

The Well-Being of Women Who Create With Textiles: Implications for Art Therapy

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Abstract

In this survey research study, a convenience sample (N = 821) of women textile handcrafters reported the frequency and pattern of their handcraft making, reasons for creating with fibers, and whether they used handcrafts to change difficult moods. These variables were examined in relationship to several measures and indicators of well-being. Women who used textile handcrafts to change mood reported more success, rejuvenation, and engagement than women who did not use textile methods to cope. The overall sample reported well-being indicators that were at least average, engaged in their art form quite frequently, and reported high mastery with several different techniques. The most important reasons given for engaging in textile making were the need to have beautiful aesthetics, to feel grounded, and to cope. The implications of these findings for art therapy are discussed.

Introduction

For thousands of years, women have created with textiles. Broadly defined, textiles encompass a variety of fiber-related materials that are made from plants (e.g., cotton or linen), animals (e.g., wool, alpaca, or silk), or synthetics (e.g., acrylic). Fibers are felted or spun into yarn, dyed, knit, crocheted, or woven. The material is then joined, by sewing, hand stitching, or tying, into a finished piece that may be embellished by various methods such as beading or surface design.

In many if not all cultures, textile making has historically and/or presently been central to the role of women and has happened largely in the home or village. Fiber making was (and continues to be) a necessity of life to clothe, protect, insulate, and hold objects (Barber, 1994). Women have also created cloth to soften, beautify, and adorn their environments. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in mid-1800s Europe, textile making moved increasingly out of the home domain and into factories. Machinery brought about automation and mechanization, which led to faster

production and a more uniform product. Over the ensuing decades, textile handcrafting declined, especially as Western women questioned and rejected stereotypic feminine constructs that they perceived had to do with domesticity and oppression (Turney, 2009). Fiber arts were seen as old fashioned and unattractive, as craft and not art.

However, there has been a resurgence of fiber art making in recent years, labeled as everything from the “craft revolution” to the “new generation of do it yourselves.” Among the reasons for this change is a rejection of consumer culture (Joy, 2009) and an attraction to handcrafters as a community, something that is missing in today’s urbanization (History of Knitting, 2008). The Internet also has played a role, allowing handcrafters to share their interests, to find and buy newly available materials, and to socialize and learn from one another both locally and internationally. As the pendulum has swung back, textile handcrafts are regarded today as true art forms and are finally elevated beyond the derogatory view of craft (Joy, 2009).

Few investigators have explored the psychological value of textile making for women. Most research has involved qualitative studies with very small, localized, homogenous samples (e.g., Johnson & Wilson, 2005; Nelson, LaBat, & Williams, 2002, 2005; Reynolds, 1999, 2000, 2002; Schofield-Tomschin & Littrell, 2001). These studies typically have used convenience samples; quite often the investigator is also a fiber artist and has interviewed her friends and colleagues (e.g., Johnson & Wilson, 2005; Riley, 2008). In addition, most of the published research on textile making has not come from art therapy but from the occupational therapy field, bringing a completely different focus.

Research on textile making has explored reasons that women engage in the activity. Johnson and Wilson (2005) determined that textile handcrafting gave women a sense of place, provided both tangible and intangible benefits, and connected them to their personal histories. Riley (2008) suggested that textile making brought women an enhanced sense of self and a collective identity; some women reported that textile making was a deeply personal spiritual or psychological experience.

Reynolds explored the role of the textile arts in women with unresolved grief (Reynolds, 1999); depression (Reynolds, 2000); and chronic illnesses including chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalopathy (Reynolds, Vivat, & Prior, 2008), cancer (Reynolds, Lim, & Prior, 2008), and long-term health problems (e.g., Reynolds, 2002, 2004a, 2004b). In the studies cited above, Reynolds analyzed qualitative interview data to find that textile arts allow women to cope with grief, with depression, and with a range of physical

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impairments to express, restore, and manage their illnesses, while simultaneously experiencing joy, confidence, and social connectivity.

Textile handcrafts may be an important entry point for art therapists working with women. In my practice as a clinical psychologist, the women I see typically do not consider themselves to be artists when creating textiles. Instead they regard their work as practical, useful, possibly attractive, and maybe a little artistic, but certainly not “professional.” Yet their level of textile handcraft creativity and mastery frequently is exceptional. In both my practice and in my work as a fiber artist, I have found that many women already use their textile handcraft for psychological reasons. Textile making allows them to calm themselves, to feel centered, to have control over a small part of their lives, to have social opportunities, and, for some, to just immerse themselves in the sheer pleasure of the creative process. When a skilled clinician suggests textile making as an intervention or a focused exploration toward personal growth, expression, and communication, women gladly add a new and often metaphoric dimension to their handcrafting. Thus, for many women, textile making is already implicitly valued and can be deepened and enhanced with a therapeutic perspective.

The current study attempted to expand existing research by exploring a large, multinational sample using quantitative methods. The objective was to better understand the specifics of how women use textiles to cope with difficult moods in their daily lives. I sought to determine the overall well-being of women who create with textiles and whether well-being was enhanced by textile making. Women were the focus of my study due to the long, complicated heritage of women in textile and fiber making.

Four hypotheses were tested:

1. Women who self-identify as textile handcrafters will have tried a variety of techniques, indicate strong mastery with several different techniques, and make textiles frequently.
2. Women who make textile handcrafts do so predominantly for pleasure and enjoyment and because it provides them with an outlet for their feelings, rather than because it is their profession or a financial necessity.
3. Women who create with textiles and fibers will show a minimum of average well-being and, at best, above average well-being.
4. Textile making for psychological reasons is an effective way to cope with difficult moods; that is, women who use textiles to change difficult moods will be significantly better adjusted than women who do not use textiles to cope.

Method

Participants

Requests to participate in a survey were sent initially to local yarn stores in Wisconsin and to textile handcrafters whom I knew in the United States and New Zealand. After approximately one week, I sent e-mail requests to the editors

of several international fiber magazines under the Interweave Press label (e.g., *Fiber Arts*, *Handwoven*, *Knits*, and *Crochet*) and to the Minnesota Textile Center. These organizations included in their e-newsletters a description of the study and a request to participate. After these initial announcements, women started to inform each other about the study via their guilds, knitting circles, online newsgroups, and blogs.

The e-mail announcement, which served as the cover letter, described the nature of the project and provided a link to the online survey. The same information, but expanded, was also provided at the beginning of the survey. Participants were assured of confidentiality before they agreed to answer the questions. If respondents agreed to participate, acknowledged that they were 18 or over, and had read and agreed to the informed consent form, they were allowed entry into the electronic study. After 3 weeks, the study was closed with 891 participants. All notices about the study specified that participation was limited to women.

Measures

All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. Every respondent completed the survey using online software (Qualtrics) that allows direct, web-based data collection. The survey took between 20 minutes and 1 hour to complete. No identifying information was linked with any of the subjects. Additional information was collected that is not relevant to the current hypotheses and will be described in a subsequent paper.

Participants provided demographic information and indicated how they had found out about the study, and then identified all textile handcrafts they had ever tried from a list of 19 items. Participants rated their skill level for each technique on a 5-point scale (1 = *no skills* and 5 = *excellent*) and how often they had used the technique to make something in the past 3 years (1 = *never* and 5 = *very often*). A list of 23 reasons for making textile handcrafts was developed from a review of the literature; participants indicated whether each reason was true for her using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*). Participants also could name any reasons that were not listed. Next, they indicated what they typically did with their completed handcrafts (*sell*, *gift*, *keep*, *other*) as well as whether they considered themselves to be professionals with each technique (*yes*, *no*), and answered the question, “Would you call yourself an artist?”

Flourishing. Among the measures selected to examine well-being, I used the International Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short Form to calculate positive affect and negative affect. This survey tool has excellent validity, stability, reliability, and cross-cultural factorial invariance (Thompson, 2007). Using a 5-point scale (1 = *very slightly* and 5 = *extremely*), participants were asked: “Thinking about yourself and how you normally feel, to what extent do you generally feel *x*.” The participants rated 5 items for positive affect (e.g., *determined*, *inspired*); and 5 items for negative affect (e.g., *upset*, *hostile*). Flourishing scores were derived from these affect ratings by creating a ratio

of the total positive affect to the total negative affect scores (Frederickson & Losada, 2005).

Quality of Life (QOL). The World Health Organization Quality of Life–BREF was used to evaluate the quality of life perceptions of the participants (Murphy, Herrman, Hawthorne, Pinzone, & Evert, 2000; Hawthorne, Herrman, & Murphy, 2006). This instrument is comprised of 26 items that measure the following domains: physical health (7 items), psychological health (6 items), social relationships (3 items), and environmental health (8 items).

Depression and Anxiety. Depression and anxiety were assessed using the Patient Health Questionnaire for Depression and Anxiety (PHQ-4; Kroenke, Spitzer, Williams, & Löwe, 2009). The PHQ-4 is a valid, ultra-brief screening tool for depression and anxiety, developed from the original Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders (PRIME-MD) (Spitzer et al., 1994). In addition to depression and anxiety, PHQ-4 scores are strongly associated with functional impairment, absenteeism due to disability, and health care use (Kroenke et al., 2009).

Alcohol Risk. The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test–Consumption (AUDIT-C) is a 3-item alcohol screening tool that identifies alcohol misuse (Bush, Kivlahan, McDonnell, Fihn, & Bradley, 1998). Research indicates that the AUDIT-C is a valid screening test for heavy drinking and/or active alcohol abuse or dependence (e.g., Bradley et al., 2007).

Textile Making and Well-Being in Handcrafters. To determine how participants cope with difficult mood states, they were asked to indicate what activity they did when faced with the “worst type of mood possible.” Then they were asked to rate the success, rejuvenation, and engagement they experienced when using that activity (on a scale of 0 to 100).

Results

A total of 891 participants began the survey; 61 participants declined to participate after reading the informed consent form or after the first two questions, and 9 participants did not identify as women and therefore did not meet the gender criterion. Thus, the overall sample included in the data analysis was 821 women. Table 1 presents a summary of the survey demographics. Overall, the respondents were middle aged or older, White, well educated, and employed; the majority lived in the United States and earned well over US\$50,000 annually.

Hypothesis 1

My first hypothesis was that women who self-identify as textile handcrafters will have tried a variety of techniques, indicate strong mastery with several different techniques, and make textiles frequently. The handcraft that the most participants had ever tried was knitting, followed by sewing, crocheting, and weaving (see Table 2). On average, participants had tried 11 different techniques (Range 1–20; $SD = 4.25$). Respondents were least likely to have used multimedia techniques and lace making.

Table 1 Female Textile Handcrafter Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	%	<i>n</i>
Age Range		
18 to 34 years	7.2	817
35 to 44	11.9	
45 to 64	65.0	
65 and over	15.9	
Location		
USA ^a	88.0	816
Non-USA (Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Asia, South America, Africa)	12.0	
Race		
White/Caucasian	94.9	821
Black/African American	1.0	
Alaska Native or American Indian	1.6	
Asian	1.0	
Other/Rather not say	1.5	
Employment status		
Full time	48.9	814
Part-time	17.1	
Employed as homemaker	20.7	
Not employed	13.3	
Urbanization		
Large metropolitan	15.8	818
Small metropolitan	19.4	
Suburban	19.9	
Micropolitan	15.2	
Small town	11.2	
Rural setting	18.5	
Marital status		
Single; never married	9.2	818
Married	72.6	
Divorced	1.1	
Separated	12.3	
Widowed	4.8	
Education		
Less than high school	0.0	819
High school/GED equivalent	7.0	
Some college or associate degree	22.7	
Bachelor's degree	33.9	
Master's degree	28.2	
Doctoral degree or professional degree	8.2	
Income		
Rather not say	17.7	815
Under \$10,000	2.9	
\$10,000–\$19,999	3.3	
\$20,000–\$29,999	5.5	
\$30,000–\$49,999	14.2	
\$50,000–\$149,999	46.4	
Over \$150,000	10.0	

^aTwo states had the most participants: Wisconsin (15%) and California (7%).

Table 2 Textile Handcrafts That Participants Had Tried, Their Mastery Level, and Their Frequency of Use

Textile Handcraft Technique	% That Tried Technique	Overall Mastery Level	Frequency of Use
Knitting	85.5%	3.86	3.86
Sewing	82.2%	3.72	3.24
Crocheting	73.6%	3.10	2.49
Weaving	72.5%	3.60	3.72
Embroidery	67.5%	3.36	2.37
Cross stitch	64.6%	3.54	2.07
Quilting	60.8%	3.19	2.60
Spinning fibers	58.1%	3.20	3.15
Felting	57.0%	3.03	2.77
Dyeing fibers	56.3%	3.07	2.95
Beading	51.9%	2.97	2.63
Braiding, macramé, or kumihimo	50.6%	2.78	2.23
Needlepoint	48.4%	3.21	1.82
Rug hooking	38.2%	2.78	1.69
Basketry	35.8%	2.65	1.98
Textile surface design	30.2%	3.04	2.72
Papermaking	26.5%	2.43	1.86
Lace making	23.5%	2.70	2.55
Multimedia	14.4%	3.01	2.78

Each technique that participants rated themselves as having above moderate skill level in (i.e., *good* or *excellent*) was given a 1, and a 0 if rated as *moderate* or below. Overall mastery was highest for knitting, followed by weaving and sewing; lowest mastery was reported for papermaking and basketry. The overall mastery score was then calculated by summing across all techniques rated as masterful. Participant scores could range from 0 (not masterful in anything) to 19 (mastery in every technique). The average number of techniques that respondents had mastered was 4.5 (Range 0–16; $SD = 2.99$).

For frequency of fiber making, a mean score for each technique was calculated for the overall sample, as well as across the 19 techniques, for each participant. Participants had used an average of 2.6 techniques during the past 3 years (Range 0–9; $SD = 1.60$). The individual skills most frequently utilized were knitting, weaving, and sewing. Participants had used needlepoint and rug making least frequently.

Hypothesis 2

My second hypothesis was that women who make textile handcrafts do so predominantly for pleasure and enjoyment, and because it provides them with an outlet for their feelings, rather than because it is their profession or a financial necessity. Table 3 presents the 23 reasons handcrafters in this study reported for making textiles, from most to least frequently endorsed reasons. Beauty, love of color, and love of the sensations were the most popular reasons; income was

the least frequent reason cited. Most of the women completing the survey did not consider themselves to be professionals in their art form or artists (60.6%). Consistent with this finding, the majority did not expect to sell their work (85.5%). Instead, most textile handcrafters gave their handwork away (45.3%) or kept it (35.6%).

The 23 reasons for textile making were factor analyzed using principal component factor analysis and Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization to determine communalities. All Initial Eigen values were greater than one, and to be included in a factor the rotated component matrix value had to be greater than 0.50. Seven factors accounted for 60.6% of the variance (see Table 4): Aesthetic Need, Feeling Grounded, Psychological Coping, Do for Others, Social Fulfillment, Tangibility, and Financial Reasons. Two additional items, Need to Make Something and Memories, did not load on any factors. Chronbach's alphas were greater than 0.60 for all factors except Tangibility ($\alpha = .403$) and Financial Reasons ($\alpha = .343$). Therefore these two factors were not included in subsequent analyses.

Summary scores for each statistically derived factor were calculated and averaged. In the order of frequency endorsed, they were: Aesthetic Need [$M = 4.5$ (0.66)], Feeling Grounded [$M = 3.9$ (0.90)], Psychological Coping [$M = 3.8$ (0.94)], Do for Others [$M = 3.8$ (0.87)], and Social Fulfillment [$M = 3.3$ (0.87)].

Participants provided their own reasons for making textiles when their reasons didn't align with those in the

Table 3 Reasons for Textile Making in Descending Order

Reason	Mean	SD
Beauty of it	4.67	0.60
I like color	4.53	0.71
Love touch, smell, sound or kinesthetic	4.50	0.75
It is who I am; part of my identity	4.48	0.77
"Need" to make things	4.47	0.87
Self-expression	4.47	0.73
Personalized gifts	4.37	0.82
Like the rhythm or repetition	4.33	0.82
Tangible outcomes; have something to show	4.28	0.92
Like to do for others	4.16	0.92
To change my mood	4.13	0.91
It helps me to cope	4.09	0.99
Spending time on my own	3.91	0.93
Continuity with the past	3.77	1.16
Inner spiritual experience	3.60	1.19
Memories	3.51	1.12
Makes my home unique	3.50	1.11
To forget; it is a distraction	3.45	1.18
I have time	3.27	1.18
It is a historical marker	3.26	1.29
Social; to be with people	3.17	1.15
Fund raising or donations	3.02	1.23
Income	2.30	1.26

Table 4 Factor Loadings for Principal Component Factor Analysis With Varimax Rotation of Reasons Participants Make Textile Handcrafts

Reasons	Factor Loadings						
	Factor 1 Aesthetic Need	Factor 2 Feeling Grounded	Factor 3 Psychological Coping	Factor 4 Do for Others	Factor 5 Social Fulfillment	Factor 6 Physical Sensations	Factor 7 Financial
Cope	.857	.134	.181	.135	.091	-.030	-.001
Change mood	.820	.165	.227	.143	.055	-.036	.068
Distraction	.759	.078	-.115	.057	.149	.283	-.043
Kinesthetic	.099	.728	.221	-.070	-.125	.240	.075
Continuity	.066	.693	.128	.184	.306	-.066	-.014
Rhythm	.244	.646	.081	-.048	.041	.378	.115
Spiritual	.216	.575	.426	.063	.229	-.283	.013
Expression	.049	.158	.743	.020	.228	.126	.079
Identity	.177	.203	.682	.082	.066	.078	.229
Beauty of it	.058	.118	.649	.201	.071	.340	-.086
Do for others	.236	-.011	.220	.748	.122	.107	-.078
Gifts	.089	-.017	.076	.723	-.075	.026	.064
Historical marker	-.013	.232	-.003	.579	.087	.031	.420
Have time	.051	-.124	.055	-.089	.712	.157	.178
Time on my own	.298	.175	.225	-.019	.545	.034	-.042
Home unique	.034	.317	.345	.217	.521	-.017	-.070
Social	.011	.184	-.017	.155	.509	.005	.279
Touchable	.208	-.005	.180	.157	.247	.671	-.036
Color	-.030	.270	.255	.024	-.016	.623	.111
Donations	.066	-.022	-.028	.386	.156	-.040	.666
Income	-.038	.052	.201	-.127	.117	.061	.655
Memories	.049	.442	-.023	.427	.364	.133	-.036
Need to make	.358	-.025	.426	.086	-.162	.199	.341

Note: Factor loadings greater than 0.5 are printed in boldface. “Memories” and “need to make” did not load greater than 0.5 on any factor.

survey. These “other” reasons were grouped into three additional categories: (a) cognitive—textile making helped their thinking processes either by stimulating them (e.g., “I make textiles for the mental challenge or stimulation”) or calming them (e.g., “it slows my spinning head”); (b) idle hands—multiple respondents stated that “idle hands were the devil’s work,” and they did not like doing nothing, ever; and (c) coping with illness—some participants stated that making textiles helped them to cope with pain, to maintain dexterity, or to give them an outlet when dealing with a serious medical condition.

Hypothesis 3

My third hypothesis was that women who create with textiles and fibers will show a minimum of average well-being and, at best, above average well-being. Table 5 presents the average well-being scores for each of the measures. Quality of life (QOL) domain scores were summed and transformed into percentile scores (Range 0–100), where higher scores denoted better QOL. Mean scores were calculated for each domain using the approach delineated by Hawthorne

et al. (2006). Each of the QOL subscales was within the normal range of published reference points (Hawthorne et al., 2006). Flourishing ratios were within the normal range (Frederickson & Losada, 2005; Thompson, 2007). Anxiety/depression risk was calculated by summing the 4 items on the PHQ-4; alcohol risk was calculated by summing the 3 AUDIT-C items. Anxiety/depression risk (Bradley et al., 2007) and alcohol risk scores were all in the normal range (Kroenke et al., 2009).

Hypothesis 4

My final hypothesis was that textile making for psychological reasons is an effective way to cope with difficult moods, and thus women who use textiles to change difficult moods will be significantly better adjusted than women who do not use textiles to cope. To determine whether textile making was effective for coping with difficult mood states, women who reported using textiles to cope (*textile-copers*) were compared to women who did not (*non-textile-copers*). Slightly fewer than half of the respondents (47.1%) indicated that they used textile-making techniques

Table 5 Well-Being Measures in Participants in Comparison With Published Norms for Women in the General Population

Measure	Mean	SD	Range	Normal?
Positive affect	19.1	2.5	12–25	Yes ^a
Negative affect	10.0	2.8	5–21	Yes ^a
Flourishing ratio	2.1	1.5	0–5	Yes ^b
Depression and anxiety risk (PHQ-4)	1.5	1.9	0–12	Yes ^c
Alcohol risk (AUDIT-C)	2.5	1.7	0–10	Yes ^d
Health QOL	76.0	17.3	7.1–100	Yes ^e
Psychological QOL	72.1	15.6	21–100	Yes ^e
Social QOL	68.5	19.3	83–100	Yes ^e
Environmental QOL	79.1	13.7	21.9–100	Yes ^e

^aThompson, 2007; ^bFrederickson & Losada, 2005; ^cKroenke et al., 2009; ^dRubinsky et al., 2009; ^eHawthorne et al., 2006.

to change terrible moods. The most common techniques textile-copers reported using when they were upset were: knitting or crocheting (37.1%); weaving (22.4%); spinning (16.7%); engaging in an activity related to textile making (13.3%), such as “plan a project,” “go shopping for yarn,” or “go through and sort my supplies”; and sewing or quilting (7.5%). Other methods were reported by less than 1% of respondents.

The non-textile-copers (52.9%) reported using the following leisure activities when faced with a difficult mood: exercising, especially walking (32.2%); reading (8.7%); spending time in nature (7.9%); venting (7.1%); practicing religious activities (7.1%); resting (7.1%); relaxing (3.0%); and talking to friends (3.0%). Other methods were reported by less than 1% of respondents.

Separate ANOVAs were computed with group (textile-copers and non-textile-copers) by outcome (success, rejuvenation, or engagement). Textile-copers reported significantly greater success, rejuvenation, and engagement when using their textile handcraft to change a terrible mood com-

pared to the non-textile-copers (see Table 6). ANOVAs were also computed for the well-being measures and the textile patterns: group (textile-copers and non-textile-copers) by well-being indicator (health QOL, flourishing, PHQ-4, and AUDIT-C), as well as group by textile pattern (number of techniques tried, overall mastery, and average use).

There were no significant differences between the textile-copers and the non-textile-copers for flourishing or alcohol risk. There were significant group differences for health QOL, $F(1, 682) = 13.9, p < .000$, and depression/anxiety risk, $F(1, 681) = 8.8, p < .003$. There also were significant differences for the number of textile techniques tried, $F(1, 685) = 18.2, p < .000$, overall mastery, $F(1, 685) = 25.0, p < .000$, and number of projects made in the past 3 years, $F(1, 671) = 29.9, p < .000$. Mean scores suggested that textile-copers were at significantly greater risk for depression and anxiety, had poorer health QOL, had tried more textile techniques, and had used them more frequently and masterfully.

To control for potential confounds of these variables, the General Linear Model for multivariate analysis was conducted, with coping style (textile-coper, non-textile-coper) as the between subjects factor and outcome (rejuvenation, success, engagement) as the repeated measures. Depression/anxiety risk, health QOL, and overall mastery were the covariates. It is important to note that only one variable was chosen from the textile patterns as a covariate, which was overall mastery. The three textile variables were all highly correlated ($p < .000$) and the mastery score reflected both the frequency of use (to gain mastery) and the number of techniques tried.

With this model, there were significant covariate effects for all three variables: depression/anxiety risk, $F(3, 644) = 5.1, p < .002$, health QOL, $F(3, 644) = 3.4, p < .017$, and mastery, $F(3, 644) = 3.5, p < .015$. Furthermore, when the corrected model controlled for each of these covariates, significant differences still occurred between the textile-copers and non-textile-copers for success, $F(4) = 10.3, p < .000$, rejuvenation, $F(4) = 16.4, p < .000$, and engagement, $F(4) = 16.8, p < .000$. Thus the results suggest that textile-copers are more successful at changing their mood, feeling rejuvenated, and feeling engaged when involved in a textile coping activity as compared to the non-textile-copers, regardless of baseline levels of depression/anxiety, health QOL, or overall mastery.

Table 6 Success, Rejuvenation, and Engagement in Textile-Copers and Non-Textile-Copers

	Coping Involves Handcrafts?	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i> (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i> (1-tailed)
Success	Yes	76.4 (16.88)	18.4(1, 676)	.000
	No	70.3 (19.51)		
Rejuvenation	Yes	78.6 (16.88)	28.2(1, 675)	.000
	No	70.6 (21.70)		
Engagement	Yes	85.3 (16.87)	60.4(1, 666)	.000
	No	72.1 (25.58)		

Discussion

First, results confirmed that self-identified textile handcrafters create a lot: They have tried almost a dozen techniques, reported overall mastery with approximately five techniques, and have used only three textile techniques during the previous 3 years. Women in this sample had tried many more techniques than reported by Johnson and Wilson (2005); however, their sample size also was considerably smaller ($N = 39$). Women engaged in fewer textile techniques than they had mastered during the past 3 years. This suggests that women have resources and skills they may not be using at any given time. If an art therapist were to consider using textiles in therapy with women, it would be worthwhile to explore their history of textile making, even if they were not obviously engaged in making textiles.

Knitting was the main technique that women in this study had tried, felt mastery over, and used frequently. Knitting is both popular and very portable; with some persistence it can be easily mastered. Sewing, weaving, quilting, and spinning were all common activities that participants had tried, felt mastery over, and had used in the past several years. I found it interesting that crocheting, embroidery, and cross-stitch were techniques that participants had tried and felt mastery over, but had not used in the past 3 years. Although crocheting has made somewhat of a comeback in the past decade, these three crafts may still be considered "old fashioned." Textile design and multi-media techniques all were used, but participants did not self-rate themselves as being skilled in these techniques.

Second, the results confirmed the hypothesis that textile handcrafters engage in fiber arts predominantly for enjoyment and not for financial reasons. In fact, making handcrafts for income was the least likely reason that women reported for creating with fibers. The majority of handcrafters in this study preferred to give away or keep their products. Most of the women did not consider themselves to be professionals.

Why, then, do women make handcrafts? For most of the respondents in this study, it was because of their aesthetic love of textiles: the beauty of it, the feeling that it was part of their identity, and the sense that it was a vital means of expression. For other women, motivation was related to the grounding quality of textile making. Women truly enjoyed the sensations of fiber making, the repetition, and the rhythm involved. Textiles provides a sense of continuity in their lives. Psychological fulfillment, the desire to do things for others, and social fulfillment were also reasons that women reported for working with textiles. Although not as statistically sound as the five factors identified earlier, women also made textile handcrafts for financial reasons (e.g., to save money, to make money) and because it gave them tangible outcomes.

Other reasons given for making textile handcrafts included coping with illness, cognitive coping, and not wanting to have "idle hands." It is ironic that despite being derogated as "craft" and "women's work," textile making provides an important source of cognitive coping or intel-

lectual stimulation for many women. Geda (2009) at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota suggested that people who engage in cognitively challenging activities, such as working with computers or crafting (specifically knitting and quilt making), in middle age or later life had a decreased risk of mild cognitive impairment that protected against memory loss. Textile handcraft guild participation also has been correlated with better emotional and cognitive adjustment in older women (Schofield-Tomschin & Littrell, 2001). The comment "idle hands are the devil's playground," an old saying dating at least as far back as Chaucer in the 14th century (MacDonald, 1988), appeared in multiple places in the survey responses. Many women have a strong work ethic and use their textile handcrafts to feel productive and to provide a cognitive release.

The hypothesis that textile handcrafters were functioning within healthy norms on every indicator of well-being was confirmed. The respondents were not, however, superior in well-being to the average population. The textile-copers reported that fiber making successfully changed their negative mood, rejuvenated them, and allowed them to be absorbed in an activity. The most common techniques textile-copers used when in a terrible mood were knitting, weaving, and spinning; activities related to textile planning; sewing or quilting; and needlework. These techniques would therefore be best to try as frontline therapeutic interventions.

I was intrigued to discover that the textile-copers also reported greater depression and anxiety symptoms, lower health QOL, and greater mastery than non-textile-copers. However, even when controlling for small baseline differences in these variables, textile-copers still reported greater changes in their mood than non-textile-copers. It is important to recognize that the negative indicators with respect to well-being are still within the norms of healthy functioning; they are not clinically pathological. One could say that textile-copers have come up with a constructive, practical way to deal with difficult moods. If slightly elevated depression and anxiety and lower health QOL draw these women to make textiles, it is fair to say that fiber making is certainly good for their mental well-being.

In a recent art therapy study, Dalebroux, Goldstein, and Winner (2008) reported that the greatest mood valence change in participants occurred after creating a drawing that depicted a positive emotion, compared to venting or a neutral control. This finding is contrary to a long-standing art therapy approach that encourages clients to express negative feelings through art making. These authors suggested that art making can be most beneficial by orienting people away from distressed feelings and towards more positive feelings to create short-term mood repair. Approximately half of the textile handcrafters in the current study have discovered this same benefit for themselves: The aesthetics and grounding quality of textile making helps them cope with negative moods. By focusing on creating something beautiful with their art, textile-copers experienced more success and rejuvenation than non-textile-copers.

Several investigators have discussed the concept of skill and "flow" in artistic endeavors (e.g., Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005; Rheinberg, 2008). Flow is a mental state

in which a person is fully engaged in an activity, has mastery yet feels challenged by the activity, becomes completely absorbed, feels an energized focus, and finds the activity to be intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Blood (2007) examined flow theory applied to textiles, specifically with non-industrial clothing and textile making. She found that participants experienced greater occurrences of the flow state the longer they engaged in the textile activity. They also experienced a highly focused state, a sense of control, and creativity. My results are consistent with the flow theory in that the textile-copers, who reported more success and rejuvenation with mood change, were also significantly more skilled and engaged in their handcraft making than non-textile-copers. Skill and flow, combined with the desire to create an aesthetic object and to feel grounded, are all motivations that can be accessed by art therapists when working with clients who may be attracted to textile handcraft when faced with turbulent life events and illnesses.

It would be reasonable to question whether any activity, hobby, or leisure activity that involves flow would have similar results. Griffiths (2008) reported that a variety of creative activities—especially if they facilitate engagement and flow, balance skill with challenge, and give the client control over choosing the activity—could be used as therapeutic mediums. Iwasaki, Mactavish, and MacKay (2005) found that leisure activities provided a positive diversion from stress and a context for rejuvenation and renewal across a variety of samples and settings. In the current study, textile-copers were far more engaged and effective at changing their mood states than non-textile-copers, who used other leisure activities or hobbies to cope. This study suggests that textile media may be therapeutically beneficial for women who already have fiber art skills. More than half of the respondents already knew how to apply textile making to cope with their lives; the other half may fare even better by using their skills.

Limitations

Respondents in this study were self-identified textile handcrafters who had a great deal of experience with knitting, weaving, spinning, and sewing. Different psychological patterns may emerge in women from other handcraft orientations or with less textile expertise. Furthermore, the current study is a convenience sample of textile handcrafters; it does not provide information on the frequency or pattern of textile making (or coping) in the general population of women.

The sample, despite its sheer size, may be biased. The respondents were very well educated and had moderate to high incomes. Most were White and middle-aged and older. The women who participated were also very enthusiastic about sharing their experiences. Even after the study closed, approximately 300 additional women sent e-mails asking to participate. Often these requests came with vivid stories about how textile handcrafts had been an anchor through difficult personal and family situations, illnesses, crises, and life-changing events. Respondents in this sample likely had the luxury to use textile arts for emotional fulfillment because they were older and resourceful, more

financially successful, and possibly more oriented towards self-actualization.

Future Considerations

It is important to consider the variety of reasons women have in making textile handcrafts. Asking women about these reasons can provide insight into their motivations as well as assist clinicians in understanding ways to engage clients in the future.

Many participants contacted me after the study ended to clarify that they used textiles to cope with *ordinary* daily hassles, but not for *terrible* mood states (terms that were used in the survey). Many said they were averse to creating when truly upset, as it “put negative energy into the product,” or they would “make too many mistakes.” Some women even stated that they had never experienced extremely terrible mood states. Future research would do well to differentiate textile coping with “ordinary” negative mood versus “severe” negative mood state. It was interesting to note that the women who had the most skill and experience in fiber arts actually reported the opposite: They had so mastered their skills at textile-making that they knew how to put aside, neutralize, and transform any personal agitation or sadness while creating with textiles. Most of the time, they felt that textile making offered them a creative outlet for their concerns, and for many the act of textile making both rejuvenated and enlivened them.

During my own decades as a textile hand crafter, I have seen firsthand how women use textiles to cope with life, from the joy at the process of making to the joy of giving to someone else. This study verified such anecdotal impressions. When choosing art as an intervention for psychological exploration, there are obviously a multitude of media to choose from. The results of this study make a case for assessing a client’s mastery with textile handcrafts, and for using this medium as a launching point for therapeutic art intervention.

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