**Jackie Reynolds**

**Crafting Resilience for Later Life**

**<1> Introduction**

In this chapter, I draw upon my doctoral research which examined the meanings that older people attach to their participation in group arts activities throughout their lives. The study (Reynolds, 2011) explored participation in a range of activities and focused on understanding the relationship between arts participation and social capital in later life. Social capital is increasingly recognised as a resource for resilience, and can be a characteristic of individuals or communities. The concept was popularised by Robert Putnam, who defines it as ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000, p.19). Commentators have since noted the lack of qualitative insights into how social capital is actually *experienced* (Blackshaw and Long, 2005) and the tendency to ignore gender differences (O’Neill and Gidengil, 2006). The social capital of older women in particular is largely neglected in the literature. Whilst arts activities are recognised as a potentially valuable means of building social capital (Better Together, 2000), our knowledge of the nature of arts-generated social capital has previously been limited. Similarly, the relationship between arts-generated social capital and later life resilience is also largely unexplored.

In order to address these issues, I focus in this chapter on the findings from ten interviews with female participants who take part in craft activities in groups. I will highlight the ways in which these women’s relationships, widowhood, ill-health and a range of other factors have impacted upon their later life participation. I will also discuss the networks of support and reciprocity arising from their arts engagement. In doing so, I provide insights into the distinctive nature of arts-generated social capital and the implications of this in terms of resilience. Moreover, I demonstrate the value of approaching the topic from a life course perspective, with key aspects of these women’s biographies providing useful insights into the importance of their crafts in terms of their identities and the various roles that they have fulfilled at work and at home.

**<1> Resilience in later Life**

The concept of resilience is most strongly associated with the field of developmental psychology, but in recent years has been an increasingly popular topic amongst social scientists more widely. Moreover, whilst early resilience research focused mainly on the experiences of children, it is increasingly seen as relevant to all stages of life. There is, however, no common understanding of the potentially distinctive or unique nature of resilience in later life (Wild et al, 2013). There are no universally agreed definitions or measures of resilience, and so the factors associated with the concept are a matter for on-going research and debate. There are, however, some broad and widely accepted understandings of what it entails. Resilience in later life has been defined as ‘the ability to stand up to adversity and to ‘bounce back’ or return to a state of equilibrium following individual adverse episodes’ (CPA 2014:2). As Langer notes:

Aging brings many types of changes. It is a challenging period in people’s lives that often includes sudden and multiple losses and unforeseen physical, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual assaults to their person. (Langer, 2012, p.459)

Langer observes that despite such adversity, some older people are able to adjust and to address the challenges that they face with determination and enthusiasm, noting that ‘the extent to which they accept and adapt to changes directly affects the quality of life they can achieve and maintain as they grow older’ (Langer, 2012, p. 459). In cases where adversity is on-going, resilience may also involve having (or developing) the ability to cope with such challenges in the longer term. This includes being able to ‘derive meaning from experiences and the realization that life has a purpose, *meaningfulness’* (Langer, 2012, p. 462). The meanings are derived from life-themes that people regard as important, and which can include creativity. As Zautra et al (2008, p.44) express it: ‘the greater a person’s capacity to stay on a satisfying life course, the greater their resilience’. As well as providing a sense of purpose, this is also important for maintaining self-identity. We can observe these processes in the ordinary and everyday events in people’s lives, including engagement in arts and creativity.

Researchers of resilience have tended to focus on identifying ‘risks’, though as Wild et al (2013) note, there is much debate about what constitutes adversity or ‘risk’, and it can be seen as a subjective, or at least a relative issue. They draw upon a wide range of research about later life resilience in identifying the following ‘risks’ or adversity that might affect older people: socio-economic disadvantage; elder abuse; bereavement; health challenge, and changing social roles. They also highlight that more recent research has used the concept of resilience in exploring ‘how people cope with ‘negative life events’, and even ‘the more ordinary upheavals associated with normal ‘life transitions’’ (Wild et al, 2013, p.138).

Increasingly, however, work on later life resilience has been influenced by the movement of gerontology beyond a problem-focused orientation towards a focus on the strengths of older adults and their contributions to society. Resilience is thus viewed as a key element in ‘ageing well’ (Resnick et al, 2010), and the focus is on mechanisms through which resilience is developed (Windle, 2010). Understanding these mechanisms includes identifying assets or protective factors (e.g., supportive social networks) that can help to mitigate the negative effects of a risk (Wild et al, 2013). To some extent, these assets can be identified as individual characteristics or ‘traits’, but we have also seen the growth of environmental perspectives on resilience. On a collective level, there is the potential for ‘community resilience’ to be generated by informal networks within civil society that may help groups or communities to withstand the pressures of social, political and environmental change (Windle, 2010; Wild et al, 2013). This is where we see an explicit link between the concept of resilience and that of social capital.

Such a focus on strengths and assets has resulted in links between resilience research and the positive psychology movement. Resilience has thus become viewed as an important aspect of a person’s well-being, enabling them to thrive and flourish, rather than simply surviving:

Resilience researchers have also argued for further expansion of the concept to incorporate the potential for ‘growth’ as a *result of*, not just *in spite of*, the experience of adversity – i.e. the idea that new skills are learnt and insights gained through coping with difficult circumstances.

(Richardson 2002 cited by Wild et al, 2013, p. 139).

My interest is in the development of social capital assets in the context of craft groups as a mechanism for resilience.

**<1> Linking Resilience and Social Capital**

Social capital is generally viewed as having originated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and was popularised by the work of Robert Putnam (2000). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth analysis of the concept, John Field (2008, p.1) sums up its essence in the words ‘relationships matter’:

By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of these networks; to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they may be seen as forming a kind of capital. (Field, 2008, p.1)

A strong relationship exists between the concept of resilience and that of social capital. Indeed, Zautra et al (2008) see examinations of social capital as being at the forefront of research into community resources that foster resilience. Just as we have seen that resilience has both individual and collective dimensions, the same is true of social capital: it can be viewed as a benefit that can be accumulated by individuals, or as lodged in social structures, ‘a resource that exists only because of the mutual or reciprocal relations or interactions that exist between a group of people’ (Sapiro, 2006, p. 157-8).

Wild et al (2013) point to an emerging body of research on social or community resilience, (with the terms tending to be used interchangeably). Drawing on the work of Sapountzaki (2007), they identify social capital as one of the types of community capital that underpin social resilience (the other types being natural, financial, human and physical). Networks, affiliation, reciprocity, trust and mutual exchange are given as examples of social capital resources. Again, the key point to recognise here is that resilience is much more complex than an issue of individual psychology, and that we need to consider the broader structures and resources that may affect an individual’s resilience. Social connectedness (and therefore social capital) is clearly therefore a highly important factor in understanding both individual and collective resilience. There is currently a lack of research that explores resilience from both an individual *and* a community perspective, and there is arguably an ‘(over) emphasis on personal qualities and experiences within debates on resilience and ageing’ (Wild et al, 2013, p.147). Examining the issue from a social capital perspective can contribute towards addressing this deficit.

Within gerontology, both social capital and resilience are concepts which engage with and emphasise the strengths of older people, thus challenging the more common deficit approach to researching later life. Moreover, as Wild et al (2013, p. 142) note, much of the work on successful ageing (citing Rowe and Kahn, 1998) can be seen as focusing on overcoming or avoiding problems, whereas ‘the resilience literature is more explicitly focused on exploring the *experience of* rather than the *avoidance of* vulnerability’. My research exemplifies this focus on ‘what works’, as opposed to a deficit approach, by engaging with people who are actively engaged in their community through membership of at least one group (and in some cases belonging to more than one group and/or in a leadership role).

**<1> About the Research**

The study explored the meanings that older people attach to their participation in group arts activities throughout their lives. Reflecting a narrative approach and a life course perspective, it involved qualitative interviews with 24 participants linked to a case study town in the English Midlands (with the pseudonym Greentown). Greentown is a small town with a population of around 25,000, and a lower than average black and minority ethnic population. It lies in a high shallow valley, surrounded by arable fields and countryside and is around ten miles from the nearest city conurbation. It contains both the most affluent, and the most deprived wards in the local authority area. In the early to mid-twentieth century, it was rich in heavy industry, mainly coal and steel, and also in the production of fabrics. Since the demise of these industries, and the resulting lack of employment opportunities, the town has an ageing population, although in recent years, building programmes have encouraged some young families to move into the area.

For many of the older population, the town tends to be characterised by a sense of locality. Most of the arts and cultural opportunities in the town are led by volunteers. There is little in the way of purpose-built accommodation, so venues include the Town Hall, the library, community centres, churches and schools. There is a branch of the U3A in the town, established in 2005, and a variety of other arts activities and organisations, often typically attracting older participants. Participants for this study were recruited through a range of groups, including choirs, dancing, amateur dramatics and arts and crafts groups. The interviews took place between March and October 2008. A total of 24 participants took part, including 8 men and 16 women, and aged between 60 and 87. This chapter focuses on the findings from interviews with ten women who were recruited through craft groups, including a U3A Patchwork and Quilting group, hand-made cards, and parchment craft. There are also informal groups where people take along a range of individual craft projects to work on in a social setting. The women who took part are listed in the table below. Whilst the main groups that they attend are identified, most of them are avid participants in a range of crafts, often practised individually as well as in groups.

Figure 1: Participants

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name (pseudonyms) | Age | Craft Groups |
| Margaret | 62 | U3A Patchwork and Quilting  |
| Alice | 69 | U3A Patchwork and Quilting (previously U3A Calligraphy) |
| Sandra | 62 | U3A Patchwork and Quilting  |
| Dorothy | 73  | Leads a general craft group |
| Edith  | 87 | General craft group (focusing on card making) U3A Parchment Craft  |
| Marion | 66 | General craft group (focusing on card making)U3A Parchment Craft |
| Rebecca | 75 | U3A Patchwork and Quilting |
| Heather | 64 | U3A Patchwork and QuiltingSeveral general craft groups  |
| Penny | 63 | U3A Parchment Craft  |
| Joan | 75 | Card making, sewing, tapestry and embroidery – mainly individually but previously U3A Calligraphy and has attended residential craft courses.  |

The semi-structured interviews were developed around a number of open-ended themes including: the nature of people’s arts participation (past and present); the impact of key life course transitions; what role people’s arts participation plays when they deal with life’s challenges and setbacks; motivations and barriers to participation; whether creativity changes over time, and the impact of belonging to particular communities or neighbourhoods. Whilst the shortest interview lasted 45 minutes, they were typically much longer, up to around three hours. Interviews were fully transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo software. In writing this chapter, I have re-analysed the ten interviews identified above, examining the data with a specific focus on resilience. Whilst this was often an implicit focus in the original research, re-examining with this lens has further enhanced the understanding and insights gained through the research. It is important to note that participants were not asked to explicitly focus on their engagement in group arts activities in terms of social capital or resilience: the questions of meaning were far more open than this. It is therefore highly significant that their accounts frequently focused on issues relating to these concepts.

**<1> Findings**

**<2> Crafting Resilience throughout Life**

In setting the scene for the ways in which people’s involvement in craft activities relates to social capital and resilience in later life, it is important to understand their involvement from a life course perspective. The study’s findings highlighted the key roles played by people’s childhood experiences at home, school and church - as well as in some cases their employment experiences as adults - in shaping their arts engagement. This was evidenced clearly in the ten interviews with women crafters. Their experiences were highly gendered, and influenced by cohort factors. Crafting skills were learned from the earliest stages:

“We used to sit in the evenings cutting up old coats, rag pieces and auntie used to sit pegging rugs on sugar bags, you know and those were our times in the evenings – we used to say, “Can we get the box out with the bits in?” and we used to sit cutting these little bits of material up and watching her do this – she taught me how to knit, she sat with me knitting and I had a little toy sewing machine.”

(Alice)

There were also flower and craft festivals at churches, which again was significant for this cohort who grew up in a time of higher levels of church attendance. This informal learning at home and church also continued at school; Edith, for example, learned how to knit at infant school, and craft education was a big focus of all her school life, which continued until she left school at the age of fourteen. Margaret specialised in studying dress making at school from the age of thirteen, and Alice also attended evening classes in embroidery when she was in her teens. Once they left school, the craft skills that were learned were then utilised as part of people’s home making roles, often as a strategy for dealing with poverty:

“Well when I first got married, we had nothing so to speak and if I hadn’t have got the material and stuff or the embroidery silks to do – I don’t know what we’d have done – or what *I’d* have done.”

(Marion)

“I think then people *did* make a lot more things; they made things for their home, you know, the curtains and the furnishings – and they made things for themselves; there was lots of crafts and there was the knitting and everybody made things and they all had a go at doing it...”

(Sandra)

As well as making clothes for all her family, Sandra also used to do the same for work colleagues, again as a way of earning some extra money, and Alice went into tailoring after she left school. In this study, people’s involvement in craft activities could invariably be traced as a coherent path throughout their lives, with a sense of adaptation in response to varying levels of financial necessity, domestic responsibilities, prevailing fashions, and a desire to learn new techniques.

Hence, when people engage in craft activities in later life, they are often using skills and resources that they have acquired throughout their lives. Margaret, for example, feels that without her involvement in the patchwork and quilting group, her dressmaking skills would be redundant, as clothes are now much cheaper to buy. And similarly, Sandra talked of her excitement at getting her sewing machine out and serviced upon her retirement, looking forward to utilising and further developing skills that had long been unused due to work and caring commitments.

The findings highlighted in this section have created a context for people’s later life participation and have further demonstrated the importance of the themes that develop during people’s lives which may contribute to positive ageing identities. In the next section, we look in more depth at some of the ways in which involvement in crafts can be linked to a sense of meaning and purpose.

**<2> Meaning and Purpose**

There were a number of key themes that emerged from the ten interviews around the importance of people’s craft activities for maintaining a sense of meaning and purpose throughout life, and particularly in later life. As in the previous section, these findings also link strongly to the issue of self-identity, and again, adopting a life course perspective is valuable. Firstly, several of the women talked about the ways in which negative experiences at school had undermined their confidence throughout life, but that the craft skills that they had gained had in some way compensated for this, and/or provided a positive self-identity and self-esteem. Dorothy, for example, was clearly resentful that her head teacher had refused to allow her to sit the eleven plus exam, and had steered her directly into sewing work:

“Our headmistress, Miss W, said, “Ooh no, Dorothy’ll never do anything, she’ll only sew for her living.” So I always felt a bit miffed that I never had the opportunity to fail, you know. I couldn’t sit me eleven plus, she wouldn’t let me. And it was up to her.”

(Dorothy)

However, being “clever with me fingers” is clearly an important part of Dorothy’s self-identity, and she makes a direct link between the denial of opportunities at school (involving herself and others) and the talents and resourcefulness of older women in Greentown:

“Miss W just wouldn’t let you go anywhere, she just wanted you to leave school and go in a mill, that’s all girls did of my age, they used to go down the mills... And they got a lot of skills from there cos of the sewing and making things and I think that’s why people in Greentown – I mean you put a craft fair on, it’s beautiful. The stuff that they make is beautiful. And I’m sure it’s just through what they’ve done at work really. They’ve taught themselves in a way because there certainly wasn’t the opportunities that there are today.”

(Dorothy)

As well as taking pride in their skills, there was also a strong sense for these women that they needed to be constantly active and productive. For some, this had been a constant theme throughout life. Marion, for example, links it to having been brought up on a farm where everyone is “always busy”. She also talks about always having had to “make her own entertainment”, due to her husband long working hours through self-employment. Similarly, for Dorothy the need to be busy is explained very much in terms of continuity:

“I couldn’t do without it, let’s put it that way. I *really* couldn’t do without it. Sometimes I feel as if I don’t want to do anything but I *really* couldn’t do without doing something. Me fingers are never still. But – I don’t know why that is, I suppose it’s because you’ve been busy all your life, see and you come to retire and I’ve just kept going, I’ve just kept on and on and on.”

(Dorothy)

However, for some participants, such as Rebecca, who is widowed, this need for achievement and productivity has become more important to her as she has become older:

“I think it’s become more important as I’ve got older. I still like trying different things. If I didn’t have something on the go as it were, or if I didn’t have several things on the go, I think I would be, well not exactly lost but I don’t think I’d be as contented. You’ve got a sense of achievement, you’ve created something, you’ve made something which you can feel pleased with, and I don’t know – no, it’s a bigger part of my life now…”

(Rebecca)

Discussions on the theme were also not limited just to the times that people spent at home, but were also related to their group participation. Heather, for examples, values both being productive as a group, but also the opportunities to learn from each other:

“I think you’re all learning off one another, you’ve all got something to put in, whereas if you’re just meeting up with a group of friends just for a chat, you’re not really developing anything from each other...I think all life is a learning curve. And I wouldn’t go, like say to just – like some people meet up every week or every fortnight or whatever just for coffee or something, I couldn’t do that, as I say, I’ve got to be doing, I’ve got to be achieving something.”

(Heather)

As in Rebecca’s case, this desire for challenge and achievement has become more important to Heather as she has become older:

“I think when your children are very little your time is limited, and I think it’s only since I retired and I’ve had loads of time on my hands and I can’t bear to do nothing, that I wanted to branch out...I’ve always been into the craft side, but it hasn’t been until I retired that I’ve sort of spread me wings and thought, “Oh yeah, I’ll do this, I’ll do that. I’ll try that.””

(Heather)

Thus, for Heather, a focus on continued learning, setting herself goals, and embracing challenges helps her to maintain a positive self-identity in negotiating the upheaval of retirement. Her quotes reinforce the important point that resilience has both individual and collective dimensions, thus highlighting the key role of social capital within understanding resilience. Networks and mutual support are core elements of social capital and in the following section we turn our attention to these aspects of participants’ experiences.

**<2> Networks and Mutual Support**

Again, to begin this section, it is useful to draw attention to some of the highly gendered experiences that have shaped the lives of some of these women. People’s group involvement could often be traced back to their cohort experiences in terms of the kind of close-knit communities that they grew up in. Several of the women clearly identified themselves as being a “people person”, or someone who liked being part of a group, and their desire for social interaction is realised through a long history of joining groups, including arts-related groups. For some, working with others as part of a team was a strong aspect of their identity, and this tended to include nurturing and supporting others’ talents.

During their interviews, participants discussed at length the different aspects of emotional and practical support that they had experienced through the groups, and the ways in which this had helped them to address particular challenges in their lives. Mutual support was significant at every stage of people’s involvement in the groups. Several women talked about losing confidence in later life, often related to retirement and/or loss of caring roles:

“It’s funny when you retire cos you feel as though, “Well I’ve done it now. And I’ve finished me job. I’ve brought me children up. I’m no good now.” But you are – really – and you’ve got a lot of experience and things that you’ve done haven’t you?”

(Sandra)

There was recognition that even for those who were relatively confident, joining a group in the first place could be a significant challenge:

“It’s quite difficult to go into a new group on your own; *I* found it quite difficult and I’ve got a lot of confidence, as you can tell [laughter], but you know, like I found it quite difficult.”

(Penny)

However, the local nature of the craft groups, and the ways in which they draw on people’s existing skills and experiences, accumulated throughout their lives, make them a relatively accessible opportunity to connect with others. This is exemplified in Heather’s account, as she made the decision to join a craft group following a period of mental ill-health. She recalls deciding to go to the local library at a lunch time to look for information on local groups, and how a chance meeting whilst there led to a new friendship focused on involvement in crafts. Neither woman felt able to go to the group (which also met at the library) on their own, but they agreed to meet outside and go in together.

Even when participants had strong family relationships, they had sometimes faced issues in later life that had left them feeling isolated. Alice, for example, experienced a loss of social contacts due to old friends leaving the area and her grandchildren growing up. She had previously been involved in a church choir for many years, but this eventually folded as members died and no-one came forward to replace them. Her husband had experienced a prolonged period of mental ill-health, which resulted in a further loss of social activities. Joining the U3A Patchwork and Quilting group was a means of trying to adjust to all these changes by “doing her own thing” in a local setting, from where she could quickly return home if her husband needed her.

Marion also had a limited social network, especially since her children had grown up. She had no work-related networks, as she had always worked for her husband, based at home. She relied mostly on the craft groups that she attends for her social relationships. These groups are, in effect, Marion’s community, and she becomes isolated at the times when the groups do not meet:

“I don’t mind being on my own at all but I must admit I *do miss –* if the classes are shut for a week or two in the Summer or anything you do miss that social, you know, you really enjoy going back, even if it’s just for chit chat... I’ve got friends there which I wouldn’t have... if I didn’t go out to these classes I wouldn’t meet anybody so it’s a great outlet for me to go.”

(Marion)

In Edith’s case, it is her social relationships that have developed through attending craft groups that enable her to sustain her involvement. Since she no longer drives and cannot walk far, she relies on group members for lifts to the activities. She also referred to having recently visited a craft centre and cafe at a nearby garden centre with one of the group members with whom she had developed a friendship, and who had driven her there. This further illustrates the social capital mechanisms related to joining these groups, and how they may be experienced in people’s everyday lives.

As well as the practicalities of joining and attending the groups, participants also highlight ways in which they experience emotional and practical support once they are regular members of the group. Feeling valued by the group was clearly and deeply meaningful to some of the participants. The patchwork and quilting group seemed to be a particularly close and supportive network. Alice contrasted their understanding and support of her husband’s illness with her less positive experiences in a different type of group, and Sandra was moved to tears as she talked about feeling valued by the group:

“The hard part for me...is the people that I don’t know. And will they think I’m silly? Will they think, “She’s no good”? Will they think this, will they think that? But do you know, they’re so lovely and you go and they’re, “I’ve missed you, you’ve been away for two weeks” cos the children have been off, you know, I haven’t been going – “Oh, you know we’ve missed you, you know and we’ve said “I wonder how Sandra’s going on?”” and you think, “That’s really nice”, you know...it’s nice that they’re there, that the groups are there that you can join and it is nice to feel you’re still wanted.”

(Sandra )

As well as this emotional support, the groups also tended to be mutually supportive environments in relation to encouraging the development of each other’s craft skills, both through positive affirmation and learning new techniques from each other:

“I would never have attempted the patchwork or anything like that if I hadn’t have been – and the encouragement, and when you’ve done something and you take it in and everybody, oh they’re over the moon that you’ve finished it, that is very important to me. And like the beading and that, if you get stuck there’s always somebody there who will show you and guide you and help you. So I wouldn’t have done that on my own, not the making the necklaces side of it.”

(Heather)

Several participants referred to the ways in which they were able to contact each other between group meetings if they were stuck on a particular craft project, and that they would on occasion go to each other’s homes to demonstrate a particular skill, for example on a sewing machine. They would also sometimes lend each other expensive equipment, or share a magazine subscription to reduce costs. This was important as it was recognised that whilst the groups tended to involve minimal membership costs, the craft activities themselves could be expensive – though this varied depending on the types of project undertaken and from where people sourced their materials.

So far, we have seen examples of the ways in which these women’s involvement in craft activities supports the development of social capital and resilience in both their normal, everyday lives, and also in relation to particular challenges, such as coping with caring responsibilities, transition to retirement and loss of networks and self-confidence. Ill-health was also an issue for some. We have seen that taking up craft activities could be part of a strategy for dealing with ill-health (for example, in the case of Heather), and whilst Edith saw her craft activities as simply a continuity, she also made reference to having had to give up other group memberships due to her lack of mobility. Similarly, Marion’s involvement in crafts had increased as she had become less able to walk any distances (though it should be noted that for both Marion and Penny, their involvement in crafts also caused them physical discomfort due to neck and shoulder problems).

Another challenge that was referred to by several participants (though not always in relation to personal experience) was that of bereavement, especially the loss of a partner. Margaret, for example, felt that belonging to a group was important in terms of not relying exclusively on one’s partner for social interaction. As a group leader, she also expressed a strong commitment to providing support for bereaved people within the group:

“... if one of us was left on our own you’ve already got a system in place where you know you’re welcome, you can go back at whatever point in time you want to go back and you’re not somebody new and you can find that uncomfortable to start joining a group, especially if something’s happened then people do become isolated. You need a network of people around you...I would do that for anybody that something had happened to; I would be there for them. And I just think that’s really important. You’ve got to make them welcome.”

(Margaret)

Similarly, Dorothy referred to a member of the group that she leads who had been suddenly widowed two years previously, and who had seemingly gained new confidence and craft skills through involvement in the group, which Dorothy found “ever so rewarding”. Whilst three of the women (Rebecca, Edith and Joan) were widows, Joan was the only one who discussed this aspect of her involvement in crafts. Joan had attended various arts and crafts groups since being widowed (having been persuaded to do so by a friend). Whilst she values the “good friends” that she has made at some of the groups, some of whom she has been out with outside of the groups (e.g., visiting craft fairs), she is generally ambivalent about the commitment involved in friendships, and it seems that the craft activity is of greater importance than the social aspect. She also places emphasis on the ways in which her crafts (and other arts activities) help her to manage her time when she is alone:

“Time goes quickly...And when it’s winter and cold and dark and wet, it’s just nice to get all your bits out and get cracking and stick onto doing something and that’s two hours gone before you know where you are...it’s time for a cuppa, you know. So it’s good for that and I think that’s needed when you’re on your own and you’re retired...”

(Joan)

Whilst this section has focused mostly on some of the strengths that people perceived in relation to their engagement in craft groups, through accessing supportive networks, Joan’s account reminds us that we should not make assumptions about people’s desire for social relationships, nor ignore the complexities of people’s motivations and the way that they may feel ambivalent about particular aspects of their participation. One of the distinctive aspects of crafting activities is that they can be practised both individually and within a group, and both aspects are significant in examining resilience.

**<2> Community Resilience**

It has been argued that there is a need for greater understanding of the relationship between individual and community resilience, and that even when the role of the community is considered, it tends to be in terms of impact on individual resilience (Wild et al, 2013). This chapter has highlighted the interdependence of individual and social resilience. There are three further themes that demonstrate the contribution made by this group of older women to building up and maintaining community resilience. These are passing on skills; developing leadership and community activism.

The passing on of skills occurs not only within the actual groups, but often more widely, and sometimes with the expressed aim of ensuring that skills do not disappear over time. Margaret, Rebecca and Heather had all been involved in leading Guides or Brownies over time. Rebecca has also helped to run a craft session at a local care home, doing card making. Margaret talks about teaching groups of Brownies to sew buttons onto fabric, noting that they are often no longer taught these skills at school or home. She also worked with Guides from different groups to make friendship bracelets, encouraging them to connect with each other. Alice and Heather also talk about passing on their skills to their grandchildren:

“My youngest granddaughter is doing textiles, now she’s very very interested in what I do because she’s sort of making things at school and she said, “When I tell them my Nan’s done this or my Nan can do that” you know and she says, “I feel at a bit of an advantage over a lot of them because they’ve not done, they haven’t seen it done in the family.””

(Alice)

The leadership of the craft groups is another area requiring recognition in terms of community resilience. Groups in Greentown often struggle to keep going due to a lack of people willing to lead them:

“The U3A is pretty good but the groups there, you’ve got to find somebody from within the group who belongs to the U3A who’s prepared to instruct or to be in charge, you know, sort of keep it going. So if there isn’t somebody in what you want to do who’s prepared to do that ...People get ill or they get tired…”

(Rebecca)

However, for the craft groups that featured in the research, there seems to be a particular style of informal, collaborative leadership which can support people who do not see themselves as leaders and are perhaps more generally lacking in confidence to take on a leadership role. Drawing upon long established skills and attending sessions in a local environment also seems to support leadership development. Several participants with longer histories of group leadership described how they had encouraged friends to become co-leaders, to the point where they were confident enough to take on sole leadership. On the one hand, there is a sense that no-one is the overall leader, but on the other, there is some recognition of the sacrifice that group leaders do make in terms of their own engagement:

“Nobody leads them, nobody leads, it’s all general. If nobody’s there at the parchment [craft group], if the teacher can’t come, then I’m the one that tries to show them, because I’m the one that’s done it the longest because last week the teacher couldn’t come and I said, “Do you want to carry on?” and they said “Oh yes, you’re there, you can show us”. But when you’re the leader, you don’t do anything yourself – that’s the drawback – because they want to know, so you might as well not take anything.”

(Marion)

As well as group leadership, other types of volunteering that could be seen to support community resilience more widely include fund raising and supporting charities through craft making. This is a key focus of Dorothy’s involvement in leading a craft group. The aspect of her voluntary activities that she focuses on mostly is her commitment to fund-raising. Not only does she make a lot of goods to sell and raise funds for causes such as the church, but she also involves the whole group in making items to give away to other charitable causes:

“But I do take the crochet class down at church, done that about twenty years, but now it’s turned more into a craft class because all the ladies that come I think have got more crocheting than they know what to do with really so now they knit, and we take on projects, we’ve done blankets for the babies in the orphanages in Romania, and – we just take on a project and try and do it.”

(Dorothy)

A common theme between this and other projects referred to by participants is the sense of joint purpose that results from group efforts in such projects. All of the volunteering activities highlighted in this section can be seen as contributing to community resilience. Yet, such contributions tend to go unrecognised due to the small-scale, local nature of the groups and arguably also the gendered and low status nature of the activities.

**<1> Discussion and Conclusion**

This was a small scale research study, and this chapter focused on just ten of the interviews. The women all lived in the same small town, and attended some of the same craft groups. Caution is therefore needed in drawing generalisations from the findings. There is much scope for future research into resilience and ageing, including understanding inequalities in accessing resilience resources and the complex interplay between individual and community resilience. In particular, there is still significant potential to further develop our understanding of the relationship between arts participation, social capital and resilience. In discussions of social capital in relation to different types of groups, arts groups are generally not included (see for example Gray 2009). This is a significant gap, since arts and craft groups arguably blur the lines between formal civic participation and informal ties.

This chapter has contributed to addressing this gap by presenting some detailed analysis of the ways in which mechanisms of social capital and resilience can be understood in the everyday lives of these ten women in relation to their involvement in crafts. Some of the distinctive aspects of craft groups have been emphasised, such as the continuity of skills and experiences; the links to previous employment; the ability to participate even when in ill-health, and the potential for lifelong learning and personal challenge. Along with the local nature of many of the groups, these aspects of people’s engagement challenge the potentially exclusionary and aspirational focus that is often seen in discussions of ‘successful ageing’.

The findings have emphasised the importance of adopting life course perspectives when considering processes of resilience, as suggested by Zautra et al:

...we need to study resilience over time. People develop themes in their lives that offer them hope, optimism, purpose, emotional clarity and a wisdom built on a complex and accepting view of their social relationships. But they do not do so all at once. Resilience takes time to unfold. (Zautra et al, 2008, p.50)

All of the women in this chapter were drawing in later life on skills that often dated back to early childhood. They had experienced highly gendered lives, where developing craft skills was a key part of their expected role in a number of contexts including home, school and work. In other areas, they had often been denied opportunities (e.g., for educational achievement), but had used their crafting skills to their advantage, both in terms of building positive self-identities and in the ways in which they had applied their craft skills (e.g., in making their homes with limited financial resources). Whilst participants would not directly refer to themselves as ‘resilient’, it was certainly an important message in the biographies of participants. This links directly with the ways in which ‘older people use storytelling or “life review” and, in particular, narratives about loss and coping in the “construction or reconfirmation” of a sense of self as resilient’ (Wild et al, 2013, p.144, with reference to Gattuso, 2003).

The findings also challenge the academic discourse around the role of class in shaping the nature of people’s social capital. Gray (2009: 15) discusses arguments that membership of organisations is dominated by ‘middle-class joiners’, and that working class elders rely more on family contacts and are disadvantaged in terms of making non-family contacts that might generate friendship and support. However, some participants in this research, issues of class are blurred. Their life course experiences often included working class childhoods and young adulthoods, but as their lives progressed they apparently achieved relative affluence and class identities became relatively submerged (see Gilleard & Higgs 2005). Again, the craft groups seem to provide continuity of skills, interests and experiences through such transitions, as well as informal, locally based routes into joining and leading groups, and making non-family contacts.

It is clear overall that continuity is a key issue for the women in this study. As Langer observes:

Many older people rely on continuity in their lives because it appears necessary for their security and survival. Continuity of activities and environments concentrates the individual’s energies in familiar domains of activity where learned routines can minimize the effects of aging. (Langer, 2012, p.460)

However, focusing on continuity does not always give adequate recognition to people’s enthusiasm for adapting their skills, sharing learning, problem solving, and developing new craft skills and techniques. It is clear from the findings that such challenges, along with being active and productive, offer a sense of meaning and purpose to participants.

The sense of purpose and meaning, and in particular the supportive networks that are accessed through membership of craft groups, can be seen to help people to deal with a range of challenges, some of them linked to later life. The findings highlight the wide range of emotional and practical support that is generated through craft groups. They also emphasise the value of volunteering as a component of resilience from both an individual and community perspective (see also Morrow-Howell et al, 2010).

Examining older people’s resilience through a social capital lens goes some way to identifying the gaps in understanding identified by Wild et al (2013) regarding the relationship between individual and collective resilience. We cannot view the resilience of individuals in isolation, and one of the strengths of qualitative research is that it helps us to unpick the everyday, simple interactions in people’s lives. This further enables us to identify the ‘hidden resilience resources’ amongst low income and marginalised populations, which are often missed in traditional accounts of resilience (Wild et al, 2013, p.153). This includes unrecognised contributions by older people to building up and maintaining community resilience.

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