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‘Knit “n” natter’: a feminist methodological assessment of using creative ‘women’s work’ in focus groups

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Abstract

This article outlines the methodological innovations generated in a study of knitting and femininity in Britain. The study utilised ‘knit “n” natter’ focus groups during which female participants were encouraged to knit and talk. The research design encompassed a traditionally undervalued form of domestic ‘women’s work’ to recognise the creative skills of female practitioners. ‘Knit “n” natter’ is a fruitful feminist research method in relation to its capitalisation on female participants’ creativity, its disruption of expertise and its feminisation of academic space. The method challenges patriarchal conventions of knowledge production and gendered power relations in research, but it also reproduces problematic constructions of gender, which are acknowledged. The study contributes to a growing body of work on creative participatory methods and finds that the ‘knit “n” natter’ format has utility beyond investigations of crafting and may be used productively in other contexts where in-depth research with women is desirable.

Keywords

Craft, creative methods, domesticity, feminism, knitting, participatory methods, space, women

Introduction

This study discusses the use of the ‘knit “n” natter’ focus group as a method of data collection and argues that this creative approach provides valuable feminist methodological

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insights, particularly vis-à-vis working with older female participants. We suggest that the ‘knit “n” natter’ focus group has three benefits: first, it provides a creative, relaxing and enjoyable experience for participants, which facilitates openness and the production of rich qualitative data; second, it *may* position participants as experts, disrupting power hierarchies between the researcher and the researched; third, it feminises space, allowing for a gendered experience that contrasts with common constructions of academic knowledge production as masculine. While we posit these findings as methodologically useful, we also acknowledge and reflect on the problematic gendered assumptions that underlie some of our arguments.

Our sociological study explored the links between knitting, femininity and women’s everyday lives (Harrison and Ogden, 2019); hence, the ‘knit “n” natter’ method directly matched the skills of our targeted participants. Participatory textiles workshops have been used productively in arts and design research (Shercliff and Holroyd, 2016; see also the special issue of *Journal of Arts and Communities* titled ‘Stitching Together’ (2020)). There has also been a recent shift towards creative and arts-based methods in social scientific qualitative research to democratise the research process (Henwood et al., 2019). Our research adds to this by focusing specifically on an undervalued form of creative ‘women’s work’ that has potential as a participatory method to engender inclusivity and help elicit women’s stories. Our ‘knit “n” natter’ method encapsulates feminist research principles and its strengths lead us to argue that it may be of value to research that aims to explore other issues impacting women, especially under-researched groups such as older women excluded from or intimidated by traditional academic research settings. Nevertheless, the ‘knit “n” natter’ method is also in tension with feminist research principles because it naturalises the association between women and domesticity.

‘Knit “n” natter’ is a contemporary name for a knitting circle where knitters gather together to practice their craft and talk. Knitting circles can be informal groups within the home attended by relatives and friends or bigger collectives in public venues such as yarn shops, pubs or parks involving knitters who are unacquainted or linked predominantly via social media. Knitting is not exclusive to women, but Parker (1996) has examined the long history of women’s homosocial needlework practices, noting that in Victorian Britain textiles-based hand-crafting was common to women of all social classes: a means of subsistence for working-class women and ‘correct drawing-room behaviour’ for middle-class ladies (p. 152). Needlework occupies a special place in women’s history because it has long been ‘a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness’ (Parker, 1996: 11). Turney (2009) has discussed the historical knitting circle as ‘solely the domain of women’ (p. 145) and today as an activity that still ‘recognises the power of group work [and] discussion’ amongst women (p. 203). The contemporary knitting circle acts ‘as a communicative tool’, expressing women’s subjectivities that otherwise tend to be ‘hidden, marginalized or ignored’ (Turney, 2009: 203). Recently, knitting circles have been resurrected under a new name, ‘stich “n” bitch’ (Stoller, 2003). We use the name ‘knit “n” natter’ because several of our older participants disliked Stoller’s term on the grounds that the language was vulgar. We acknowledge the subsequent potential for representing women’s talk as ‘natter’, or mindless chatter, which is not our intention.

To explain the methodological innovativeness and utility of the ‘knit “n” natter’ focus group, this paper first provides the context for our interest in knitting in the 21st century, including our observations of reductive distinctions made in popular media discourse between ‘hipster-knitters’ and ‘granny-knitters’ (Harrison and Ogden, 2019). As we show, the so-called granny-knitter and her particular practices have been disparaged as tedious and outdated, whereas ‘hipster’ craft pursuits have been valorised as cool, desirable accomplishments. This raises interesting questions about how the meanings of knitting are differently constructed according to intersections of age, gender, ethnicity and level of feminist or political activism of knitters (Harrison and Ogden, 2019; Bratich and Brush, 2011; Literat and Markus, 2019; Pentney, 2008; Turney, 2009). As we have argued elsewhere (Harrison and Ogden, 2019), older female knitters have been overlooked in research linked to domestic leisure practices and constitute an under-researched group.

Following the contextualisation of our study of knitting, the paper outlines the unusual reactions our research elicited from colleagues, emphasising the undervaluation of women’s domestic leisure practices in the academy. Lessons learned from these reactions informed the research design as it was necessary to create a safe space within which participants could feel valued. The paper also discusses our recruitment strategy for accessing participants before providing a critical account of the three main strengths of the ‘knit “n” natter’ focus group method: its capitalisation on women’s creativity, potential disruption of hierarchies of expertise and feminisation of academic space.

Knitting in the 21st century

Knitting has undergone a dramatic revival in popularity this century. An estimated 7.3 million people in Britain knit – around 11% of the population, though these statistics must be treated with caution since they derive from commercial research (Wool and the Gang, 2015; Rowan cited in Turney, 2009). The majority of knitters in Britain – 5.9 million – are thought to be women in their mid-thirties or older (UK Hand Knitting Association, 2014; Immediate Media, 2017). Although it is known that, historically in Britain and elsewhere, the craft was practiced by men (Rutt, 1987), knitting and other sedentary textile handicrafts, such as crochet and embroidery, have a long history as ‘women’s work’ and, consequently, have been undervalued in terms of skilfulness and cultural importance (Parker, 1996; Turney, 2009). Particularly since the mid-20th century, when the popularity of hand knitting declined – partly effected by the availability of low-cost, machine-manufactured clothing – making textile products in the home accrued ‘cultural stigma’ (Turney, 2009: 5). As Turney (2009) observes, the idea of knitting was embodied by ‘grannies in rocking chairs’ (p. 5) and symbolic of ‘non-liberated femininity’ (p. 216); thus the craft is understood as ‘a highly gendered relic from yesteryear that . . . somehow deserves derision’ (p. 5). Today, the public image of knitting, as communicated in news media reportage and online lifestyle content, divides knitters into two camps: fusty granny-knitters situated within the private home, who personify all that is outdated and undesirable for women, and youthful, cool, feminist, public knitters, who represent a new form of what we have called ‘hipster-knitting’ (Harrison and Ogden, 2019). The artificial division of contemporary knitters into notionally oppositional camps

of grannies and hipsters reproduces what Close (2018) calls ‘the postfeminist stereotype of grandmothers: politically inert but domestically skilled’ (pp. 878–879).

Research into knitting has, to some extent, replicated the cultural preoccupation with hipster-knitters and their new knitting practices at the expense of practitioners who may be uncritically classified as granny-knitters. There have been studies of knitting in relation to: avant-garde performance art (Rees, 2018); fan art (Cherry, 2016); celebrity and lifestyle cultures (Drix, 2014; Parkins, 2004); online social networks (Minahan and Cox, 2007; Orton-Johnson, 2014); feminism (Groeneveld, 2010; Kelly, 2014; Pentney, 2008); yarn-bombing and political activism (Black, 2017; Bratich and Brush, 2011; Close, 2018; Hahner and Varda, 2014; Literat and Markus, 2019). These forms of knitting may involve women of all ages but are discursively constructed as youthful activities, representative of a new ethos of trendy, public crafting and the feminist reclamation of knitting from anachronistic ‘grannies’. Where sociological studies have engaged empirically with knitters, which is fairly rare, they have selected young women as research subjects, such as Stannard’s and Sanders’ (2014) work with college students in the USA (research with knitting participants is more common in arts and design research. See, for example, Shercliff and Holroyd, 2016). Only a few studies have engaged with older women, for example, Shin’s and Ha’s (2011) ethnographic work with knitting groups in South Korea. All the above research is invaluable to understandings of contemporary knitting, but it also risks reproducing the patriarchal privileging of public, intellectual, politically engaged forms of leisure over sedentary, domestic practices that are largely, but not exclusively, enjoyed by older women. This links to patriarchal value systems that understand the home as of lesser significance than the masculine public sphere. The undervaluation of ‘granny-knitting’ also recalls second-wave feminism’s imperatives for women to escape the stultifying confines of housewifery. Germaine Greer (2007) wrote that ‘women have frittered their lives away stitching things for which there is no demand ever since vicarious leisure was invented. . . for centuries, women have been kept busy wasting their time’. Attitudes towards ‘women’s work’ that equate domesticity uncritically with gendered oppression have been challenged by writers who argue that traditional practices of housewifery can be enjoyable and fulfilling for some women and that women negotiate domesticity in more complex ways than have been fully recognised in scholarship and culture. Johnson and Lloyd (2004) argue ‘the project of feminism has itself been built on this tradition of domesticity as a source of critique of the contemporary social world’ (p. 160). The findings of our study corresponded with this as many of our participants reported enjoyment of knitting within the home and talked about the craft’s facility for forging emotional links with other women, eliciting positive memories of and feelings of kinship with female ancestors and providing creative space for relaxation and personal accomplishment. The next section will discuss the unusual reactions to our research from some academic colleagues.

Researching ‘women’s work’ in the academy

Unexpectedly, we encountered derisory attitudes towards knitting research amongst some academic colleagues. When discussing our work in both informal and formal professional contexts, we experienced light mockery. This was unusual compared to

responses to other research projects we had been involved in. Some colleagues – male and female – appeared puzzled or amused by our study of knitting, as though it was unworthy of scholarly attention. We were asked incredulously ‘do you knit?’ as if this was an incongruous pastime for academics and we must have a personal investment in it. It became apparent that patriarchal attitudes to ‘women’s work’ persist in some spaces in academia. Parker (1996) found that when women’s needlework ‘is carried across the borders into masculine territory’, it is considered to be ‘out of place’ (p. 215). We experienced quite literally the validity of Parker’s (1996) observation that a female needleworker ‘can become a sociologist but does not bring her work out in staffroom, boardroom or pub’ without risk (p. 215). It is unlikely that social scientists researching more traditionally masculine leisure practices would have met with similar scepticism about their projects, nor been interrogated about their personal habits. Stalp (2015) finds that feminine, sedentary leisure pursuits conducted by ‘aging women in the private sphere’ are ‘on the sidelines in sociology and leisure research’ (p. 261). This sidelining necessitated extraordinary defence of our research. Some colleagues, however, were supportive and eager to share knitting stories. A surprising number of female colleagues revealed they could knit, something they had never before mentioned in the workplace. Overall, knitting proved to be an unusually polarising object of research, eliciting incredulity or strong personal affinity. The exposure to derision allowed us to understand how knitting can be perceived negatively and the patronising encounters knitters may have experienced in their everyday lives, which helped when designing the research and establishing rapport with our participants.

Focus groups as a feminist method

The tradition of women knitting together in family, friendship or community ‘circles’ has endured into the present (Turney, 2009). We felt that focus groups had the potential to replicate the knitting circle scenario with a degree of authenticity, especially as both researchers were women. Focus groups have been identified as particularly appropriate to research with women. Kook et al. (2019) suggest that focus group research ‘holds a special appeal for researchers committed to feminist concerns’ (p. 88). Wilkinson (1999) has identified it as ‘a feminist method’. Reasons for this include the potential for focus groups to listen to many different women’s voices to reflect female diversity, the creation of shared naturalistic, unthreatening social spaces generative of open conversation and the ‘strong sense of validation that participants often feel when being listened to and when listening to other women’s stories’ (Kook et al., 2019: 89). Moreover, focus groups can break down the ‘exploitative power relations between researcher and researched’ that are normative in patriarchal research contexts (Wilkinson, 1999: 224). This is partially due to the favourable ratio of research participants to researchers and the reduced power the researchers have to influence conversations as compared to one-to-one interviews. Although there are counterarguments to the understanding of focus groups as especially female-centred and the method has been used successfully with men and mixed-gender groups, the tipping of the balance of power towards the participants corresponds with ‘principles of feminist research’ and is inclusive of under-represented and difficult-to-reach groups (Wilkinson, 1999: 233). The commonalities between knitting

circles and focus groups, and their reported shared utility for generating women's talk and co-operation, led us to conclude that the 'knit "n" natter' format would be ideal for our research. Next, we outline how knitters' networks assisted us with recruitment for our study.

Participant recruitment

Recent studies on knitting have collected data from established knitting groups or online fora (Cherry, 2016; Fields, 2014; Literat and Markus, 2019; Wills, 2007). This approach has proven fruitful, but we were interested in capturing knitters who may not be part of any social knitting scene. We developed a recruitment strategy that opened the door to solitary, non-networked knitters while not excluding knitters who participated in knitting circles and social media. While advertisements for participants were placed on local online fora on the knitting social network Ravelry.com, we also utilised physical noticeboards in supermarkets and leisure centres. It was notable that one of our locations – a Welsh town – did not have its own Ravelry.com group and there was no response to adverts placed around town. For this, we recruited based on word-of-mouth, which was significant in attracting older knitters in their late fifties and sixties who may not have had the opportunity to see our advertisements or may not have felt themselves directly addressed by them. Snowball sampling was utilised in a big-city location after our Ravelry.com post was shared to a knitting group's membership. Our youngest participants in their twenties were recruited in this manner, but also our oldest participant, aged 69. Thus, knitters' networks – local and based in social media – helped us to recruit a diverse age sample of knitters. This practice could be reproduced in other studies where the research aims were of interest to knitters.

The inclusion criteria for the study required adult participants to have been knitting for at least 6 months. This period encompassed people new to but serious about knitting as well as life-long knitters. We did not specify any age range or gender in our selection criteria to avoid preconceptions about who knits but the 15 people who came forward were relatively homogenous. The majority were over 35 years of age. All but one classified themselves as female. All identified as White British or White Other. This could have been a representative reflection of knitting participation in Britain (Hahner and Varda (2014) have noted the white, middle-classness of knitting in this context) or, more likely, of how snowball sampling works to obtain people of similar demographics. While little attention has been paid in research to older white female knitters, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic knitters have been almost entirely neglected (Close, 2018) and further efforts must be made to employ different strategies to recruit a more ethnically diverse range of knitters.

Outline of the research

The research took the form of three one-off 90-min 'knit "n" natter' focus groups in three locations in Britain. Each group comprised two to six participants plus two researchers. The 15 participants ranged from 25 to 69 years of age. Ten participants were 35 or older,

which corresponds with market research indicating that, despite media coverage of youthful hipster-knitters, the typical consumer of knitting materials in Britain is 35 or older (Immediate Media, 2017). Fourteen were female and one was gender neutral. Participants were sent information sheets, consent forms and invited to bring their knitting. This decision was made, as opposed to asking participants to knit using materials supplied by us, for three reasons. First, a pilot study where we had supplied knitting materials had elicited criticisms from participants who felt that our synthetic yarns and plastic needles were inferior quality compared to their own, making the knitting task less enjoyable. Budget restrictions prevented us from being able to supply natural yarns and higher quality needles. Second, we anticipated that participants would feel more confident entering an unfamiliar space if they brought something familiar to work on. Third, we hoped that participants could make meaningful use of their time by progressing their own projects rather than working on a purposeless knitting task devised by us. The invitation also established that we valued participants' knitting and provided an initial talking point for each focus group. This strategy had unintended benefits, which we discuss in more detail below.

The data generated by the research were in-depth and our findings were that older female knitters, aged 35 or older, had diverse knitting experiences but the majority diverged from stereotypes of granny-knitters and hipster-knitters, which led us to conclude that these were gendered constructions and unrepresentative of real knitters in 21st-century Britain (Harrison and Ogden, 2019). Below, we discuss three factors in the research design that contributed to the success of the research but also posed some problems for our feminist methodological principles: the use of feminine creativity in a focus group setting, the positioning of participants as experts and the feminisation of institutional space.

Creativity

Knitting is an embodied creative practice, so we capitalised on the findings of recent research that advocates creative methods to democratise the research process through participatory and non-linguistic forms of knowledge production. Knitting is often experienced as a meditative task conducive to thoughtfulness. As knitting scholar and practitioner Rutt (1987) explains, knitting is 'reflective and repetitive. Wherever you are engaged in doing a purely repetitive thing, your mind can reflect upon life' (p. 157). This was borne out in our focus groups where participants reflected on the relaxing, expansive effects of knitting:

Hazel: Knitting keeps me awake in an evening. If I just sat and watched the telly or read a book or read the newspaper, my eyes would close, but because I'm knitting, I stay awake. So that's, I think, a great asset of knitting.

Joanne: It's just enough concentration that your mind can drift. Like it's not so arduous that you have to think about it constantly. . . it's enough to focus you. . . other thoughts can drift away. Yeah, you don't realise that you're kind of focusing down on something. . . I do Pilates and it's exactly how I feel after that.

Drawing on Jung's work on the unconscious, Gauntlett (2007) suggests creativity enables 'an uninhibited state during which meaningful material would surface' (pp. 77–78). Engaging in creative practices allows a person to access their unconscious and bring out 'significant truth' (Gauntlett, 2007: 79). Gauntlett concludes that brains are 'narrative-producing machines' and approaches to research that allow the unconscious to be explored 'reveal different kinds of account and give us a fuller understanding of those subjectivities' (2007: 90). Our research sought to generate data regarding women's subjectivities in relation to a creative task that has been culturally undervalued so enabling 'different kinds of accounts' was our primary aim. Gauntlett's (2011) idea that 'making is connecting', both materially and socially, was important here. The 'knit "n" natter' format demonstrated that people felt able to tell stories in different ways and/or with fewer inhibitions while concentrating on a creative task, even when in the company of strangers. The shared practice of knitting between participants and the familiar, repetitive nature of the activity generated relaxation and feelings of connectedness, leading to in-depth conversations. Some knitters spoke intimately about love and how knitting and knitted objects were intertwined with deep personal connections with female relatives and friends, some of whom had passed away. Others disclosed feelings of anger when knitted gifts were not treated with care by ungrateful recipients, including children, husbands and other family members. We argue, therefore, that 'knit "n" natter' enables freer, deeper participation in group discussions than more conventional focus group formats. The level of disclosure here may also have been enhanced by the one-off nature of the session. Notwithstanding this benefit, the research format also presented a problem.

Using a form of 'women's work' as a creative task to appeal specifically to women in our research reproduced gendered cultural associations between women and domestic labour. As discussed, knitting is an undervalued practice that encapsulates ideas of femininity as docile, sedentary and virtuous. This is a gendered and classed construction of both knitting and women that we did not intend to sustain. To disrupt this, we considered the contrivance of a public knitting activity – yarn-bombing – to challenge problematic associations between women, textiles and domesticity but this proved to be counterproductive for two reasons. First, we wanted to access non-networked, non-public knitters who may have been put off by this ostentatious, 'hipster' form of knitting. Second, Hahner and Varda show that the articulation of yarn-bombing as a 'progressive vision of modern womanhood' meant to subvert masculine urban space overlooks the idea that 'such posturing may actually reify women's labour practices as valuable only when womanly bodies are able to publicise their domestic prowess' (2014: 305, 306). Yarn-bombing thus reproduces reductive associations between women and the home. It is also practiced by older, white, middle- to upper-class women making it a 'comfortable' and acceptable form of street art that firmly locates the female as domestic and inoffensive (Hahner and Varda, 2014). Comparatively, our private, mundane 'knit "n" natter' circle format was advantageous because of its more egalitarian history as a practice of women from all social classes (Parker, 1996) and its appeal to introvert as well as extrovert knitters. One unpredicted consequence was that the research imbued knitting with new status in the eyes of some participants and their colleagues:

Sarah: Maybe we can exploit your research to up the prestige of knitting. . . I was walking through the car park with wool for this [focus group] and, as always, you see the [male senior colleague] and you say, 'why do I always see them when I'm carrying it'? And OK, they didn't say anything, they looked at the wool and when I got to the meeting they said, 'oh you're doing the research, aren't you?' Not like 'haven't you got anything else better to do?'

Our attempt to simulate the experience of a private, domestic knitting circle had the paradoxical effect of imbuing knitting with status in the public workplace and, here, despite our efforts, reproduced the gendered public/private binary. The following section demonstrates how knitting can be used to trouble hierarchies of power within research but also poses problems in relation to gendered notions of expertise.

Power relations and expertise

Focus groups disrupt the conventional power imbalance between researcher and researched and are particularly favourable for research with women, as discussed above. However, Van der Riet and Boettiger (2009) demonstrate that focus groups can still be intimidating and used creative methods to overcome perceived status difference between the researcher and researched. The 'knit "n" natter' format enabled a useful development of this because not only are knitting 'circles' notionally non-hierarchical female-centred social contexts, the creative activity allowed participants to function as experts. Our research design drew on a participatory model. We aimed 'to confront the way in which the established and power-holding elements of societies world-wide are favoured because they hold a monopoly on the definition and employment of knowledge' (Riley and Reason, 2015: 171). Although the study did not conform to all aspects of the participatory paradigm (because we had manufactured the knitting circle format and devised a semi-structured series of questions), it did establish more equal research relations than conventional studies (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Arguably, the inclusion of knitting circles in research challenges patriarchal knowledge production by privileging predominantly female experiences, which Reid and Frisby (2008) identify as important within a feminist participatory research framework. As knitting itself is marginalised both in social scientific research and broader culture, the adoption of a participatory framework that actively set out to challenge what counts as valued knowledge was appropriate. Much participatory action research is committed to mitigating wider forms of injustice and enhancing marginalised communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). We aimed to take seriously women's craft work and challenge patriarchal power structures that diminish the value of gendered and vernacular forms of creativity (Edensor and Millington, 2012). However, knitting circles themselves have their own hierarchies.

Our pilot study found that some participants who had attended knitting circles had encountered cliques and off-putting hierarchies of proficiency. In the main study, Sarah echoed this experience. They felt that their knitting had not been good enough and they did not 'belong' in the knitting group: 'There were two circles, the one that was there and the one that wasn't. . . so it wasn't very welcoming.' Many of our participants had been knitting for much longer than the 6 months required by our inclusion criteria and were highly skilled, so there was potential for our 'knit "n" natter' groups to reproduce this

exclusivity. This was mitigated to some extent by our status as inexpert knitters. Scholars who write about knitting tend to be expert knitters (Cherry, 2016; Holroyd, 2017); however, we were beginners with demonstrably limited skills. This disrupted insider/outsider status in the groups and created space where participants recognised their own knitting proficiencies in comparison to ours and allowed for non-judgemental discussion of their work by deflecting it on to ours. Scholars who are expert knitters could foster a positive research environment for participants by ensuring they are situated as fellow experts; however, recent research by Walters used drawing in focus groups with teenage girls and found that a lack of skill on the part of the researcher was productive not only for reassuring participants that they would not be judged by an expert, but also for inviting ‘gentle mockery’ that further disrupted the researcher–researched power hierarchy (2019: 9). Like Walters (2019), we openly demonstrated our lack of expertise in the creative task, which allowed our participants to take a position of authority. Unlike Walters’ study, our participants did not mock us but rather encouraged us to improve. This was perhaps due to differences in age and levels of maturity compared to the teenagers in Walters’ research. Skilled participants were thus able to adopt a pedagogic role, consigning us as researchers to a less clearly authoritative position in the group, as the following exchange shows:

Joan: I don’t know whether you’re [the researchers] a knitter, do I?

KH: I am a bit – amateur.

Joan: There you go, yes. . .

KH: Properly amateur, not really good.

Natalie: But we’re all there together, aren’t we?

CO: I knit, I’m the same as Katherine really. . .

Joan: Yeah, so you can knit, you can cast on and you can. . .?

Lorraine: And you make stuff for yourself?

CO: Yeah, if needs be.

Lorraine: There’s nothing wrong with that.

In exploring the advantages and disadvantages of insider/outsider status in qualitative research, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) assert that adopting a space ‘in-between’ is valuable. Among the advantages of occupying ‘insider’ status is the ability to enhance understanding of the population and in our ‘knit “n” natter’ groups we were able to share the satisfactions and frustrations of knitting. But, as beginner-knitters without a serious investment in the craft, we could also be critical. Although expert knitters can provide critical insights into their craft, in qualitative research with established knitting groups in the United States, Wills (2007) paints an insightful but entirely positive picture. It appears that being invited into established knitting circles as a committed knitter might influence the researcher to be idealistic, as insider status may make it harder for the researcher to distinguish between their own and their respondents’ experiences (Dwyer and Buckle,

2009). Scholars who are expert knitters and utilise the focus group research method may be better able to notice specific detail in craft practice compared to beginners. Nevertheless, by eschewing established knitting circles and being open about our lack of expertise, it may have been easier for us to identify negative aspects of knitting groups. We found that occupying the space ‘in-between’ established empathetic understanding with participants and generated materially based subjective knowledge. However, our willing self-divestment of expertise had problematic consequences. As female researchers investigating the domestic pastimes of older women, we already occupy ‘the sidelines’ in sociology (Stalp, 2015: 261). Positioning ourselves as ‘inexpert’ within our field of study reaffirms the undervaluation of knitting research as productive of worthwhile academic knowledge. A double bind was thus created. As knitting research ‘experts’, we found that our intellectual capital was questionable for some academic colleagues, but as ‘non-experts’ within our own field of research we wilfully undervalued our knitting skills. In our attempt to challenge patriarchal knowledge production, then, we could also be criticised for playing up to gendered stereotyping and ‘dumbing-down’ our own proficiencies, further reifying patriarchal ideas of expertise. The next section discusses how introducing knitting materials into the research setting feminises space but also draws on problematically gendered sensory and aesthetic categories.

Feminising space

Historically, knitting circles have been noted as private, female-only spaces, ‘hidden zones’ in domestic locations that allow women to share stories and skills and, as such, are dismissed as unproductive and sentimental (Bratich and Brush, 2011: 240). Knitting circles therefore have the potential to capture women’s subjective experiences. Today, some knitting circles meet in public places like pubs and, arguably, these sites become feminised and domesticated. This interpretation is problematic since it associates femininity with an anodyne ‘snuggly feeling’ and overlooks the ways in which some women’s domestic labour – particularly that of working-class and ethnic minority women – already occurs in public (Hahner and Varda, 2014: 304). Nevertheless, in this section we discuss how our research method capitalised on participants’ gendered perceptions of the knitting circle to create what may be understood as feminine space within masculine institutional contexts.

Reproducing a knitting circle with any degree of authenticity was challenging because the locations we were obliged to use were institutional and typically associated with the public, masculine world of work rather than domestic feminine space. Like many researchers, we had a limited choice of venues because of budget restrictions. Two focus groups took place in free university classrooms and the third in a privately hired events space. The university locations were bland teaching rooms replete with strip-lighting, whiteboards and computer equipment. The privately booked space was designed with corporate away-days in mind, with a screen and projector for presentations. These locations were not conducive to an inviting environment generative of in-depth discussion. Moreover, the hard, institutional design and corporate aesthetics were potentially off-putting or intimidating for participants unfamiliar with university and business settings and risked reproducing the power hierarchies between researchers and researched outlined above.

We attempted to make each space welcoming by moving furniture and providing refreshments; however, this did not do much to mitigate the environments. As discussed, we could have designed the research so that we worked with pre-existing ‘knit “n” matter’ circles in their regular venues but since we wanted to bring together knitters who did not necessarily know one another, using participants’ homes would have been problematic. Joining a pre-established group in a public place could have excluded unsociable knitters and/or reproduced divisive ingroups and outgroups. Additionally, established ‘knit “n” natters’ usually took place during the day whereas our data collection was scheduled for early evening to be accessible to knitters with work or caring responsibilities, when most venues were closed. Despite the uninspiring and potentially off-putting locations we used, we found participants’ sensory and aesthetic perceptions of and interactions with knitting materials worked to some extent to soften and feminise the research space in ways that were beneficial but also mobilised troubling constructions of gender.

The introduction of participants’ knitting materials, specifically their yarn and knitting works-in-progress, into the rooms had a positive effect for generating what may be described as ‘cosiness’. This quality is associated with homeliness and hospitality and has been identified as particularly valued by older people (Devine-Wright et al., 2014). The ‘snuggly’ construction of femininity in knitting cultures criticised by Hahner and Varda (2014) is partly linked to the perception of the tactile properties of yarns and items made from these materials. In a study about old pairs of jeans, Woodward (2016) discusses participants’ interactions with fabric. She suggests these are important because ‘The material properties of things are central to understanding the sensual, tactile, material and embodied ways in which social lives are lived and experienced’ (p. 359). Attention to sensory perceptions of the material can be productive of new forms of knowledge that unsettle conventional social scientific understandings of experience. Although we did not set out to collect data regarding the tactile properties or affordances of knitting materials, these became evident in participants’ verbalised descriptions of and physical interactions with yarn and partially made garments during the focus groups. Participants’ sensory engagements with materials, particularly wool, and the enthusiastic ways they talked about feel, colour and smell, or recalled these, were conducive of pleasure. For example:

Beatrice: It’s the smell of wool, I just love wool.

Joanne: Like the smell of it when it’s in your hands. . . oh, it’s just beautiful, 100% Lambswool, I could just stand and sniff the piles of wool.

Hebrok and Klepp (2014) investigated sensory perceptions of wool amongst women from different national contexts and concluded that senses are embodied interactions that are interpreted culturally. For our participants, who were all keen knitters, wool had cultural connotations of feminine cosiness and indulgence that contributed to a plenitude of sensory satisfactions. Generally, yarn was understood as a feminine material and repeatedly discussed in relation to feminine ‘touchy-feely’ concepts such as love, maternal caring practices and gift-giving. Referring to a gift she was currently making, Joanne linked the tactility of yarn to being physically close to the recipient:

I enjoy that people have a jumper that keeps them warm, or they have a scarf that keeps them warm, or they have something that's, you know, about their person, it's quite sort of tactile and you know it's very close to them somehow.

The recollection of warmth and closeness with recipients of knitted gifts and the sensory, emotive nature of discussions about knitted objects present in the room infused the focus groups with a soft cosiness that was unlikely to have been achievable without the material presence of textiles. This was a highly gendered cultural affect rather than a natural property of the materials.

The partially knitted items that participants showed us also elicited feminised aesthetic responses. An exhibition of Christmas decorations provoked repeated declarations of 'cuteness' from participants and, inadvertently, researchers:

Natalie: Aren't they adorable?

KH: And you've got here some baby booties.

Natalie: I thought little stockings for a Christmas tree.

KH: Oh, little Christmas stockings!

Lorraine: Christmas bunting.

Natalie: Aren't they cute? . . . I do love bunting.

KH: They're very cute as well.

Natalie: Oh, they're so cute. That one's a bit bigger. . . Are we getting a bit carried away?

The aesthetic category of cuteness is intrinsic to the 'ideological consolidation of the middle-class home as a female space organized around consumption' (Ngai, 2010: 951). Our inadvertent mobilisation of this aesthetic reproduced the construction of women's knitting as domestic, docile and bourgeois. Nevertheless, this experience highlights how bringing tactile knitting materials, culturally conceived of as soft, cosy and cute, into a research setting can enable gendered sensory and aesthetic responses in participants, indicating a feminisation of masculine institutional or corporate space. This was conducive to creating safe space for female participants to talk openly between themselves and in which 'women's work' was valued and 'at home'. An additional benefit for us as researchers accustomed to institutional environments was 'making the familiar strange' through the introduction of incongruous materials, creative practices and sensory and aesthetic awarenesses (Mannay, 2010). Processes of defamiliarisation of space, particularly those involving art and creativity, force us to 'slow down our perception, to linger and to notice' (Mannay, 2010: 95). Finally, the inclusion of the 'private' feminine space of 'knit "n" natter' groups in research settings challenges the patriarchal, public arena of the academy.

Conclusions

This article has outlined the methodological benefits of the 'knit "n" natter' focus group and reflected on the method's drawbacks in relation to constructions of gender. The

research design had three advantages that aligned with feminist research principles. Firstly, the 'knit "n" natter' format recognised the value of knitting as a significant form of creative 'women's work'. Incorporating knitting into focus groups acknowledged participants' experiences, skills and the embodied act of performing their craft. We utilised the positive unconscious effects of the act of knitting to facilitate an open, relaxing environment conducive to in-depth discussion and the production of rich qualitative data. Second, 'knit "n" natter' enabled the participants to be positioned as skilled experts with experiences and talents not shared by the researchers. We were thus situated more equitably with our research subjects, leading to disruption of the patriarchal, hierarchical process of knowledge production. This allowed for insights into overlooked and undervalued female subjectivities associated with sedentary textiles work. Third, the research method feminised masculine institutional and corporate space, creating a soft, homely, cosy environment which felt intimate and familiar. This potentially reassured participants who were not used to the university and corporate settings we were obliged to use. The introduction of participants' knitting materials into the research setting helped us gain understanding of the material significances of their tools and hand-made objects in their stories. Taken together, we argue that these advantages show 'knit "n" natter' to be an inclusive research method that corresponds with feminist research principles and may be useful in other research that aims to engage with women. However, this method also had some drawbacks.

The 'knit "n" natter' format unavoidably reproduced some gendered and class-based assumptions about women and domestic pastimes that were problematic. First, in attempting to recognise the value of women's textiles-based creativity, we potentially reinscribed the gendered association between women and needlework, which has been naturalised throughout European history and is linked to constructions of the feminine as sedentary, docile and domesticated. Despite work by sociologists who critique such understandings of women and the home, this conception is still predominant in patriarchal binaries of private/public and their relative values in contemporary society. Second, while we positioned the knitters as experts, we simultaneously diminished our own status to non-expert. For our participants, our 'dumbing-down' was beneficial but in a broader, institutional context, as female sociologists of women's leisure, we may have reconfirmed the dismissive attitudes we encountered towards academic studies of 'women's work' from some quarters. Embracing our non-expertise as knitters created tensions with the need to defend the significance of our research into knitting as a skilful, culturally valuable form of female leisure. This double bind arguably reproduced wider tensions about what is deemed 'worthwhile' knowledge in the academy. Third, in feminising university and corporate space, we mobilised gendered sensory perceptions of cosiness and the feminine aesthetic category of cuteness, thereby replicating the cultural infantilisation of women and the idealisation of the home as the antithesis to the public sphere. While we created a familiar, safe space for our participants to talk, we mimicked the sequestered, bourgeois female homosocial domestic context that falsely separates 'women's work' from the public realm of masculine value. In so doing, we inadvertently reinscribed the otherness of the domestic realm and, simultaneously, coded the home as a place particular to women's leisure, which is highly misleading since domestic labour (both within and outside the home) is still largely conducted by women. Furthermore,

this constructed our participants as vulnerable and in need of paternalistic protection, metaphorically wrapping them in (cotton)wool.


Having considered the benefits and problems of the ‘knit “n” natter’ method, we recommend the one-off craft-based focus group format for research around women’s domestic leisure. Previous sociological research in this area has often accessed pre-existing groups, which our research found to contain their own hierarchies of proficiency and privilege that alienated some participants. Therefore, we recommend the contrivance of one-off groups where participants may be less likely to feel that they are being judged by peers. We also suggest that the method may be employed in research with women – particularly older women – that is not necessarily concerned with craft practices but seeks women’s in-depth stories. We learned that the creative act of making and the incorporation of material objects into the research setting could both facilitate non-linguistic forms of knowledge and generate particular affects (in this case cosiness) that constitute under-researched feminine subjectivities. Further, the critical participatory paradigm that underpins the sedentary, craft-based focus group research design challenges patriarchal forms of knowledge production and simultaneously ensures that reductive constructions of gender, women’s expertise and vernacular, feminine forms of creativity are acknowledged.

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