a skill, and the opportunity to display that skill? Do women enjoy knitting because it results in a valuable product through wisely usage of their time? Or, did the women say they felt good about using their time well in order to justify their knitting? Was there an underlying concern that if their knitting wasn’t useful, or beneficial, would it be viewed as frivolous and a waste of time and money? Was there an underlying socially instilled behaviour at work? Do women feel that they need to be busy all the time? Is it possible that knitting is one outlet of a woman’s need, her gendered behaviour to feel busy, and productive? The desire to knit and knitting as an activity is derived from multiple motives and meets divergent needs among knitters in the early 21st century.

**Contribution to Literature**

There were similarities and differences between the published literature and the findings from this study concerning the importance of knitting in women’s lives. The discussion of the health benefits of knitting in existing literature was supported by the results found in this study. Both the literature and the women in this research recognized the soothing and calming effects of knitting. However some women in this study also mentioned that knitting helped them to stay focused and pay attention in certain situations.
Authors cited in the Review of Literature mentioned that giving and gifts was one of the reasons that women knit. The sub-theme Connections with Others found in this study provided further support for gifts and giving. Both the existing literature and the information gathered in this study showed that when women knit it was an expression of love and caring for family and friends as well as a way to show concern for those in need through charity knitting. Charity knitting for men at war evolved into charity knitting for those who are ill.

Previous authors cited the need for creative expression as one of the reasons that contemporary women knit. This study supported this reason but also identified that the creative outlet was part of the larger desire to make or do something original as an expression of oneself.

This research enlarged on factors as to why women knit and found knitting to be an important part of their lives. Aside from the creativity component, the entire accomplishment and empowerment theme was new. The women who participated in this study showed that knitting and completing projects boosted their concept of self; they felt accomplished and empowered as a result of knitting. In particular it was interesting to note that having control over their knitting, as a small element of their lives, was important to the women. They felt that knowing how to knit a finished product, the complete making from start to finish, was a way of having control over a part of their lives, which in turn led to a feeling of self-sufficiency and accomplishment.

Another sub-theme that developed from data analysis that was not present in preexisting literature about contemporary knitting was Time Usage. It was important to the women that they use their time wisely, and not waste it. These women knit because they enjoyed it and wanted to, unlike women who in the past knit out of necessity. However both
then and now, knitting was seen as wise use of time with something valuable to show at the end.

**Future Research**

In order to more comprehensively understand the importance that textile arts have in women’s lives, further research needs to be conducted. Future studies could examine the following:

- The meaning and importance of knitting for a broader demographic group of women knitters, such as women who reside in different parts of the United States.
- The experiences of a cohort of knitters, such as those who knit in clubs through their high schools, including their reasons for knitting and the meaning it holds for them.
- The meaning and importance that other textile arts such as quilting, crocheting, embroidery, weaving, felting, and tatting, can have in women’s lives.
- The importance of traditional cultural textile arts for women in other countries and/or indigenous peoples.
- Differences and similarities in meanings and importance of textile arts, including knitting, between men and women.

Additional research and study is needed to illustrate more broadly that the textile work that people do can be and is a very important part of their lives. Textile work can be an expression of self, and accomplishment, a means of achieving calm and dealing with life’s tribulations, and a way of conveying love, caring, and concern to others.
APPENDIX A
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Demographics: where are you from, where did you grow up, age, family etc
Occupation and age?

When did you learn to knit?

Who taught you? Tell me about that experience.

Have you ever taught someone else to knit? Tell me about that experience.

Did you ever stop for a significant period of time? Why?
Why did you start up again?

When do you knit?
How often do you knit?
Over the year are there times that you knit more than others?

Were there ever any significant periods in your life where knitting helped you deal with stress/illness/family problems/personal issues? Can you tell me more about that?

What do you knit?
Tell me about beginning new projects.
About choosing patterns and yarn
Where do you get your supplies? What do you think about that (store/place etc.)
Do you have a supply of yarn on hand?

What is the general current status of knitting?
Have you ever seen disapproval because of your knitting in a certain situation (why)

What are you working on right now? Tell me about this.
How do you feel when you are working on a project?

What is your favorite part about a given project?

Have you ever abandoned projects? Tell me what and why.

What is the most special thing you ever knit? Tell me about that.

What groups/workshops have you participated in?
How was that?
Tell me about a significant event that happened there.
What about friends, family who knits? DO you share, have conversations, etc. your experiences with them? Tell me about that.

What is knitting to you?
Do you identify yourself as a knitter?

Any thing else, other thoughts on knitting that I forgot to ask about?
APPENDIX B
HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Copies of the transcribed interviews will be stored on computers in the researcher's home and in the office of the major professor. Only the researcher and major professor will have access to the interview data. Any identifiers will be removed by 12/30/04.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Checklist for Attachments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The following are attached (please check ones that are applicable):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ A copy of the informed consent document OR ☐ Letter of information with elements of consent to subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ A copy of the assent form if minors will be enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Letter of approval from cooperating organizations or institutions allowing you to conduct research at their facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Data-gathering instruments (including surveys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Recruitment fliers or any other documents the subjects will see</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two sets of materials should be submitted for each project – the original signed copy of the application form, one copy and two sets of accompanying materials. Federal regulations require that one copy of the grant application or proposal must be submitted for comparison.

FOR IRB USE ONLY:

Initial action by the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

☐ Project approved. Date: 2/4/04
☐ Pending further review. Date: ____________
☐ Project not approved. Date: ____________

Follow-up action by the IRB:

[Signature]

IRB Approval Signature    Date

Research Compliance 04/10/03
APPENDIX C
CODING GUIDE

1. HEALTH & WELL-BEING

1.1 Knitting as Therapy:
   a. Stress release, calming, soothing, relaxation, therapeutic
   b. Helps to focus
   c. Comfy cozy feelings

1.2 Connections with Others
   a. Family connections: traditions, gifts
   b. Friends Connections; groups,
   c. Knitting for others: Prayer Shawls, charity knitting, and in general

1.3 stop and smell the flowers, slowing down, w/ 9-11 and getting back/historically speaking

2. ACCOMPLISHMENT & EMPOWERMENT

2.1 Pride in Accomplishment
   a. I made it, something to show, something valuable, sense of accomplishment

2.2 Recognize the Progress
   a. See how it’s coming along,
   b. The actual doing
   c. See it finished,

2.3 It’s All Me:
   a. Make it your own
   b. Creativity
   c. Have control over the process

2.4 Time Usage
   Good use of time, busy work

2.5 Changes:
   a. Breaking down stereotypes.
   b. really recognizing the value of it (others recognize its valuable)
REFERENCES


