



For the Love of Sewing

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Key Words: expert sewers, handwork, identity, interviews, motivation, perception

Introduction: Literature on handwork, craft and sewing is often focused on manuals that describe the ‘how-to’ of making. Yet, an important facet of creation is why people feel compelled to make things. To use Peter Korn’s (2013, 7) words: “why do people choose the spiritually, emotionally, and physically demanding work of bringing new objects into the world with creativity and skill?” When people create sewn things they explore their personal perceptions, reflect on themselves, construct their identities, and examine external stimuli, by embodying themselves “in the objective world, and communicate to others” (Korn, 2013, 159).

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore why professional women who are expert sewers love to sew, while at the same time determine how they perceived and identified with their acts of making. We were interested in understanding why women love working with fabrics, textiles, threads and needles and immersing themselves in making things. The kinds of questions we asked were: how did they learn to sew (formally, informally)? What were their sewing related work and hobbies? What attracted them to working with fabric and thread? How did sewing affect other skilled work they did? What resources/information were sought for projects? How did they share their work? Why do they love making things through sewing?

Background: Through academic and grey literature reviews, we discovered that there is a great deal of interest in understanding why people love sewing. Although there is a great deal of grey literature in the form of companies that openly blog, discuss and publicize the concept of loving sewing, there seems to be little academic research on the topic. For instance, Peter Lappin on *Burda Style* itemizes his top ten reasons for why he loves sewing, which includes: the transformation of fabric to thing, how relatively inexpensive sewing is, sewing as a creative outlet, problem solving a project, working with the hands, having the item to wear, the act of self sufficiency, connection to others, “sewing is sexy”, and things made fit nicely which makes them more sustainable (Lappin, 2012). Even though many grey sources itemize these kinds of reasons for loving sewing, there is no depth in the understanding, i.e., the wording about why sewing is great tends to be statements like ‘it’s sexy’ or ‘fun’ with no elaboration on why. Interestingly, there is academic literature that elaborates in-depth into why people love doing various other handwork. For instance, Peter Korn (2013) elaborates on his journey of making furniture since 1974 whereby he discusses how making things shapes people’s identities and Robin O’Brian (1999) examines the perceptions and identities of women who weave by examining the craft of making. As such, we were motivated to further investigate the love of sewing.

Methods: Our research is based on three assumptions about our participants: 1) they love to sew and make things; 2) they have a special appreciation for fabrics and textiles; and 3) they enjoy sharing their work with others. These assumptions are linked to the values and interests of the authors/researchers and as such we engage in reflexive research practices (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000) where we acknowledge our interests towards data collection and analysis. Consequently, we engage in personal journaling (Bernard, 2006) around our own love of sewing and making

practices. The participants of our study are professional, expert women sewers who currently work as sewers or have worked as sewers in the recent past. These sewers have at least 20 years of experience. Interviews are conducted with each participant separately and they do not know each other. The interview questions are based on the focus of this study, as previously outlined. The interviews are recorded on an MP3 device to accurately capture the details of the discussions between the interviewer and interviewees. The interviews are conducted while the participants sew in their studio, home or workplace, which is an adapted technique from Jon Anderson's (2004) "talking whilst walking". Being surrounded by related physical objects and projects means that the participants are immersed in a setting that aids in prompting conversation focused on sewing. The setting acts as a stimulus that moves discussions along and prompts conversation towards deep discussions between participant and researcher that result in a rich data set. The first phase of data analysis involved transcription of the researchers' reflexive notes and the participants' interviews. Following this, the participants are given the transcripts and asked if they would like to add or subtract anything and the researchers do the same with their notes. Data analysis involves a flow between the researchers' reflexive notes and the participants' interview transcripts, with careful examination of the relationship between the data sets. It is important that the data analysis is not simply a process that "fill[s] in the gaps with [one's] own assumptions and beliefs" (Etherington, 2007, 600) but a seeking for rich information about the identities, motivations, and reasons for the love of sewing.

Discussion & Conclusion: Emily Matcher (2013) indicates that handwork or "domestic practices" are the product of a generation's "longing for a more authentic, meaningful life" (398). The research herein explores the value of sewing and handwork as a means to uncovering how handwork embodies the self and constructs people's identities. The results of our research are a series of narratives that reveal insights into how sewing acts as an anchor in our participants' lives. The narratives illustrate how sewing is a particular ideology that is linked to values that connect our participants to the broader communities they live and work within. These values include: loving oneself; displaying and constantly re-scripting one's identity; connecting with family, other loved ones, and the community; and considering the local, global and environmental contexts. Our findings tell a story of the inherent value and meanings connected to handwork and the creative process.

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