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Narrating complex identities: Contemporary women and craft



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SYNOPSIS

Personal narratives incorporating ambivalence, ambiguity and inconsistencies reflect the fluidity and complexities of contemporary identities. Based on the authors' original narrative research exploring what craftmaking means to women, this paper focuses on the ways that three contemporary Australian women narrate their identities as amateur craftswomen. While craft has had some resurgence in popularity in recent years, the research participants experienced subtle pressures, both internal and external, to subdue their passion for craftmaking. The research participants located themselves not as identified subjects within dominant discourses, but rather referred to the discourse/s in order to position themselves by the actions of critique, resistance and subversion. Postmodern theorists suggest that contemporary identity construction is an internal project of the self, or is socially developed in interaction with other people. We suggest that contemporary craftswomen's identities are constructed, internally, socially, and in embodied interaction with the material world.

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Introduction

In recent years we have seen a resurgence in the popularity of craftmaking, including among young women (Stannard, 2011). While craftmaking, especially textile and fibre crafts such as knitting, crochet and quilting continues to be practised by individual women in their homes as part of their leisure time, the contemporary profile includes participation through groups like *Stitch 'n' Bitch* (Minahan & Cox, 2007), through craftivism movements which use craft to make political statements (Hackney, 2013), and through the increasing opportunities for craftmakers to sell their handmade objects at markets and through online sites such as *Etsy*. However women's craftmaking has a long and sometimes controversial history and even in the midst of this resurgence, a more traditional view of craft persists, associating it with the domestic, as a 'time filler' and therefore in opposition to the imagined preoccupations of the 'contemporary woman' (Stannard, 2011; Turney, 2004). This article draws on the authors' original research to explore how contemporary amateur craftswomen narrate the complexities of their identities as craftswomen. As Andrews, Squire, and

Tamboukou (2008) suggest, narrative research enables us 'to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change' (Andrews et al., 2008: 1).

Identity

Focussing on identity is like trying to capture the movement of the ocean in a static image such as a painting or photograph. Different scholarly disciplines – psychology, social theory, cultural studies and feminism – have different perspectives on identity. Although elusive there is a general agreement that identity is an important concept, that contemporary understandings have shifted from a view of identity as static and fixed to identity as fluid and contingent, and that how people experience and express their identities is complex.

In this paper, while acknowledging the contribution of other disciplines, we focus mainly on social, cultural, and feminist theory that links ideas about identity and identity formation with broader social conditions including globalisation and individualisation. According to Elliot and du Gay (2009), the

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postmodernism of the late twentieth century has significantly influenced social science conceptions of identity:

Postmodernity, at least in terms of identity, involves the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self as fluid, fragmented, discontinuous, decentred, dispersed, culturally eclectic, hybrid-like. ... Identity, in the post-traditional world of the postmodern, becomes principally performative—depthless, playful, ironic, just a plurality of selves, scripts, discourses and desires. (Elliot & du Gay, 2009: xii)

While not all contemporary theorists see identity as entirely superficial, performative and transient, there is a general agreement that identities are less fixed than they were considered to be in past times. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) sees us as the do-it-yourself biographers of our own identities rather than identifying with pre-existing cultural prescriptions. Similarly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) contrast the contemporary pre-occupation regarding self-definition with the pre-determined roles available to people in the past. Identity development is no longer a question of choosing from established, culturally available roles, but has become an ongoing process of self-invention. Identity politics based on collective identities have given way to individual life politics of identity construction, negotiation and assertion (Bauman, 2000). Identity is no longer a given but a task. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) link this pressure to constitute ourselves as individuals with 'new individualism':

Opportunities, dangers and biographical uncertainties that were earlier pre-defined within the family association, the village community, or by recourse to the rules of social estates or classes, must now be perceived, interpreted, decided on and processed by individuals themselves. (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996:17)

Elliot and du Gay (2009: xvi) suggest that '[f]or those enticed by the new individualism, the danger of self-reinvention is a form of change so rapid and complete that identity becomes disposable. Instead of finding ourselves, we lose ourselves.'

Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti, acknowledging the fluidity of contemporary identities, focuses less on individualism and more on connection, both social and genealogical. She writes: 'Identity for me is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the 'other'; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in the genealogical process' (Braidotti, 1994: 166). Thus for Braidotti, identity may be a contemporary project of the self, but it is a self in context, in social relation with the people around oneself in the present, as well as the remembered self and the recollected influences of the past.

In Braidotti's view identity is not always rational or conscious. While we have agency and can construct our own identities to an extent, identity is constrained by personal experiences, interaction with the material and social world, culturally available options, and structures such as gender, race, and class. At the social level, identification with other people creates recognisable inter-subjective or social identities such as 'craftswoman' or 'quilter'. At a cultural level, individuals and groups identify with or juxtapose themselves in relation to cultural narratives of particular identities.

Like Braidotti (1994) we understand that identities are not constructed in social isolation. It is cultural discourses that provide the context for individuals' construction and understanding of identities, whether by adoption, adaptation or rejection of identities that exist, albeit in a fluid and flexible way, in cultural discourses. As Joseph states, in discussing the negotiated identities of Malaysian migrant women in Australia, 'identities are simultaneously shaped by, and help shape, discourses' (2013:35).

Like all cultural discourses, the discourses around craft and craftmaking shift and change over time and in different parts of the community. Parker (1984) and Isaacs (1987) are among a number of scholars who have documented aspects of the long history of women's craft and craftmaking. Both Parker and Isaacs illustrated the range of craftwork undertaken both by poor women who 'had no alternative but to make the things they needed, who often recycled materials including flour sacks and sugar bags; and those women who had more time and resources to spend on their craft... [including both] the purely functional and the highly decorative' (Gandolfo & Grace, 2010: 10).

The increasing availability of manufactured goods, alongside the increasing numbers of women in the paid workforce in industrialised countries like Australia, has reduced the necessity for making household items at home. However, craft and craftmaking have not disappeared. The current popularity of craft can be seen in the increase in craft groups such as *Stitch 'n Bitch*, the rise of DIY and use of craft as a form of activism (yarn bombing and graffiti knitting) and in the proliferation of craft blogs and websites. This resurgence has been attributed to various factors including the 'rejection of the consumer culture' that has led to a re-valuing of handmade objects, driven by movements like the 'slow' movements that often have environmental and ethical concerns (Collier, 2011: 104), health and wellbeing benefits (Gandolfo & Grace, 2009, 2010) and the reclaiming of craft practices by feminists.

Feminism has had a complex relationship with craft, certainly some second wave feminists who wanted to free women from the domestic sphere and create opportunities for them to pursue an education and professional work, rejected craft. However, other feminists such as the artist Judy Chicago who used a range of textile crafts in her installation *The Dinner Party* (1970s), a political work that challenged the omission of women from history, have argued for and continue to argue for the importance of valuing craft and craftmaking practices.

While some women are gathering together and knitting to protest against war or the lack of action on climate change, and others are taking up quilting or sewing to help them relax, as an avenue for creative expression, it appears that at least in some sections of the community the old discourses persist—ideas about craft as a 'timefiller' activity for women with nothing much to do and therefore necessarily anti-feminist. As Betsy Hosegood writes in her article, 'Not Tonight Darling, I'm Knitting': 'Over and over again women who knit wrestle with their positions in society as either feminists or homemakers' (Hosegood, 2009:157). Contemporary craftswomen experience their identities within this ambiguous, contested space.

The study

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