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## Stitching Together: An Exploration of Women's Sociality Through an Urban Knitting Group

Authors	Ruland, Gillian Barbara
Citation	Ruland, Gillian Barbara. 2010. "Stitching Together: An Exploration of Women's Sociality Through an Urban Knitting Group." Georgia State University. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/1332023">https://doi.org/10.57709/1332023</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/1332023">https://doi.org/10.57709/1332023</a>
Download date	2026-05-13 15:38:20
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/643">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/643</a>

STITCHING TOGETHER: AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S SOCIALITY THROUGH  
AN URBAN KNITTING GROUP

by

GILLIAN BARBARA RULAND

Under the Direction of Kathryn A. Kozaitis

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of knitting groups is an increasingly widespread trend in urban settings. In this thesis, I argue that the resurgence of knitting groups in contemporary urban areas is the result of a nostalgic search for a sense of community within an otherwise complex and sometimes alienating urban landscape. Through ethnographic research in Atlanta, GA, I examine how women knitters whom I interviewed theorize their own interactions in the knitting community and the ways in which technology serves to facilitate these interactions. With lives revolving mainly around family and careers, the women who join knitting groups seek an escape from everyday life, friendship without strings, and the communal gathering focused around a leisure activity which holds social significance in daily life.

INDEX: Women, Friendship, Leisure, Community, Sociality, Knitting, Cultural anthropology

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THROUGH AN URBAN KNITTING GROUP

by

GILLIAN BARBARA RULAND

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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2010

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May 2010

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to the Alphabet Knitters, without whom my research would not have been possible. Thank you for all of the Friday evenings full of laughter, friendship, and knitting camaraderie.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to offer my gratitude to the following people for their never-ending support throughout this journey. There were too many people to list who were integral to this process, so for those who aren't listed, know that you weren't forgotten! Thank you:

To Nana, for teaching me the joys of craft at a young age.

To my parents, for standing behind me every step of the way, and for encouraging and supporting me in so many different ways.

To Luis, my first friend at Georgia State. I thank you for the many times you explained difficult concepts to me lucidly, for the many rounds of Skip Bo, afternoons in the park, trivia nights and shared pitchers, and for all of the support you've offered me throughout our friendship.

To Veronica, for always having a witty comment to make me laugh, for the many trivia nights and shared pitchers, for always letting me win at Guitar Hero, and for always being willing to go above and beyond, whether with emergency Ben & Jerry's or a ride to work.

To Pam, the best roommate I've ever had! I still find it so ironic that we moved in together before we realized how intertwined our thesis topics are. Thank you for the many nights of tea, Sex and the City, and frozen yogurt, and for the many conversations about women, leisure, and community!

To Douglas Pippin, for always encouraging me to seek what I need, for all the years of recommendations, insight, support, and emails. For the unexpected mentorship and friendship---I truly thank you.

To Steve Blaes, for forcing me to realize that I wasn't ready to go to graduate school for Library Science, and for helping me find my way back to Anthropology.

To Dr. Guano, for going above and beyond and re-reading my comps over Christmas break!  
Thank you for your insight, knowledge, and positive attitude.

To Dr. Patico, for your insight and encouragement in the development of this research, and for the gift of an early start with the writing of an ethnography on knitting in my first semester.

To Dr. Glover, for being such a joy to work with. You always made me laugh, even on the most stressful of days, and for that, I am grateful.

And finally, to Dr. Kozaitis, for being as excited about my research as I am, for always being ready and willing to talk, for your invaluable and never-ending encouragement, support, and guidance—my thesis would not be where it is today without you.

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## **Chapter One: The Concept / Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

My headlights bore through the darkness of a parking lot in Tucker, thirteen miles north of my cozy apartment in Midtown Atlanta. People ran from their cars to the comforting confines of Starbucks, coats and bags held over their heads to protect them from the pouring rain. I sat, partially trying to wait until the rain lightened up for a moment, and partly trying to gather myself before I walked into a situation that would inevitably be uncomfortable. I had been invited to join the Alphabet Knitters for a knit night after posting online, on the Internet fiber community *Ravelry*, that I was looking for a group on which to focus my thesis research. I had been in communication with the group members via the online forum for several months now, but I hadn't yet attended a knit night. Through the pane glass window of the Starbucks, I could see the group in the front corner by the door, sitting on couches and straight-backed chairs that had been pulled from the café-style tables. In the corner, a young woman with a spinning wheel moved fluidly, letting white wool slip through her fingers, twist, and wind onto the wheel a fine yarn.

At nine years old, my grandmother taught me to crochet, a sister craft to knitting, sitting on the love seat in my parent's house while they were out one night. Within weeks, all of my dolls had warm homemade blankets in pastel colors. She taught me to knit as well, but I stuck with crochet for many years. In high school, my best friend at the time, Amy, picked up the hook and I found myself pulled back in. Again, I tried knitting, but didn't stick with it. My love of knitting didn't start until college, after I felt I had mastered crochet. I first knitted a teddy bear from a charity pattern and gave it as a gift to my college boyfriend. I then moved onto sweater vests, scarves, and was soon tackling more complicated patterns, finding that all I had to do was

“follow the recipe.” Over the years, I have knitted simple patterns and complicated patterns, items that I ended up hating and items that I can hardly force myself to take off. For me, the process is as important as the product. Even when I have sweaters that aren’t flattering on me, such as the thin aubergine one hanging in my closet now, I appreciate the time, effort, and learning that went into the sweater and I hold onto it, in hopes that it will find someone who will wear it.

At 24 years old, I pushed through the door of the Starbucks, my knitting bag on my shoulder, and I found a seat amongst women who were strangers, with the exception of snippets of conversations with them online. That night, the Alphabet Knitters welcomed me with open arms. They asked me questions about myself, and told me a little bit about themselves. I felt comfortable with them from the beginning and soon found a weekly rhythm in which the week didn’t feel complete until I sat with my knitters for a couple of hours on Friday night. For me, the group was a blessing. The group has not only provided me with valuable insight for my thesis, but has also offered me an outlet throughout the past year and a half. Time to knit is hard to come by while in graduate school. I am grateful for the chance I’ve been given to get to know these women and let them into my life.

## **1.2 Personal Background**

I moved to Atlanta, Georgia from a brief stay between jobs in my hometown of rural Cobleskill, New York. Cobleskill consists of about 5,000 people, which swells to about 8,000 when the local college is in session. I grew up on the edge of the village, within walking distance of downtown, but also within walking distance of countryside. My experiences prior to

my move to Atlanta included temporary stints in some cities, but none as large as Atlanta. I packed my four-door Honda Civic full of my belongings and driven the 16 hours south. The apartment I'd rented without seeing was in a gated community on the border of Downtown and Midtown on Piedmont Avenue. Walking through the community to see my apartment for the first time, I noticed the throngs of homeless people leaning against the back fences. There are three homeless shelters within close proximity of the complex. My third day living in the city was overly dramatic. Passing a disheveled man in a Target parking lot, I looked him in the eye, smiled, and said hello. To a girl from a small town, this was only the polite thing to do. When he started chasing me, I realized my mistake. Quickly, city life seemed dangerous and terrifying. I locked myself in my apartment for days, crying on the phone to family and friends, considering cutting my losses and moving back to New York before graduate school even began.

My first few months in Atlanta were uncomfortable. I carried pepper spray everywhere I went and constantly felt threatened. As a migrant from a rural area, I had a difficult time adjusting to life in the city. Soon, I recognized that the best coping mechanism for me would be to form my own sense of community. By familiarizing myself with different areas in the city and becoming affiliated with different groups, I would feel more attached to the city, as if I had a social network upon which I could rely. The shift was gradual. Once graduate school began, I slowly made friends within the department, many of whom had moved to Atlanta in the recent past. I found a part-time job teaching preschool in Grant Park, and formed a network with the families who had children in my class and my co-workers. By joining a knitting group, I was able to both schedule leisure time into my busy life and gain new friends with similar interests. Through all of these networks, I formed my own community, my own social network, and suddenly, the city seemed like a much smaller place.

I mention all of this because I find myself wondering about how others cope with similar feelings of nostalgia for a sense of community and feelings of loss and disconnect with the city life and surroundings. For me, joining a knitting group was a large part of my reintegration with my surroundings. I created my own sense of community. Is this a familiar trend within the knitting group, and perhaps within leisure groups as a whole? What function do knitting groups serve for those who participate in them?

## **Chapter Two: The Design / Methods**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Why have knitting groups recently exploded in popularity, especially amongst younger women? What function does a weekly knitting group fill in the social lives of the women who participate in the group? How do women negotiate the positioning of this leisure activity in their lives? Does a knitting group foster intergenerational sociality amongst women?

I employed four methods to conduct an ethnography of the Alphabet Knitters' weekly knitting group. The number of members online is listed as 77 (as of April 14, 2010); however, not all members attend the weekly meetings. A core group of approximately 8 to 10 women meet up weekly to knit together. This ethnography is the basis for a grounded theory on the function of women's knitting groups in contemporary urban settings.

### **2.2 Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory provides an excellent method for beginning to study and understand knitting groups as a phenomenon. By conducting extensive qualitative research with the women of my knitting group, I identified and coded the major themes that are parallel to each of their experiences. "Grounded theory is an iterative process by which the analyst becomes more and more 'grounded' in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works" (Bernard 2006:608). Through the use of a grounded theory approach, I developed theoretical ideas based upon the data provided by my research participants (Schwandt 2007:131). In this way, the theory I produced is specifically based on the group with which I am involved, but can be useful in understanding knitting groups as a global phenomenon.

One of the major challenges of the grounded theory approach is letting the data speak for itself. The theory comes from the analysis of the data, not from the researcher's preconceived ideas (Creswell 1998). By separating oneself from the expectations one has for the data, the researcher builds theory based on the evidence of themes, patterns, and categories. Furthermore, "the researcher needs to recognize that the primary outcome of this study is a theory with specific components: a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences. These are prescribed categories of information in the theory" (Creswell 1998:58). In other words, there is a systematic manner in which one goes about the construction of grounded theory; when done with care, grounded theory illuminates the sociocultural phenomenon as expressed in a particular case study.

### **2.3 Cultural Consensus Model**

The cultural consensus model was useful in my research to gain an understanding of the general ideas and patterns which are common to all members of the group. According to Bernard (2006), a survey consisting of 'yes' or 'no' questions was given to members of an online group. The survey consisted of 40 questions, which is what Bernard suggests as ideal for reliable results (2006). By coding the responses to these questions, patterns revealed themselves regarding shared beliefs. In conjunction with the other methods used, the test provided the basis for the themes the focus groups and interview guide would focus on.

There were some limitations to the cultural consensus model. I sent the invitation to participate in the survey to all 68 members of the Alphabet Knitters group online. Out of those 68 people, 10 responded. This was a surprisingly low number. The low response rate could be

due to the fact that I don't have a relationship with these knitters. To them, I am just another online personality requesting something of them. The number of completed surveys rose to 15 when four of the core members, one being a former core member, filled them out. Out of the 15 responses, one was from a male, with the remaining 14 being from females.

Because the model is overly simple, one limitation is that the survey could not account for more complex responses (Weller 1998). The limitations of answering a simple 'yes' or 'no' with no explanation is result in some respondents finding that they want to qualify the response, but are unable to do so. If people did not feel strongly that the answer was 'yes' or 'no', they were unable to express this. Therefore, there may be a bias in responses, as some people will answer yes when they do not fully agree and some will answer no when they do not fully disagree.

As such, I encountered some difficulties with this method. One respondent did not answer all of the questions. While this is certainly not a problem, because of the benign nature of the questions, I wonder if perhaps she did not answer them because her answer could not fit squarely into a 'yes' or 'no' response. Secondly, I had a couple of respondents who qualified their answers, despite instructions to respond only with a 'yes' or a 'no'. I looked at these case by case to determine whether their response was invalid, or whether I could categorize their response as a 'yes' or 'no' depending on what the question and answer was. For instance, in the case of the question "Do you consider knitting to be a feminine craft?" one respondent answered, "I guess so." I qualified this as a 'yes', despite the fact that she didn't seem to feel adamantly one way or another. However, it did seem to me that I could definitively say that her response could be more closely matched to a 'yes'.

To the question, “Do you prefer to knit alone?” one respondent answered, “At times.” This was a little more difficult to qualify. While I placed it in the ‘yes’ category, I can understand the respondent’s hesitation to fully answer one way or the other. The question directly preceding asked if the respondent knits with other people often. The word prefer would then lead to this previous question being understood that perhaps, if the respondent prefers to knit alone, she does not fully enjoy her time knitting with other people. In this case, the issue was a poorly worded question.

Despite the limitations of this method, this model provided valuable patterns to look at more attentively through other methods. In order for me to recognize a group of responses as significant, I decided, based on the idea of majority, that at least 10 out of 15 respondents had to answer either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in order to mark a question as significant.

## **2.4 Interviews**

Interviews allowed for the expansion of the information generated by the cultural consensus model into discussions with particular informants about their personal practices and beliefs. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 members of the Alphabet Knitters’ group, particularly focusing on those who I recognized as present or recent past attendees of the weekly meeting groups. I based my semi-structured interviews on an interview guide which allowed me to expand on certain topics, as made evident by the data gathered from work with the cultural consensus model. I took an interactionist approach to interviews, described by Karen O’Reilly as one “which depends on a combination of methods and which sees confessional type statements as one type of discourse among many, and which doubts if there is really one true

way/thing that a person really thinks” (2005). This approach allows for the participants to be recognized as individuals with complex ideas.

One limitation of interviews is the assumption that information collected during an interview is purely factual, yet realistically, it is “constructed in a specific form during the process of narrating” (Flick 1998). Individuals’ memories may vary, something which is particularly important to recognize and take into account. Another limitation is the sheer amount of information which is conveyed in a single interview. Transcribing and analysis can take extensive amounts of time (Flick 1998). However, the positive contributions of interviews far outweigh the limitations, and the information obtained using this method is invaluable in qualitative research.

## **2.5 Participant Observation**

Participant observation was a particularly important aspect of my research. Introduction into the group was pivotal and determined accessibility and openness of group members (Bernard 1998; O’Reilly 2005). There are four major themes which must be discussed with regard to participant observation: “the decision to be overt or covert, participant roles, the aims of participation, and practical considerations” (O’Reilly 2005).

My decision to be overt regarding my research of the group was one based on my ethical beliefs that, whenever possible, we must be honest and forthcoming about our intentions. Trust is built on truth, and while I understand that there are instances in which this may be compromised, my research does not dictate any need to be covert. My search for a group which would allow me to enter as a researcher took longer than I expected. Using message boards on

the popular online knitting community, *Ravelry*, I originally contacted the owner of a local yarn store which has four official knitting groups which meet throughout the week, and several unofficial groups. I was clear about my intentions and my hope for the research. While the site looked promising at first, in the end, the store owner decided that she didn't want her shop to be a focal point of my research. While I was disappointed, I fully understood her viewpoint: my role may compromise the sense of safety felt by her customers, and therefore, she could potentially lose business due to my presence.

After another effort to contact another group, I posted a message on a local board asking groups interested in participating in my research to contact me. Discouraged at first, the moderator of the Alphabet Knitters' board eventually contacted me and invited me to reach out to the knitting group in which she participated. I found the group overwhelmingly positive and welcoming, teasing about how they would scare me off with their jokes and sarcasm. Although the group met further out of the city than I had originally anticipated, the warm welcome I received from the members made the original 40 minute drive well worth it. The group has changed locations several times now, for various reasons; I am content with the current location, approximately 20 minutes from my home, and the group feels strongly connected to this location.

While my research was overt, my fellow knitting group members did not know what particular research questions I am asking. This is not a conscious decision to exclude them from this information; when they ask, I answer questions about the broad goals of my research. However, my aim is to be as unobtrusive in the group as possible and to be seen more as a participant, and less as a "researcher." Furthermore, my research questions did not become clear to me until after my research was already well under-way.

My entrance into the group was relatively seamless. Although my first meeting was somewhat awkward, I think the fact that I didn't immediately bombard my informants and fellow knitters with a plethora of questions allowed them to get used to my presence, as well as my personality, in a way that made me more approachable. I am seen as less an observer of the group, and more a participant of the group.

I invested the bulk of my time with the group observing, despite the fact that I was participating in discussions, eating ice cream or drinking tea, and knitting alongside these women. I was interested in what they talk about, how they talk about their thoughts and feelings, and what function this group serves for them in their lives. To maintain a more natural setting and to preserve the comfort of my informants, I chose not to record audio of each weekly knitting group meeting. Rather, I carried a miniature notebook, in which I scribbled the date of each meeting, the group members in attendance, and important ideas or themes of discussion of the evening. Because this notebook was in my knitting bag, alongside cable needles and darning needles, I was able to be less conspicuous about the fact that I was taking notes. While I was not making attempts to be covert, I also did not want to make a spectacle and draw attention to myself as a researcher. I made an effort to only record notes two to three times in an evening, while maintaining more thorough records written by memory after the meetings. Though all members were fully aware of my status as a researcher, the practice allowed me to blend more easily into the group.

I participated fully in the group as a member. Participation entailed attendance at the weekly meetings on Friday evenings, in addition to engagement on the online message board. Threads of discussion on the message board range from "rants" (complaints about recent events or interactions) to roll call for Friday evening to the planning of events, such as a summer spa

retreat and a trip to the Southeastern Animal Fiber Fair (SAFF). Additionally, members tend to join together for mail order purchases in order to receive free shipping. When a member posted that she was making an order from an online yarn store, I chose to purchase some items I had been planning to buy. My incentive was not only the free shipping on the combined order; in addition, I intended to use this opportunity to more fully integrate myself into the group through a more extensive participation in all of the activities of the group. As time progressed, I became more and more engaged in the regular group activities. I attended a baby shower for one of our members and was invited to attend the weekend trip to SAFF. Although I couldn't make it, the knitters made me promise that I would come on a weekend trip with them at some point.

I entered the group as a researcher, but soon found myself a part of the group. No longer was I viewed as Gillian-the-researcher, but I was simply Gillian-the-knitter. Furthermore, I found myself more able to participate in discussions during the meetings. I learned the names of the core group members who attend meetings, as well as specific details which allowed me to better navigate conversations, such as the names of friends, family members, and significant others. There was a defining moment when I felt truly accepted by my informants. On the message board, as mentioned earlier, my fellow knitters were in the process of planning a summer spa retreat. A majority of the core group was present on this discussion thread, regardless of planned attendance. When they noticed that I had not participated in the thread, due to the fact that I was not planning to attend the event due to financial constraints, I received a public note from one of the fellow knitters who invited me to look over the details and join them. Also mentioned in the note was Ella, another member who had been in the core group in the past and who had not been in attendance in several weeks. To me, this served as evidence that I was

considered a part of the core group, after regular attendance at the meetings and participation on the message board.

While I immersed myself fully in my knitting group, I also strove to remain clear-headed about my purpose for attending the meetings. That is, I tried to maintain focus, both while in attendance and later in the evenings after the meetings, while I recorded data and tried to understand how my observations potentially serve to better clarify and answer research questions. I must admit that was sometimes difficult. As an “insider,” I find that I can sometimes get caught up in the activity’s meaning in my own life. By this I mean that these women quickly became acquaintances with whom I enjoy spending time, especially since our time together is spent knitting, and it would be easy to forget my role in the group and get swept away in the simple enjoyable act of participation.

There are limitations to participant observation. Because I was not a member of the group prior to entering as a researcher, I am not certain if there were shifts in group dynamics upon my entrance. Furthermore, with the intention of being reflexive, I am aware that my role as a member has influences on my research, particularly on the interactions which took place in my presence during the meeting and on the message board. My hopes are that my periodic unobtrusive observation allowed my informants to be as open and honest as possible.

O’Reilly phrases well the tensions of participant observation: “We need both to empathize and to sympathize, to balance destraction and estrangement. Participating enables the strange to become familiar; observing enables the familiar to appear strange” (2005). As both a participant and an observer, the researcher must maintain a fine balance of priorities. For instance, there were many nights where there was a fine balance between my observation of the

group and my participation in the group. Full integration into the group was a choice I made as a researcher to make both myself and my participants more comfortable. There were times, however, when I would find myself stepping back for a moment and realizing how the group must look to people who are not acquainted with us. To the average teahouse patron on a Friday night, a raucous group of women knitting is probably the last thing expected. I tried to maintain a somewhat etic view to balance out my emic understandings.

## **2.6 Focus Groups**

Focus group interviews were conducted with the core group of members, consisting of ten women who regularly attend the group, as well as two women who were a part of the core group, but have recently moved to other states. My original plan was to conduct the focus group interviews during the meetings. However, for the sake of ease of transcribing and to minimize my impact on the weekly meetings, I decided to conduct the focus groups online. This contributed to the low quality of information collected through this method. In addition, there may have been personal concerns that the information given was more public than if the groups had been conducted in-person during the knitting group meetings. While the questions were not private or invasive, this may have led to a more closed-off response from members. Secondly, because there was not the pressure of a person sitting in front of them asking questions, some of the knitters chose not to answer certain questions at all. While this was completely within their rights, as dictated by the consent form, this reticence may have been the result of busy lives during the week, consumed by work, family, and their outside lives. Had the groups been conducted in person, the response would undoubtedly have been greater.

Nonetheless, despite the low number of responses, there were some great conversations that were generated during the interview. The positive aspect of holding the focus groups online was that members did not have to be present at the knitting groups in order to answer questions. While I did not find that this invited responses from members who are not a portion of the core group, I did recognize that core members would participate in the answering of questions even when they were unable to attend group that week. In some cases, even, because they were unable to attend group that week, they were more likely to participate in focus group discussions as a way of maintaining the connection throughout the week.

I held four focus groups, with the time frame for each set of questions depending on the responses of the participants. I allowed time for the participants to answer as fully as possible, bouncing off of each other's ideas and discussing topics in entirety, before moving on to the next topic. Some members of the core group were less interested in participating in the focus groups than others, but I did not force it. Those who did participate often gave full enough answers that the focus groups were still an effective method for gathering information from the group. Furthermore, discussion was allowed to flow amongst the members; questions were not posed directly to specific members, unless in direct response or asking for clarification. The discussion flowed organically, naturally, and informally, and I feel that there was a sense of safety and openness among the group members. I would have liked to see more participation in the group, but understood that this method is not designed for use online and resulted in lower levels of interest from the group as a whole.

I had an interesting qualm with my final focus group. As with the others, I posted this question in the discussion board online. Although the discussion board is for the entirety of the Alphabet Knitters group, not limited to those knitters who I consider to be my core group,

previously I'd had no one outside of the core group participate. In fact, I had a hard time getting some of the core group to participate. I didn't expect to have any issues with someone outside of the core answering these questions.

However, in this final round, I had one group member who is outside of the core group answer. This particular member has conflicts two Fridays a month, but is planning on attending her first Friday night in the coming weeks. Therefore, she is simply not a member of the group I had planned for the focus groups. Additionally, my concerns were that she was not fully aware that her answering of these questions could be used for my thesis. Further, I had no consent form from her, as she was not a member who chose to participate in the completion of my survey. Despite the fact that she had some very interesting things to add, I felt that, ethically speaking, I could not use the ideas she provided.

## **2.7 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity was a particularly important method in this project, as I am a member of the group which I study. Because this is the case, I recognize that my presence as a researcher may have affected the ways in which respondents chose to think and talk about their personal beliefs associated with the knitting group. Furthermore, my own participation with this craft means that the way I view this topic and the questions that I formulate are a product of my involvement and may be formed differently by someone else. According to Karen O'Reilly, reflexivity involves the following: "thinking about what we read (and an awareness that ethnography is constructed); thinking about what we write and how; [and] acknowledging we are part of the world we study" (2005). We must accept and celebrate that doing ethnography is complicated, and "abandon attempts to provide neat, ordered, narrative accounts written in an authoritative tone" (O'Reilly

2005). A potential disadvantage of the reflexive ethnography, as noted by Graham Watson, is that the ethnography could take on a narcissistic quality (1987). I made an extensive effort to consider my impact on the research and to consider my own connections to the research material, but also to maintain a clear focus on the patterns within the community rather than on my own personal beliefs and assumptions.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Because ethnography is never straight-forward, there was some need to account for the unexpected and change direction slightly, such as in the case of conducting my focus groups online rather than in-person. Grounded theory and the cultural consensus model intersect to allow for a broad overview of my knitting group, while still leaving flexibility for the unanticipated. By maintaining honesty with myself as researcher and recognizing my own impact on the research, I hope to have gained a holistic understanding of the ways in which Stitch 'n' Bitch groups allow for knitters to construct communities and gain a sense of fulfillment through participation in a social leisure group.

## Chapter Three: Test Knitting / Literature Review & Theory

*“As a metaphor for understanding the web of unity connecting all life, and as a practice that puts one in touch with the simultaneous fragility and strength of life, knitting is both expansive and fertile” (Murphy 2002:vii).*

### 3.1 Introduction

An understanding of those who participate in knitting groups requires an understanding the history of knitting, friendship, leisure, and community. These topics intersect uniquely to affect the functions that knitting plays in the lives of those who participate in the activity, particularly those who attend a weekly knitting group.

The contemporary revival of knitting bees known as *Stitch ‘n’ Bitch* groups provides an interesting lens through which the importance of women’s sociality in the new millennium may be analyzed. By understanding the historical and social aspects of knitting, one can begin to look at today’s knitting groups and their intersections with a world which has become increasingly technological. Furthermore, the construction of identities and social groups gives meaning to the practices of the women who participate as members of *Stitch ‘n’ Bitch* groups. Female homosocial spaces can serve as important places for the formation of strong relationships between women. As women’s only spaces, there is an intimacy and agency associated with the bonds that they develop. Through the formation of female homosocial spaces, there is a possibility for resistance, particularly noticeable in the topics of conversation.

Foucault (1967) notes that we take many oppositions for granted. These oppositions are particularly important in the understanding of the knitting community. The knitting community actively questions these oppositions, creating blurred lines between public and private, between

leisure and work, and between resistance and acquiescence. Further, it is through these oppositions that the group finds a place as an important socio-cultural phenomenon for study.

### 3.2 Knitting throughout History

Although knitting is not inherently a social activity, it has frequently become one at various points in history. According to Anne Macdonald (1990), at one point in time, knitted goods were produced by male knitting guilds. However, after the Industrial Revolution, men took jobs working with machines and hand knitting was taken on as a woman's activity. Once delegated to women's work, the activity took on the connotation of leisure, a shift from the classification of labor, which was viewed as men's domain. Women shared their work by forming informal groups called knitting bees. Women found a dual purpose in these bees: time to socialize and time to get the domestic work done. Knitting also took on other implications. "In resistance to the Stamp Tax of 1765, colonial women boycotted English goods, resolving to clothe their families in 'naught but homespun.' Spinning and knitting bees became a mania, as women realized that their domestic pursuits had political implications" (Jackson 2009:9). The shift from knitting inside the home to knitting in public marked an important opportunity for women to be released from their confines in the domestic space.

The current resurgence in knitting amongst women and men, young and old, is often credited to Debbie Stoller, editor of *Bust* magazine, and author of the collection of books titled *Stitch 'n' Bitch*. Stoller collected contemporary interesting patterns to attract youthful knitters and make the point that knitting is only as grandmotherly as one allows it to be. The first collection has patterns for hats with cat ears, iPod cozies, sweaters with skulls and crossbones, and bikinis. The

second collection expands upon the first one, while the third focuses on patterns designed for men. A number of the knitters I interviewed mentioned *Stitch 'n' Bitch* as something that inspired them to learn to knit.

Today's knitters are often seen as participating in something which is nostalgic. In a society which has become increasingly technological, the creation of something by hand is rare and often expensive. "People are confused over where the craft of knitting fits into the image and role of women today. This confusion is increased in a society where information technology is paramount, the idea that a person is creating something by hand is 'quaint' and unusual" (Stalker 2000:2). In a world where over-consumption has become the norm and peoples' lives are increasingly busy, finding the time, energy, and motivation to create can be difficult, yet gratifying.

The contemporary market holds a high value for items which have these quaint qualities to which Stalker refers. Homemade items, found on market sites such as Etsy.com, sell for prices which would be considered high if found in Target or Wal-Mart. These high prices are justified by the time and skill required to create the items, the uniqueness of the items which are not mass-produced, and by the value attached to them for adhering to certain consumer movements, such as the handmade, green, organic, and local movements.

In her interview, Ava mentioned nostalgia for a simpler time, for the ability to live off of what you are able to make with your own hands. For several of my knitters, this feeling of simplicity attracts them to knitting, and perhaps even to the knitting group. The group serves as a collective sigh at the end of the week, an act of community which ties them together in the most basic of ways, as well as an activity which provides a product for them, something they

were able to make themselves without having to rely on the trends and mark-ups of department stores.

### **3.3 The Social Aspect of Knitting**

As Suzyn Jackson says in *Knit it Together* (2009), there is not one single reason people knit socially. They gather to knit for comfort, sometimes to make money, to feed their creative souls, to donate the product to charities, and to pass the time. Knitters are not a homogeneous group and there are as many reasons for knitting as there are knitters. What if knitting is an attractive pastime precisely because of the social interaction with other women which suddenly becomes a possibility? Sociality is the reason women cite for joining knitting groups, forming connections with people which are voluntary, informal, and personal, a common sociological definition for friendship. As Graham Allan notes, “Not only do our friends help to provide us with our sense of identity, but they also confirm our social worth” (1989:1). Through knitting groups, women are seeking settings in which they can be themselves, be social, and spend time on their pastime. This is indicative of the society in which these women are embedded: one which doesn’t allow for much leisure time or sociality unless it is scheduled.

Furthermore, “women gain power and a sense of value when they are able to transcend domestic limits, either by entering the men’s world or by creating a society unto themselves” (Rosaldo 1974:41). Is the knitting group a form of resistance against keeping the domestic in the privacy of one’s a home? Is it a way to bring together the desire to nurture, the desire to create and to take care of loved ones, while also participating in the social group in the public space? Can a knitting group serve to empower women?

Through the creation of knitting bees, commonly referred to as *Stitch 'N' Bitch* groups, women are able to take a momentary step away from their domestic chores and lives and create an identity group of their own, one which values hard-earned skill, practice, and social interaction. As Minahan and Cox note, “We may begin to understand the role of *Stitch 'n' Bitch* by considering it under a remedial theme as part of a movement away from the individualism of the Information Society to a more collective recreation that meets a need for a social connection” (2007:10). By forming friendships with women centered around a leisure activity which was once a domestic chore, women are creating public communities. This is particularly important when viewed in an urban context. The sentiment of the “lack of community” often noted in urban settings is a result of the increasingly de-centered city. And yet, in reaction to this sentiment, this feeling of rootlessness, women choose to reconstruct their own communities. Rather than spending time with family or co-workers, they seek to form strong friendships, sometimes to the point of fictive kinships, crossing demographic boundaries. Knitting bees, quilting bees, book clubs: these leisure activities all provide “a place for women to come together, relax, and be themselves, and talk about their families, and share their joys and their sad moments, too.” (Piercy and Cheek 2004:30) The social interaction is as much an attraction as the activity which brings the women together.

### **3.4 Decommunitization**

The feeling of disconnectedness among those living in an urban setting is something I choose to refer to as decommunitization. Decommunitization is the direct result of an increasingly global world, one fraught with extensive technologies, including the Internet, cell phones, and television, which allow us to conduct life with the click of a button from the comfort of our

homes: shop, visit with relatives (via video chat), watch television and movies, transfer funds from one bank account to the other. Our increasingly busy lives call for the ability to conduct these sorts of transactions from multiple places, wherever we happen to be when we have a free moment. We pay our bills while on the train, watch last night's television show while waiting in line, and conduct business meetings on the beach. And yet, we are left unfulfilled. Our fast-paced lifestyles are jam-packed with obligations, leaving us little room for social lives, let alone to seek out and form social relationships with people outside of the circles of our lives which already exist. As social creatures, we long for conversation, for encounters with people outside of our primary networks, for affinity groups with which we can identify ourselves (Kottak & Kozaitis 2008).

With the fear of strangers which has become intrinsic to the crowded urban setting, the result of overstimulation and impersonal interactions with strangers (Simmel 1903), we resort to technologies to help facilitate "personal" interactions. I use the term *personal* loosely, as the face-to-face aspect which previously defined personal is no longer necessary. Instead, we find Internet forums for our special interests, form bonds and relationships with other members, and begin to feel that structure, that sense of being "held" by the community. As discussed by Wirth (1938), voluntary associations are important for the forging of social ties in urban communities where anonymity is the norm. In an urban setting, anonymity is, without a doubt, the norm. One can carry on throughout an entire week without seeing the same people twice outside of work and home environments. No longer do we shop at the market stalls, gathering our fruits and vegetables from the person who grew them, all while forming a relationship with that person. Instead, we shop at large grocery stores, bathing ourselves in the cool, sterile air while we pick over food that has been shipped from across the country, rarely recognizing the same cashier

more than a handful of times. No longer do we get to know our neighbors, forming relationships, sharing stories about friends and family, offering sugar and milk when needed. Instead, we live in high-rise apartment buildings, avoiding our neighbors eyes in the hallways, closing the door and effectively shutting out the world. When we milk or sugar, we go to the store; rarely do we even think to borrow a cup of sugar anymore. The reality is that we have come to see our neighbors not as friends, but as co-occupants of the same physical space. They are the anonymous sounds on the other side of the wall. They are the anonymous voices talking in the hallway. They are the people in the elevator. But they are no longer a social support system for individuals or families.

Sometimes these relationships begin online and move into real life. Relationships may be formed in different ways, through forums and avatars rather than face-to-face interaction, but there remains the possibility for these relationships to grow and morph into similar social networks. Online forums facilitate conversation about daily life, which grows into close relationships which may then be enacted in real-life as well as online. The Alphabet Knitters group provides an excellent ethnographic example of one way this can occur.

The members of the Alphabet Knitters met online, through an Internet forum for knitters called *Ravelry*. The two founding members were poking around an Atlanta-based discussion board, looking for knitting meet-ups in their areas. When they found each other, they decided to form a knitting group. They publicized the group on the Atlanta board, which is how other members came to join. As the group grew, they realized that they needed a board of their own in order to keep track of their conversations, so they created a discussion board for the Alphabet Knitters.

In this case, then, the Internet, specifically this forum, facilitated the meeting of two knitters who were seeking to form an in-person group. Through the continued use of the Internet to coordinate future meetings, they attracted more knitters and grew in number. The Alphabet Knitters are a group which Robert Putnam (2000) might refer to as a bridging form of social capital. In other words, the group is responsible for social connections made amongst a heterogeneous group of people. On the other hand is bonding capital, which is responsible for social connections between homogenous groups of people. There are positive and negative aspects of both types.

Now, the Alphabet Knitters have grown familiar with each other's families, know each others' birthdays, talk about television shows they enjoy, and take trips together. From women who would perhaps never have met, or only would have met in passing, they grew into a group, a community. They struck back against the urban disconnect, the decommunitization of life in a large urban hub, and found others with whom to share this hobby, this part of their lives important enough to make them reach out to strangers, albeit in a way that had a safety net: online. Across the globe, the stories are the same. Women and men who seek to have others, in real life, to talk and knit with, to share themselves with, have formed *Stitch 'N' Bitch* groups. These groups may start with one's own personal networks, but my observations indicate that they are often facilitated by a component of the Internet: the forum, the place which simulates the community. Within these routines, within these social groups, we are able to feel a part of a community larger than our own personal social networks.

A particularly important aspect of knitting groups is that the women seek out and construct these groups themselves. Use of the Internet facilitates communication among women who share interests and values. People who have never met in person form friendships with others

online, with whom they share intimate details about their lives, work, and families. The women who began the knitting group which I am researching, and my unit of study, longed for someone with whom to share their passion of knitting. Although they could have easily joined one of the already established knitting groups in Atlanta, they say they didn't feel particularly welcomed into those groups, as a result of not attending frequently enough to get to know the group members. In turn, they make an effort for their own group to be open and welcoming to newcomers. For Marjorie, a move from Washington, D.C. to Hawaii found her without a job, friends, or scheduled activities, and she "saw there was this hole in my life" and decided to join a knitting group. In filling the unscheduled time in her life with a leisure group, Marjorie unexpectedly formed close friendships with several of the members as well, creating for herself a base of people she could turn to. They would go out for dinner and coffee, go yarn shopping, go to the beach, and enjoy wine and movies at each others' homes. Certain people spent more time with her than others; one member would go sea kayaking and paddle-boarding with her, while another would join her on thrifting adventures. Marjorie notes the importance of her knitting friends with helping her to become more "at home" in a culture that was different than the one she was used to. They keep in contact now through phone calls and emails. They are not just her knitting buddies, but became her close girlfriends.

Robert Putnam (2000) makes a connection between the decline of participation in public organizations with the decline in informal socialization. As we are becoming less likely to participate in civic organizations, we are also less likely to form and maintain social bonds in our neighborhoods. Americans "are now less likely than in 1975 to eat dinner with their families, have friends over to eat or play cards, and they are less likely to go to bars or engage in group sports" (Muncy & Muncy 2001). Hence, the reason Putnam titled his book *Bowling Alone*

(2000): Americans are no longer interested in joining bowling leagues, but are instead choosing to bowl by themselves. How, though, would Putnam take into consideration Internet communities? Muncy and Muncy discuss that there is some difficulty amongst members of Internet groups in the sense that “they find it harder to reach consensus and feel less solidarity with one another” (2001). While there are clear benefits to being a member of Internet groups, there is sometimes a lack of civility that would be expected from interactions occurring face-to-face. Further, different social rules in the online world may result in decreased levels of reciprocity (Muncy & Muncy 2001). This is important because reciprocity is inextricably linked with social connectedness.

I argue, however, that the online formation of the SJK was particularly helpful in the forming of social bonds and solidarity. Because the SJK are formed online but also meet in person, they are an excellent example of social capital. By using the Internet to facilitate these face-to-face interactions and connections, they are bridging the social gap via technology, and are then able to increase their social trust and maintain personal contact with people outside of their daily lives.

Furthermore, social connectedness is a key component of the group and the reason the group maintains such importance to them. Through the group, they are forming a social network for socialization, but also for support. For small, newlywed couples who are living in an urban setting away from their primary support group, their families, finding that secondary support group is essential to their emotional well-being. Kim and Joe are an interesting example of this. When Joe had a severe case of kidney stones on Christmas Eve and Kim was trying to balance care for an infant and for her ill husband without her family in the area, her first instinct was to contact her knitters. She knew that she could call several of them at 2 am for help, and they

would be there for her. This trust in the other members of the group might come as a surprise to non-members. After all, a leisure group like a knitting group doesn't seem like the first place someone would turn in a time of crisis. And yet, the solid relationships which are formed are built upon a trust and respect which bonds the members in a way which is almost a surrogate to family.

Putnam's work does not go without critique. Carl Boggs (2001) notes that Putnam's failure to reflect on expanding social movements during the 1960s leaves his argument that social capital deteriorated without a whole lot of water. Think about "thousands of self-help and new-age groups, religious movements, and community organizations (resource centers, clinics, bookstores, periodicals, public interest groups, tenants associations, and so forth) often spawned by the larger movements," says Boggs (2001). These are all modes of building social capital, but modes that Putnam doesn't consider.

Further, Putnam's views of the urban as decommunitized lead to anti-urban sentiments and an idealization of the suburban. The question of authenticity comes into play, as well, as we begin to question what is a worthy and authentic lifestyle. If, as Putnam (2000) says, we are living a life of disconnect, how do we come to view the relationships that we've formed? How can we live a full life? If we romanticize the rural as a more authentic way of living, a more connected, close-knit past, how can we find pleasure within the contemporary lifestyles we lead? We must take into consideration the reality of rural settings, which is the lack of privacy. Within a rural setting, a knitting group such as the one that I research would not have the freedom to have the personal conversations the women in the Alphabet Knitters have, as they would be constrained by their personal roles in a tightly woven social network, lack of privacy, and concern with personal obligation to the community.

### 3.5 Leisure as Resistance

Women's organization of leisure groups can be a strategy of resistance to power structures of social institutions. For women who have families and careers, balancing those demands and finding time for leisure can be particularly difficult. As Shaw says, "The specific gendered constraints on women's leisure mean that simply claiming entitlement to personal or self-determined leisure can be seen to represent a form of resistance against the sometimes constraining roles of wife, mother, or girlfriend" (2005:2). When one's choice of leisure activity is something which is quiet and portable, many are relegated to throwing a project into their purse for those few moments in the day when they find themselves without something to do: waiting in line, sitting in traffic, in the waiting room at the doctor's office. Further, because the activity can be done solo, carving out time specifically for the purpose of that activity is difficult: the timer for the oven goes off; a child needs help with homework; the laundry needs to be folded. In Green's words, "Time synchronization and time fragmentation dominate most women's lives, which has led to them taking 'snatched' spaces for leisure and enjoyment, rather than planned activities" (1998:171). By removing themselves from the domestic setting and participating in the activity in a social group removed from the home and the family, these women are able to put time and effort into their projects, as well as stepping back from their lives for a few hours and allowing themselves a deep breath. Women in my study knitting group claim that the social time is wonderful, but so is the opportunity to have someone else make them dinner and bring them tea and dessert. In a sense, it is this stepping back, this removal from the domestic setting which details their resistance.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) made particularly important contributions with her research on the resistance of Bedouin women, in which her concern was with tracing social power through

instances of resistance. An important distinction Abu-Lughod makes is that, although resistance is typically associated with the *powerless*, resistance is indicative of having some source of informal power. She also makes a distinction between resistance on a larger scale and everyday resistance. This distinction is evident, for example, in the difference of a peasant revolution and Abu-Lughod's women who resist through the singing of songs that vocalize objections to marrying certain men. My research focuses on the everyday resistance of women who knit. Abu-Lughod's research is particularly useful in that it focuses on women's talk as an important place of resistance. This is tied to my research, as women's talk during knitting groups exemplifies the ways in which leisure can be tied with resistance.

Most knitting groups are comprised by women predominantly, and my research group is not an exception. As such, the group becomes an important place to analyze and understand women's talk. For Eileen Green, gender as a social construct can be analyzed more clearly when one takes into consideration the fact that "although the majority of women obviously spend a great deal of time developing and maintaining friendships and other types of close relationships with both men and women, it is often within women-only contexts that specific opportunities for resistance to gender stereotyped roles and images occur" (1998:176). Homosocial spaces allow for resistance in ways that may be more constrained in a heterosocial space.

While topics are not always so blatantly sexual, bawdy jokes find their way in more often than not. Women who are professionals and mothers use this opportunity to uncensor themselves. As a women's group, the space is a safe place for the women to talk about topics which they may not discuss otherwise. Green argues, "Women-only company affords women the chance to 'let their hair down' and 'behave badly', i.e. outside the limits of 'normal, acceptable, womanly behavior'" (Green 1998:181). Interestingly, all of my interviewees were

asked what the typical threads of conversation tended to revolve around. Most did not mention sex as a common theme, and yet, when talking about the group dynamics or the group's sense of humor, sexual jokes were often referenced as something to which new members may have a difficult time adjusting.

Knitting is a leisure activity which not only gives them time for relaxation and the enjoyment of the process, but it is also, in a sense, a ticket to an all-girls' club, one where they are able to let loose for a few hours at the end of a tiresome week. The Friday night gatherings become somewhat of a release then, a time when the daily pressures of social roles and obligations can be shrugged off, and the members can take comfort in spending purely social time with women who are their friends.

### **3.6 Knitting and Information Technology**

Kerry Wills notes the importance of the Internet in the current explosion and popularity of knitting; she writes, "It would be difficult to overstate the influence the Internet has on the popularity of knitting" (2007:85). And yet, Wills' work preceded the online community called *Ravelry*, perhaps the largest knitting community online, with 485,165 users as of October 24, 2009 (<http://www.Ravelry.com>). For women who don't know anyone else who knits in their already established group of friends and family, the online community is a significant resource. Discussion boards allow for open dialogue about patterns, yarns, tools, politics... whatever one is interested in talking about can be found here. *Stitch 'n' Bitch* groups such as the one that I am researching have their own group and maintain conversation throughout the week, despite not seeing each other regularly outside of the weekly meeting.

As technology diffuses across the world, the Internet becomes a focal point which facilitates contact between crafters worldwide (Minahan and Cox 2007). Although the popularity of knitting has waxed and waned consistently throughout history, information technology has fueled this recent boom, allowing knitters to organize, connect, share resources, and form communities. Without a doubt, technology is playing an important role in the sustainability of this most recent increase in popularity of knitting.

### **3.7 Female Homosocial Spaces**

Female friendships are frequently trivialized by the hegemonic heterosexual norms. And yet, females enjoy a homosocial fluidity and intimacy that heterosexual males are not allowed, due to the social fears associated with appearing to be homosexual. Female homosocial spaces give women agency, allowing them to construct close relationships with women who are outside of their traditional networks. For the women in my knitting group, this is one of the main attractions of the group. Their social networks are fairly rigid, dictated by their lifestyles and by how busy they are. For many of the women in my group, their days are taken over by jobs, families, and significant others. The weekly Stitch 'n' Bitch group serves as a way for them to maintain friendships with people from outside of these networks. Also important to note is the online aspect of this group. Through online communications, they are able to keep in touch with each other and maintain these friendships even in weeks where they are unable to make it to the group. As such, there is no sense of having skipped a beat; the other members always know who is planning on showing up to Friday's meeting and the major goings-on for the core members.

Foucault discusses the ways in which women's bodies are closely tied with intimate friendships: "women do each other's hair, help each other with make up, dress each other. Women have had access to the bodies of other women: they put their arms around each other, kiss each other" (Foucault 1997:139). And yet, while I do not deny that bodily access to other women is not as restricted as with men, I have not seen this to be of particular importance to my study of the Alphabet Knitters. However, topics of conversation do tend to revolve around the body. The close relationships are formed around the sharing of intimate personal information: discussions about breast feeding, pregnancy, and periods. Although the bodily affection is not applicable for this particular group, as the group has a very low-level of bodily contact, the importance of the body is stressed through the conversational threads which weave these women's lives together.

Further, conversations about bawdy and sexual topics constitute a form of resistance. When in the public eye without the bonds of their homosocial space, women feel the pull to censor themselves, maintaining a feminine presence within a world which is dominated by the masculine. "In the homosocial female space, language and body could be sexually overt; stepping into the heterosocial world of modernity was coterminous with the construction of a disciplined female language and body" (Naghibi 2007:110). In other words, in an all-female space, even one which is held in public, within what is a heterosocial space (the public teahouse) the women are able to free themselves from the shackles of appropriateness to which they are typically bound. In the event of a male presence at the knitting group, which is typically in the form of a visiting significant other, there is a sense of disruption. The women, although stronger in the group than alone, are no longer free to make crude comments about their sex lives or the men in their lives. The men visiting the group, on the other hand, are visibly uncomfortable.

There is always the sense that they are disrupting something, interrupting the emotional and physical space of female bonding (Naghibi 2007:121). Further, there may be a sense of jealousy. For heterosexual men, who are unable to have such close, intimate relationships, who are without the sense of community and support that such a group provides for the women who are participants, there may be a rather sudden recognition as to the ways that expectations for male sociality are different from female sociality. “Man’s body has been forbidden to other men in a much more drastic way” (Foucault 1997:139). Only in the most necessary of times are men’s lives so intertwined in the way that women’s lives are, and typically that is a time of war. The negative association with this need for “life between men”, the association with wartime, may lead to what is a negative association to *any* life between men, period. For women, close friendships with other women are allowable, accepted, and even expected. For men in western societies, however, close friendships with other men are seen as abnormal, if not suspicious. When there is a true bond and friendship indicative of intimacy, this closeness becomes much more disturbing than a sexual act between men (Foucault 1997).

Some of the women in the group enjoy friendships which appear to be close enough to almost be considered fictive kin. In one case in particular, a woman who is about 40 years old is quite close with a younger woman who is 23 years old. This friendship takes on a very mother-daughter quality. The women often meet halfway between their offices for lunch during the week, and when the younger woman was dealing with a difficult break-up, the older woman helped talk through her feelings with her and gave her advice based on situations she had been through. Although this is not necessarily limited to a mother-daughter relationship, the two seem to have a familial bond which is intimate in a way that is unlike a majority of the group relationships. Foucault might refer to this deep bond as one of these “dense, bright, marvelous

loves and affections” (1997:139). The intimacy of these relationships is familial, a fictive kinship, as opposed to homoerotic. Same-sex love is not automatically homosexual, which I think is Foucault’s point. When there is a closer, intimate friendship, when the sexual act is no longer the main focus, homosexuality is no longer interesting. Rather, a whole new realm of relationships is opened up. “It cannot be assumed...that because it probably had no genital expression, this passion was not deep and intense” (Faderman 135). Same-sex love is not necessarily expressed through sexuality, but through passion, intimacy, and friendship.

Using Foucault’s ideas about homosocial relationships to examine the Alphabet Knitters allows for new ideas and threads to emerge in the group analysis. Women’s homosocial knitting groups provide an interesting lens through which to scrutinize the interplay of power and resistance, the content of women’s conversation, and the formation of women’s-only communities. The Alphabet Knitters is an important example of the ways in which a female homosocial group can provide for women a play for resistance to the masculine-dominated hegemonic norms of society through collective participation in a public activity which is so often considered domestic, and thus private. Further, through the examination of women’s talk in the female homosocial space, a broader understanding of the role and function of the group in the women’s lives emerges.

## **Chapter Four: Knit One, Purl One / Ethnography**

### **4.1 Introduction**

I have been a member of the online knitting group for the Alphabet Knitters since October 2008 and began attending meetings in February 2009. As such, my preliminary findings are based predominantly on my observations and the qualitative data that I have gathered from the online group interactions and focus groups. Based on the extensive amount of time I have spent getting to know these women, both online and face-to-face, I have gained a fundamental knowledge about their experiences within and views of the knitting community.

### **4.2 Knitter Profiles**

#### **Katie**

Katie is a 36 year old Canadian transplant whose household consists of her husband Ray, and her 4 year old. Katie is a pastor and works part-time at a retail store. Katie started knitting about six years ago, in her early 30s. She'd learned the very basics when in a treatment facility for depression in her mid 20s, but it stuck when she was pregnant with her first child, whom she lost in a miscarriage. "We were living in a small town in rural North Carolina where I felt so alone in my sorrow, which was magnified by my being a female pastor and also married to a pastor. It was then that knitting became an escape."

These days, Katie knits wherever and whenever she can: in bed, in the living room, in the car when she's early for work or appointments, during concerts and church meetings. She sought a group where she could knit and be with people who loved the craft as much as she does. "I also really wanted a place where I could 'let my hair down' a bit and not have to be perfect as

many expect me to be as a pastor.” For Katie, knitting group allows her to assume an identity where there are no expectations, very unlike the pressures related to her job. Although one of her church members also attends the group, there is an understanding that this is a place where she is allowed to be more relaxed than in her everyday interactions with her church members. She joined the group on *Ravelry*, but didn’t participate for a few months, as she was nervous how she would be received because of her life as a pastor. She recalls feeling accepted and at home with the group the first night, and couldn’t wait to go back.

Katie’s favorite aspects of the group are “the community and the true sense of compassion the group has for one another.” When asked what she would change if she were given the ability, she mentioned private links within the *Ravelry* forum, so that conversations were not public to those who were not members of the group. I suspect that this desire again ties back into Katie’s life as a pastor, and shows that she feels restricted in the public community on *Ravelry*, as her church members could potentially be fellow members.

For Katie, the group provides “knitting techniques, laughter, friendship, an escape from the demands of everyday life, a sounding board, support, encouragement, and oh, did I mention laughter?” For someone who spends as much as 60 hours a week as a pastor and averages 15 hours a week, “one thing remains true almost every week...I got to knit night on Fridays.” When she is unable to attend knitting night, “I feel as if I’m missing a very important part of my life...and in many ways I grieve that loss of time with my knitting buddies and friends.”

Katie’s life as a pastor requires that she make others feel welcome and comfortable, but she isn’t always afforded the same freedom to just be herself. When Katie first joined the group, she often apologized for small things, like bringing her son, or for the times that she was unable

to attend the group. As she's become more fully integrated into the group, she recognizes that the other women are her friends: without judgment and without expectations. At the knitting group, she is free to be herself.

### **Irene**

Irene is a 30 year old Caucasian woman whose household consists of her husband, Thomas, and her 6 month old daughter, Kate Clementine. When I first met Irene, she worked at the Department of Family and Children Services in metro Atlanta. She officially left her position there after giving birth to her daughter and is now a stay-at-home mother. Her typical day revolves around her daughter.

Irene had been thinking about learning to knit while her father was ill for a year and a half with cancer. After he passed away, she picked up Debbie Stoller's *Stitch 'n' Bitch* and taught herself to knit, deciphering the diagrams with help from her technical-minded husband. She spent a full year knitting into the back loop, a frequent beginners' mistake resulting in twisted stitches, but eventually realized her error and adjusted her knitting accordingly. She attributes her desire for knitting to the idea of having a usable end product, "which is really funny to me now because I don't really wear much of my knitting at all."

Irene spends her "downtime" during the week knitting, whether it's in front of the television, on the floor with her daughter, or sitting outside. "I've noticed lately, I don't even pull it out much at knit night even, like when I do go, because I'm just like, talk to me! I don't want to knit, I want to socialize. It's become more important for me to just be there." She joined the knitting group because she wasn't sure how to meet new people and her husband suggested meeting people with similar interests. After joining a different group and not connecting with

the sole member who showed up the night she attended, who interestingly is now a member of SJK as well, Irene found this group of knitters who have become her friends. For her, the group provides friendship, stress relief, an escape, and scheduled time to knit. Of weeks where she sometimes just wants to stay home on a Friday night, she said, “It’s kind of like exercise, you might not want to do it at first, but once you get there and go in, you’ll feel better and afterwards you’ll be really glad you went.”

Irene describes the group as conducive to the more outgoing knitters. “If you’re really shy and you need somebody to chat you up to get you started [talking], that might not be a good fit... We try, but you’ve got to put yourself out there a little more.” She also notes that the group isn’t “prim and proper:” bad language and sexual stories and jokes are common in this group, and may be offensive to someone who is less tolerant of these things. Further, the group shares a desire to support local, ethical businesses, as well as “seating that’s good, lighting, actual food, not just drinks....” Many of the groups’ moves from past locations have been the result of discomfort regarding business practices that the group felt they could not support.

Since giving birth to her daughter, Irene’s attendance at knitting nights has been kind of hit-or-miss. Some nights she’s too tired to make it, while others she chooses to spend time with her husband. There are also times where she brings Kate and everyone takes turns passing her around. Irene’s husband gets time to focus on his schoolwork that way. There have been times where Irene has felt like she missed a lot of stories and felt out-of-the loop after not making a Friday night knitting group. In one instance, Irene and Kate had a rough day and when her husband got home from work, he wasn’t up to watching Kate on his own, so they collectively decided that Irene would miss her meeting. After looking forward to it all day, Irene admits she broke down in tears. Knitting nights are one of the only things that get Irene out of the house

these days, although she also takes part in a Mommy group called *My Mom Picked My Friends*. Although there was some talk about starting a Mommy knitting spin-off of our group, a discussion which Irene was a part of, the group never came together.

Irene first learned to knit after her father became ill, and remembers walking through Wal-mart, looking for a gift for him, and realizing that there was nothing in the store that she wanted, needed, or that would fix the situation. For her, she thought that knitting was a way that she could show him how much he meant to her, through the actions that she took to create something just for him. She didn't learn to knit until after he had passed away, but has since used knitting as a way to touch people who are in tough situations. "Knowing that I'm making them something that will literally keep them warm when they're cold, that will bring them comfort in a very literal sense, really makes me happy." Many of Irene's creations are practical and will give warmth, comfort, or protection.

Irene found *Ravelry* through a famous knitting blog, which facilitated her connection with the SJK group. She remembers her first time with the group as a bit awkward, and remembers feeling a bit anxious. She describes it like a first date, knowing that she would be a part of the group if she stuck it out and kept coming. When she first felt she was truly a part of the group, she'd had a really bad day at work, and forced herself to go to the knitting group. She came away that night feeling like she'd found people who were willing to listen to her and support her.

That support is her favorite aspect of being a part of the group. She appreciates having women in her life who she knows she can trust, "who aren't just trying to climb the ladder and step all over me in the meantime." The only family she has in Atlanta is her in-laws, with whom

who she isn't always on the best of terms, and so having a network of people she trusts is invaluable. When her husband had kidney stones at 2 a.m. on Christmas Eve, the knitting group members were the first people that she thought to call for help.

Irene is concerned that the group is getting to the point where it may grow to be too large and unwieldy for the space and for personal conversations. She'd like the group to remain the size that it is now, but would also like to see the café take more actions to reserve the space we knit in on Friday nights. To Irene, our loyalty is dependent upon the loyalty of the business we are helping to support. As long as the café remains the best place for our group to meet, we will continue to be there on Friday nights.

### **Betsy**

Betsy is a 32 year old Caucasian woman who lives with her husband and works as a word processor in a legal setting. She first learned to knit about 8 years ago, knitting a scarf and then putting her needles away for several years. About 2.5 years ago, the desire to have a creative outlet led her to pick up the needles again. Handicraft was new for her, but "my mom actually did a lot of sewing and English smocking...I was kind of always interested in handicraft, textiles type stuff, but just never picked up any of it." Her inspiration to continue to knit comes from "the way it feels. Not just the tactile aspect of the yarn itself, just the feeling of turning a ball of string into something I can wear or use...it's a sense of accomplishment."

Betsy occupies time knitting at home, on the MARTA train, at knit night, and in the car. She claims now that she participates in the craft, she's "a lot more cognizant myself of other people knitting and crocheting." She also notes that she frequently gets comments from men while knitting in public, saying that their mother or grandmother used to knit.

For Betsy, joining a knitting group meant expanding her circle of friends. She was looking for people who could also help her learn more, people to serve as a resource when she gets stuck with new techniques. The group serves as comic relief for her, as well as friends to vent to, particularly with regards to her husband. “Most of my other friends outside of the knitting group are also friends with my husband. So this is kind of my group of women that I don’t feel guilty venting about my husband to, because I know it’s not going to get back to him and I know they’re not going to feel conflicted.” She also describes the group as a place where she feels comfortable saying things she felt she couldn’t say to even her therapist. “With this group, somehow, I feel like there’s no judgment.” Missing a knit night makes her feel like she hasn’t had her dose of fun. Some of that fun is in the jokes that are shared. New members need an open mind “because we are kind of raunchy and borderline offensive at times.” Outside of her husband, spending time with her other friends means reigning in the “crude and silly.” With this group, she doesn’t have to do that. When Betsy first joined the knitting group, one member stuck out to her. “I was expecting all these, I don’t know, I guess like soccer mom types, people with kids, and maybe a few older women. But I didn’t expect somebody my age that had tattoos and piercings...it was a little bit odd, in a good way!”

Betsy also does trivia each week and is a member of a book club with a group of friends. She also has a group of women, friends from college and spouses of friends from college, who get together for a girls’ day. And yet, she doesn’t feel like the other groups provide for her what the knitting group provides. “They’re definitely not interchangeable. I feel like with the book club, I feel guilty if I haven’t read the book or haven’t finished the book by the time of the next meeting. And so there’s a certain stress level involved with that, even though I know they don’t

really care... Whereas with the knitting group, they don't care, I don't even have to bring knitting with me. It could be months since I've picked up a project, and whatever."

When talking about the changes in location the group has made in the past, she notes that supporting local businesses is important to the group. "We could've started going to a Starbucks or a Barnes & Noble. I know there are other groups that do that, and that's fine, but for us, and I'm not sure how it actually evolved this way, but I think it's become one of our core principles to patronize family-run local businesses, small businesses, instead of large chains."

*Ravelry* plays an important role in the group because it allows the members to keep from getting overwhelmed and to be able to keep up with the goings on of "each others' lives without having to condense it all into a few hours once a week." With the group gradually growing larger, there is a possibility that it will become too big for the members to keep up with each other and for the space we currently take over in the teahouse. When this happens, Betsy would like "to see it be kind of a natural movement, that, this space where everyone normally sits is just full and overflowing, let's a few of us move over here and keep it up...but still keep everyone together on *Ravelry*."

### **Ava**

Ava is a 34 year old who identifies herself as "white toast." She lives alone with her cat and is currently employed as a graphic designer. She's been knitting for 5 years, since she was 29 years old, and learned using books and the internet with the help of some friends. When she learned to knit, she was primarily a weaver, and was attracted to the portability of knitting. "You can't carry a loom in your pocket, and you can carry knitting needles in your pocket." The

online knitting magazine Knitty also played a role, as it publishes well-written patterns for attractive designs.

These days, Ava knits at knit night, at home while watching TV, and in her car before work. She used to work for a “time nazi” and would arrive 30 minutes early, to ensure that she wasn’t late, and then spend the extra time in her car knitting without interruptions. When it’s warmer, she also knits in her car on lunch break. “I used to knit in the building, and had so many people walk up to me and start asking me questions. And usually, at that point in time, I want to be left alone. And I got tired of people walking up and talking to me, so I would knit in my car at lunch. But right now, it’s a little cold!” Ava’s inspiration to continue to knit comes from the enjoyment of creating something, especially something that’s impressive to other people. She also notes that it is, at times, meditative for her.

Ava joined the knitting group in April 2008, seeking “people to talk to about knitting” and help with learning new techniques. She considers the other group members to be her mentors, but also describes them as friends, confidants, and play dates. Although she came for the friendships, she acknowledges that there may be others who feel differently. “I’m sure there are people who don’t come for the friendship aspect, but come for the venting aspect, come to blow off steam...I use the rant thread for that so that no one has to hear me belly aching!” Ava sees some of the members who she is closer with and knows well outside of knitting group, and has had dinner with Allison’s family in the past. When talking about the other members outside of the group, she refers to them as “my knitters.”

Friday night knitting group provides stability for Ava. Although there are no official criteria for joining the group, an open mind is important. “I think part of why I like the knitting

group is that we all do get along really well, I think, and have similar sense of what's fun, what's not, what's good, what's wrong...so that I can smack Allison on the ass in public and everybody laughs about it. You don't do that with people you don't get real intimate or familiar with." She also recognizes that the group won't feel welcoming to everyone, no matter how hard they try. "I think we do try to make people feel welcome, but if you don't feel like you fit in, it doesn't matter how welcome we make you feel." A past member left the group, and Ava feels that she was incompatible with the other members because of personality differences. "You know how in Fight Club, she says we're all just waiting for our turn to start talking? That's true, I think...maybe it shouldn't be, but I think it is for a lot of people. It's okay if you do it once in a while, but not all the time." To Ava, the group is not a place for one person to stand out, but for the members to share the spotlight and allow the focus to be the sociality.

### **Sarah**

Sarah is the youngest core member of the group. She's 23 years old and currently lives with her boyfriend Jacob. She is also probably the member who is most intertwined in the other members' lives, as fellow member Irene is her landlord, and her boss is member Allison's husband.

Sarah first learned to knit at 4 years old when one of her grandmothers taught her. She doesn't remember learning to knit, but only knows that she did it when she was very young, and then picked it back up at around 10 years old and simply knew what to do. Sarah now knits everywhere and anywhere: at home, work, in traffic, on Fridays, waiting in lines, during oil changes. She always has a project with her. She is also unique in her skill, as she rarely looks at her knitting, despite knitting difficult lace patterns that would trip up an experienced knitter

paying close attention. She bolstered this skill as a kid, when, living with her father and step-mother, she was sent to bed at 7 pm and not allowed to leave her room until 7 am. She was supposed to be sleeping, so she was unable to turn her lights on in her bedroom. As such, she taught herself to knit in the darkness.

She first joined the knitting group after a 3,000 mile move from Oregon to Atlanta. After having to leave college due to financial aid issues, she found herself living back at home with her mother. At the time, she and her boyfriend were in a long distance relationship. Once they were able to make it feasible for her to make the move, she did. She found that she grew tired of the fact that Michael doesn't care about her knitting, and searched for a group so that she had someone to appreciate the craft. After trying out the group that meets at Knitch, she found that it just didn't click for her. She hunted around on *Ravelry* a bit, found the SJK group that met at a location with which she was familiar, and started attending. At first, she was shy, but the group was smaller at that point, consisting of about 4 or 5 people, and she kept coming back.

Now, some of the knitting group members are very close friends, "the kind of people that I would call at 2 o'clock in the morning in an emergency, that kind of friend." Sarah spends quite a bit of time with the other members outside of the group, "going to yarn shops, sometimes meeting here to just sit and chat. Emily and I will go to fabric stores and things like that sometimes." For Sarah, the main thing the group provides for her is laughter. "I don't laugh very much in my normal daily life. And I do a lot with the knitting group." Also, now that her boyfriend is unemployed, he's home a lot. Other nights of the week, she finds that she feels a bit guilty telling him that she's going out for the night, but "Friday night is my one night, Friday night I get to go out."

Being a knitter is a criteria for joining the group, although there have been some members who have crocheted or who haven't brought along their knitting. Sarah notes that "we have a brand of humor that can be offensive to some people and I think you kind of have to be okay with that. If you're not okay with it, we're probably not going to kick you out, but you might kick yourself out, you know?" Conversation is very fluid, and the group navigates through different topics with ease. She notes that there are a couple of different camps of sci fi fans within the group, but that sci fi is something that most of the group shares as an interest.

Her favorite aspect of the group is the friendships that she's formed. "It's the friends that I have that I can go hang out with and do things with other places and that I have people that I can turn to and rely on." She recognizes that the group is growing in membership, and she sometimes wishes that we could go back to the smaller group of 6 or 7 people; she understands that she cannot pick and choose who she would want to come and who she would want to leave out. Ideally, though, she'd like to see a second night form. She would enjoy doing two nights a week and thinks that some people would choose to come only one of those nights; yet, the group itself would be preserved.

During a typical week, Sarah's life is consumed mostly by work. "I'm a very boring person!" She attends knitting nights more regularly than most other members, and can't remember the last one she missed. She notes, however, that she would be seriously disappointed to miss one. "I look forward to it all week. So if it's not there at the end of my week, it sucks." She doesn't have other social groups that provide for her a recreational or an emotional outlet.

When asked about what inspires her to continue to knit, Sarah responds that she doesn't know how not to knit. "Honestly, I'm doing it right now without even thinking about it, because

it's just what my hands naturally do.” And watching her, you can see that the movements are fluid, without a hitch, without the need to stop and think about what to do next. Despite being the youngest member of the group, Sarah has been knitting the longest of the members I interviewed. She estimates that she spends about 25 to 30 hours each week knitting. She finds the differences in time spent on the craft to be fascinating. Some knit as much as she does, while others knit only once a week, on Fridays with the group. “It’s not the knitting that brings us together as a group. I mean, it’s knitting that brings people here, but it’s not the knitting that makes this group click.” Sarah recognizes, then, that the group is about more than just the activity which brings the members together. There is a larger function of the group in the members’ lives, one of sociality, friendship, and support.

### **Marjorie**

Marjorie is a 49 year old Caucasian woman who lives with her husband and is a math teacher. She also tutors students with identified learning disabilities. Marjorie comes “from a family of women who crochet, embroider, and quilt.” Spending money on cable knit and fair isle wool sweaters over the years made knitting seem like a very useful craft. After purchasing a lot of old aluminum knitting needles from a yard sale in 1995, Marjorie was a step closer. Then, when Marjorie was in her late 30s, she and a coworker decided to teach themselves to knit. They were both crafty, and did a lot of sewing, candlemaking, and basketry with their students. As they are both left-handed, they found a book with directions and pictures catered to left-handed learners. Marjorie struggled a bit, but eventually decided to sit up all night and work at it until it clicked. She mainly made potholders and washcloths until she was inspired after hearing Debbie Stoller speak in 2003 at her local yarn store. Then, she says, her knitting really took off. Now,

Marjorie finds that she doesn't often leave her home without a knitting project tucked in her bag. She knits at home, watching television, in public, at work during meetings, while travelling, in the car...everywhere.

Marjorie first joined a knitting group when she moved from the Washington, D.C. area to Hawaii in 2005. Her move found her without a job, friends, or scheduled activities, and she "saw there was this 'hole' in my life and time that would allow it. I thought it would be a fun way to meet people." When she found herself moving again, from Hawaii to Georgia, a knitting group seemed again like the obvious answer. She researched Atlanta area groups online and joined two groups, one of which is the Alphabet Knitters. She joined the Alphabet group mainly because of the location; she was interested in the teahouse at which the group meets, especially because of its close proximity to her home. When she first visited the group in January, she felt welcomed and describes the knitters as "very friendly and outgoing." When comparing the SJK to her other group, she says, "The overall 'feel' of the group is more playful and boisterous than the Roswell group, maybe because they've been together longer, maybe because there are more of you, or Brevity is a more open, larger space" than where the other group meets.

Because Marjorie is a fairly new member to the group, she talked about her experiences with her Hawaii group, with whom she knitted for four years. Those knitters became some of her closest friends while she was living in Hawaii, and she spent quite a lot of time with them. They would go out for dinner and coffee, go yarn shopping, go to the beach, and enjoy wine and movies at each others' homes. Certain people spent more time with her than others; one member would go sea kayaking and paddle-boarding with her, while another would join her on thrifting adventures. Marjorie notes the importance of her knitting friends with helping her to become more "at home" in a culture that was different than the one she was used to. They keep in

contact now through phone calls and emails. They are not just her knitting buddies, but became her close girlfriends. Now, she is becoming close friends with the members of her Roswell group, which consists of about six people, but realizes that it takes time to form friendships in a new city. She doesn't attend the Alphabet Knitters as frequently, but notes that the group as a whole is outgoing and friendly, welcoming and warm. For Marjorie, knitting groups provide for her a place to go to get out of the house and into the community. She moves around a lot and finds that knitting groups are a natural way for her to meet people.

Marjorie notes that, although there are no formal requirements for joining the knitting group, "there seems to be an unwritten rule of 'play nice' and don't be judgmental or gross anyone out, and if you stay within those boundaries, most topics are open." When she misses a knitting night, usually due to a conflict or feeling like she needs some quiet time, she feels like she is 'out of the loop' and will email the others to find out what she missed, who was there, and the big news of the night. As of right now, knitting group is the only solely social group she participates in, although she is also a member of an earth-based spirituality group which meets once a month. Her favorite aspects of the knitting group are "the social time, the shared camaraderie, the feeling of having a 'way' into the community, since I have just recently moved here."

### **Caroline**

Caroline is a 32 year old Caucasian woman who lives with her husband and 6 year old daughter. She currently is a corporate legal secretary. Caroline started knitting in October 2007. "I was in Michael's one day, and I did not intend to go in there to buy knitting stuff, but I came out with knitting stuff!" She learned from Debbie Stoller's *Stitch 'n' Bitch*, spending about 4

hours to really get down the basics. She had tried to learn to crochet in the past, but says that “knitting just stuck.”

These days, Caroline estimates that she spends about 21 hours a week knitting, at knitting group, during lunch in her office, and at home. She was one of the founding members of the knitting group, after seeing posts on *Ravelry*. At first, it was just her and Emily, then Allison joined shortly after. Caroline describes being unsure of Emily at the time, because of her calmness. Now, however, she describes Emily as the mentor of the group, a distinction other members agree with. Caroline broke down a number of the other members into the roles that they play in her life. “Emily would be, to me, the knitting mentor type person. She’s always been the knitting person to go to. Techniques, and really decision making. Like, if anybody needs to make a decision, it can be Emily. She’s always fair! Allison and I have a lot in common physically, with the kids, the Girl Scouts, stuff like that. I roll a lot of my stuff off of her and we talk a lot about kids and that’s part of our relationship because I think we’re one of the only two who have kids... Sarah is quirky. She’s the lace guru...she’s very funny and witty... Irene and I actually went to the same high school, a boarding school in Mobile, AL. I got kicked out of it, and she did not....We could’ve had the chance to know the same people, but anyway, she and I have a lot in common because we went to the same high school and our husbands are both computer geeks.” Although she says that the other group members are friends, she doesn’t often see people outside of the group, aside from events like the knitting retreats that the group organizes. A unique aspect of the group for Caroline is that many of the other members also enjoy science fiction, so it’s a place where she’s able to discuss that, as well as knitting.

For Caroline, Friday night is the one night a week that she is free from being the primary caregiver for her daughter Emma Lou. She considers Friday nights to be an escape. In the time that she's been attending knit nights, having to take care of something for her household on a Friday night has been a rarity. In fact, she only remembers one such occasion, when she had a grocery list that needed to be taken care of on the way home. When asked if her husband has a "night out" she said, "No. But I would consider myself a primary caregiver, even when he's there. He's able to kind of walk out and disappear to his smoking room and play on the computer and stuff." When Caroline isn't feeling her best, she sometimes misses knit nights. But she says that when she's down, she'd actually rather attend, because she's still able to escape the responsibility of being a caregiver that she would take on if she were at home.

Caroline can see that, as the group expands, there is the potential that we may grow too big. When that happens, she would like to see "knit night still be at the same time, same place, etc. and just break up into smaller groups and have more of a mingling party, so that I could actually talk to you rather than sitting on the other side. What I think will happen, probably, is that it will naturally fall into separate groups. There would be no mingling, just separate groups."

The best part of the group for Caroline is the camaraderie. "I think we have a good sense of humor, and I like that, and you can say something that's bawdy or silly and you know, it's not taken in the wrong way or it's not going to hurt anybody's feelings. Although, I do have to admit, when we go on our knitting retreats sometimes, it's a bunch of girls sitting around talking about sex. It's like, how did this happen?" Although Caroline considers herself to be a complainer, she notes that she never finds herself complaining about her knitting group.

## **Isabelle**

Isabelle is a 26 year old Hispanic woman who currently lives in Miami with her husband Tim and their newest addition, Max, their dog. Isabelle became a core member of the Alphabet Knitters in 2009, just after she learned to knit. She and Tim moved to Miami in the summer of 2009, as his job was relocated, but Isabelle still keeps in contact with the members of the group through the online message board.

Isabelle learned to knit by watching YouTube videos. She wanted to learn because it seemed relaxing and she thought it would be useful in increasing her levels of patience. These days, she knits anywhere she has the time: in waiting rooms, on airplanes, at family get-togethers. Her interest in joining a knitting group was to learn more about the craft from people and to make friends. The other members quickly became mentors for her. She notes, however, that they are also the people who she will contact for help if she ever finds herself in an emergency.

Part of what the group provides for Isabelle is a friendly atmosphere where she can talk with other women about things that her husband would not necessarily find interesting. She looks for groups where she feels welcome and likes people who are down-to-earth. Conversations tend to revolve around families, jobs, special occasions, as well as fears.

Isabelle's week tends to be very hectic, with activities filling up nearly all of the time from 6:30 am to 11:30 pm. She spends about 4 hours a week knitting. When she misses a knitting meeting, she feels "pretty bad because that is the only 'me' time I have." Isabelle takes part in another online forum, one focused on running, an activity she's recently taken up, but they do not socialize in person. She also has a group of people she meets up with at work. The

knitting group, however, is a place where she can indulge her crafty side and spend time with people who are truly interested in her friendship.

### 4.3 In Their Own Words

The transcripts from the focus groups are enlightening as to the major themes which touch the lives of the knitters the SJK group. One of the true strengths of the focus groups was the ability to hear about the themes of the group through the words of the members themselves, with the ability to comment on each others' responses. Following are selective transcripts from the four focus groups, which will be especially useful in the remainder of the chapter, which focuses on the key themes this research has uncovered.

Question one asked, "Tell me about this knitting group. When, why, and how was it created? What are the characteristics of this group?" The goal of this first focus group was to establish an understanding for the beginnings of this group: why it was started, the process of creation, and what the underlying characteristics of the group are.

*Caroline:* I think we are very eclectic, yet somehow we all enjoy similar things and get along really well. Characteristics of the group: friendly, welcome, cussing, drinking, eclectic, interesting, loyal.

*Katie:* Guess knitting group is just a place for me to be me.

*Irene:* As for the characteristics of the group, I would say that we all come from a variety of backgrounds/occupations, etc., but that we seem to value tolerance, respect, encouragement, and support within the group. While we do disagree at times we all do our best to keep the conversation mature and prevent it from being unkind in any way.

I would also say that the group has a relatively high level of trust for its members and that trust (to my knowledge) has rarely been abused. We talk about private and important matters relatively openly with each other, we often make group purchases and pay for them after the things have arrived, and we have even taken trips together and counted on each other to prepare and provide meals for the group. We did have one incident where a member of the group

ordered something and then sort of faded out of the group, failing to respond to attempts to contact her to get her purchases to her and for her to pay for them, but that is the only one I know of.

*Caroline:* I guess Emily and I started it because we wanted people to knit with. I learned from a book, no one around me knit, and I yearned for someone to share my passion with.

*Irene:* One thing I do find a little odd about the group is that we rarely help each other to learn new knitting skills or do a knit-along... while we share knitting as a group and we share what we are doing individually we rarely share our knowledge with each other or pool our resources. One exception to that I can think of is the lovely blanket that the crew made for Kate.

*Emily:* As for what I was looking to get out of it, mostly just an opportunity to hang out with knitters who lived in my general area. I had tried a couple of knit nights at [a local yarn store] and didn't feel particularly welcome, probably because it was an already established group, which makes me worry sometimes about whether or not our group is welcoming enough to new people. It didn't help that I wasn't able to go to the [local yarn store] group every week, but the lack of connection with the group was particularly apparent to me when I showed up for my first knit night in a while and sat around for a bit before somebody finally asked if I was there for the knitting group and said that they'd moved to somebody's house for a while.

As far as characteristics of the group, I think we're fairly open and welcoming. We like to laugh and gently rib one another. We have shared interests outside of knitting, at least smaller groupings of people do. And as Irene said, I feel like there's a pretty high level of trust in the group. I certainly feel comfortable sharing things with the group.

*Sarah:* Like Emily, I also tried going to [a local yarn store] on Thursdays a couple of times. I also didn't feel like I fit in. Probably related to being a well-established group, but they talked about a lot of things that I didn't know anything about (knitting guild, people, other meet-ups) and I could be there a whole evening and never say a single word. I eventually just gave up.

At this point, with the exception of a couple of people at work who aren't as close, this group makes up my closest friends in Atlanta. I find the whole group easy to talk to, comfortable to hang out with.

*Isabelle:* I joined because I have never had friends since my husband and I moved out of Austin and since I was learning how to knit I figured that going to a group and meeting people will do two things for me: get me some friends and learn some skills.

I feel like I accomplished both. Not only were Caroline, Sally, and Irene very welcoming on the first meeting, but also they seemed to be very encouraging on my crocheting project. I felt not only welcomed but listened to and I really enjoyed their conversations. Then, then next week I met the whole gang and it was great. I found them to be great knitters, great women, and their projects inspired me to try more challenging things and step away from knit and purl square scarves into more complicated stuff such as lace knitting, knitting in a circle, and attempting two at a time socks.

I felt for the first time in my life someone was my friend not because they wanted me to give them the answers to the homework, or because they wanted me to do something for them, but instead I found them to enjoy my company and my chats and I do miss them dearly.

*Ava:* Sometimes you just click with someone or someones, and that's all there is to it. And one of the things I like best besides the chance for sharing silliness is how willing we are to be respectful to one another even when we disagree.

Question two asked, "Tell me about your personal experience as a member of the knitting group. What expectations do you have of this group? What does the group offer you that is different from other social activities?" The goal here was to understand each member's personal experiences with the group, as far as how it did or not meet, or exceeded, expectations when they joined. I also wanted to understand what was unique about this group, in comparison to other social groups in which the members may participate.

*Caroline:* My personal experience has been a great one. I find the group warm and inviting, we encourage open dialogues without judgments, we laugh a whole lot and can poke fun at each other (and ourselves) without being taken too seriously.

Two years ago, I never would have thought I'd find a group of yarn-minded ladies that I got along with so well.

It's also my only girl-only group of friends—that's the main difference between it and my other circles of friends. Like Ava said, it allows me the opportunity to get away from other aspects of life.

*Gillian:* *What other aspects do you use this group to get away from?*

*Caroline:* The basic aspect would be getting away from husband and kid, but with further contemplation, I've come to realize that it's one major aspect of these things that makes knit night so enjoyable for me. And it's really simple.

Knit night lets me escape from thinking about what's for dinner and the process of eating it.

Let me explain. Dinner time (really, any meal time) in our house is not so great. No one likes to cook. Mike and I have just come home from work and just want some peace and quiet for a few minutes to decompress but the kid talks all the time. We end up scrambling for sandwiches or Chick-fil-a or a quick spaghetti and then have to convince said kid to stop talking long enough to eat it. Which takes a lot of mental patience and energy. And then I start to feel guilty about asking Emma Lou to be quiet because I also want to encourage open communication with her.

And then Mike pisses me off because he'll ask her to be quiet while he watches TV and I don't think TV should preempt conversations with your kid, no matter how silly, and especially when she has questions about what's happening on the TV because she just wants to learn! God gave us TiVo for a reason. So I end up frustrated with all three of us within an hour of getting home.

So knit night lets me escape that for a night. Even if I take Emma Lou with me, she doesn't bother me because she's not really talking to me and I can decompress with the rest of the girls. If she stays at home, I 'm allowed not to care what Mike does for dinner or how he handles it.

*Sarah:* I think it's kind of fascinating that really, without knitting, I don't expect many of us would even know each other, let alone be good friends. Not just because we wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet, but also because we don't have the things in common that many social circles do have. The "big things" that usually seem to be really important to who you are...aren't, for us. Just the fact that we're all knitters is big enough to bring us together into a fairly close group.

The third focus group question asked, "What are some anticipated outcomes of your participation in this group? What are some unanticipated outcomes of your participation in this group?" This question focuses on what this group actually provides for the members and how that differs from what they expected at the time of joining the group.

I believe it's important to note that this was the question that people participated in answering the least. I believe it was a combination of bad timing (members were busy at work and with their families) and a question which didn't seem to encourage a lot of conversation. There was little response to other members' answers, which was a big portion of answers to the previous questions. I think this question may just have seemed a little more cut-and-dry, and therefore, responses were somewhat limited.

*Irene:* Unanticipated...spinning lessons, real friends I could count on, finding a renter for my house, a bigger yarn stash

*Katie:* Unanticipated: people who really do accept me for who I am, even if I'm high strung or stressed out (at least they give me the impression they do), grief and sadness when I can't be there on Fridays—I feel kind of lost.

*Irene:* There was one night where I had had such a rough day that I had the knitting bag packed and sitting out so that I could leave as soon as Thomas hit the door. He came in and after a few minutes of discussion it became clear that neither Kate nor Thomas could handle me going to knit night. Thomas went upstairs to put his things away from work and I actually started crying. I've really missed knit nights since the baby came and I feel like I'm way out of the loop sometimes now. I need to hang out with everybody because I care about these folks and I want to know how they are doing. It's not enough to just read posts on rav. I want a personal, face-to-face connection too.

*Emily:* I was not expecting to end up with so many people I'd consider real friends. I don't know that I've had that sense of being part of a large group of friends since college and dorm living, probably.

*Gillian:* *Would you say that you consider this group to have given you a sense of community? In what ways?*

*Katie:* Absolutely it has given me a sense of community. Community in the way that women have had since they gathered at the well to get water—community that allows you to be supported, to be kicked in the butt if you need it, to be encouraged, to be carried, and most importantly to be loved. It's not always about knitting—it's about relationships. At least for me. I've long since said that women (and since our group currently is only women I put this in that group) in today's world are missing real relationships with other women. We've become so busy with life, whatever that means for each of us that we don't take time to be with others to get the emotional connection that we need. I believe that when women gathered at the well, gathered to make quilts, etc., that they got the sense of community that I feel from the SJK group.

Question four asked, “Knitting groups are a major phenomenon in the U.S. How do you explain the rise and prevalence of this social activity?” The purpose of this final focus group question was to allow the knitters I am researching to theorize about this phenomenon themselves. Many of them have taken quite an interest in my research and have no lack of their own ideas about the importance of this contemporary resurgence of knitting groups. This focus group allowed for the opportunity to participate in my research not only as knitters, but also as fellow theorists.

*Emily:* I suspect that it has something to do with having fewer and fewer outlets for face-to-face socializing. People work long hours, and then they come home and plonk themselves in front of the TV or the computer instead of sitting on their front porches and visiting. I know our neighbors (we've known some of them for years) but...we barely see them at all except occasionally to wave at as they're driving down the street, especially now that it's winter. I feel like knitting groups offer people an opportunity to reclaim some of that, making personal connections with people.

*Caroline:* I think women have always enjoyed spending time together. Now, though, it seems that we're able to spend *more* leisure time together doing things we enjoy, as fathers become more involved in their kids' lives and the One True Goal of all women has become less about marrying a man and more about enjoying her life. In any case, I've always had my girlfriends with whom I spend leisure time. It's just that ten years ago, it would have been in a bar.

The internet definitely helps get people together (not just knitters, but all kinds of people - how many couples do you know who met on the internet? I know of three. Two of them are married now.), which helps encourage the phenomenon.

But why not a rise and prevalence of cross-stitch groups? What is it about knitting in particular? Is it that cross-stitch is more about decoration and knitting is about productive, useful objects?

*Ava:* I think you can knit more easily while talking than you can cross-stitch, and it's frequently more portable, and lastly - you can make small, cute things quickly, whereas cross-stitch is for hanging on your wall, or making a pillow with... and knitting definitely has a glamour about it that cross-stitch does not. Knitting "is cool" and allows you to put your own personal stamp on your accessories (for a lot of people - this is my generalization and not why I knit necessarily). Cross-stitch does not appear to have shrugged off the image of "old lady crafter" to the degree that knitting has... although you'll still find plenty of people who that is the first thing they say when they see you knitting. But do you see Hollywood starlets busting out the cross-stitch at a shi-shi cafe? No, they're busting out their jumbo needles and super-bulky yarn to whip off another scarf... perhaps there is an "easy" thing here that also appeals? And I'm not judging - I love having an FO in a week!! Or a weekend! A newcomer to knitting can just do easy things their whole life and get useful, pretty things and pleasure from the craft, or just as easily jump into things like lace or 3D (toys, sleeves, socks) when they're ready. Maybe I'm saying there's a fluidity to knitting that makes it appealing to many people.

*Irene:* Debbie Stoller really wanted to change the image of knitting, and I think she did a marvelous job with her *Stitch n' Bitch* book. I personally would really credit her with the push for knitting in particular. As for the rise of knitting groups I think she pushed for that but it's gone way beyond her expectations. I would second what Emily said about needing to connect in a social way while our society promotes more and more "independence" from each other. I find it especially telling that we've taken an independent "job" (an activity that doesn't require more than one person to complete) and made it (back?) into a group event. For example, quilting can be done alone, but getting together with others helps it go faster. With knitting you are solo all the way unless you are looking for technique guidance or something. I wonder if some of the reason we haven't gone back to knitting in groups is that we are looking for others to find value in what we do in a society that doesn't place value on it. We all know how much effort went into that cabled sweater, or we can at least appreciate the fact that the cool hat Ava knit wasn't hard to make but it was a perfect match of color and style for her head. There have been so many times I've shown Thomas what I was doing and knew that he wanted to support me and show that he thought my handiwork was awesome, but I knew deep down that it was to make me happy, not b/c he really understood the work I had put into it. Having the group means that I have a set of folks that will appreciate what I have done for the real work and effort it took.

I also feel that knitting and getting together to knit is a way that "grown-ups" can congregate and still have fun. I hate to say it, but I'm over the bar phase. I have little patience for a loud night

out on the town. A nice evening of knitting makes me just as happy as the party nights used to, but it fits my pace much better. Knitting is something you can do as you get older and I don't feel like you would "outgrow" it in the same way you might outgrow bar hopping, binge drinking, and taking a hit of x.

*Sarah:* Is it really a "rise?" I suppose maybe it could be resurgence.... The concept of women grouping up to help with work like knitting, mending, cooking, caring for children isn't new, is it? We're herd animals and very social in general, and women in particular have a history of creating groups to support each other. The difference now, I think, is that we don't do it because we have to do it or because it's the most convenient and practical way to care for our children anymore. Similar to the shift in the perception of knitting and sewing—what used to be necessary and mandatory is now a leisure activity.

I'm sort of thinking of Irene bringing Kate. We all as a group can take her off Irene's hands for a bit—those of us who want to can spend some time with Kate and Irene can spend some time without Kate. It's a very communal thing, and it makes me think of what it might have been like in a small rural area 200 years ago where all of the women had children and things to do and could spread the work around and get social time at the same time.

#### **4.4 Sociality and Knitting**

The overarching explanation that women in my knitting group give for their continuing to knit is because it "feels good." Of course, it isn't that simple. There are so many reasons that these women pick up their needles and sink into the leather couch week after week, a cup of tea on the table and wool running through their fingers. As Kerry Wills discusses in *The Close-Knit Circle* trying to generalize the knitting community proves pointless. The only thing that *all* knitters have in common is knitting. And yet, I find that there are a number of important themes amongst the women who participate in the Alphabet Knitters' group.

First and foremost, the knitting group serves as an escape for the women who participate. Some people choose to run a hot bubble bath, light candles, and read a book. But for these women, whose lives are consumed by their professional careers and the domestic chores associated with having a family, sometimes the best chance for an escape is a night out. By having a regular weekly meeting, they ensure that they are able to get out of the house one night

a week. They ensure that they don't have to cook dinner, bathe the kids and put them to bed. One night a week, they leave the household work to their husbands or they kiss their live-in boyfriends goodbye, and they come to share an evening with women who they may not know, if it weren't for this setting. Here, they have a chance to spend a few hours talking, laughing, and knitting with women who understand them: maybe not their religious beliefs, maybe not their political beliefs, but their love, their passion, for knitting, and their desire for companionship. As Myzelev (2009) discusses, knitters find a sense of balance when they are able to take time for their craft, in contrast with busy professional and family lives. In a world that is increasingly technological, they have found the beauty of working with string and two sticks, using their creativity to produce items for themselves, for their families, and for their friends.

An important characteristic of this knitting group is that all of the knitters are women. The group dynamics would change drastically if a male were to enter the group. When a male is present, he is usually accompanying his significant other. Sarah's boyfriend Jacob has stopped by, playing his Nintendo DS in the corner and making sarcastic comments. Caroline's husband Forrest was present for about an hour one evening, and remained very quiet, leaving as soon as he finished eating. Irene's husband Thomas has stopped by a number of times, usually pertaining to something baby-related. Because Irene breast feeds, sometimes the coordination of the schedule requires Thomas to stop by the teahouse for a few minutes. On the nights that she brings Kate, he typically comes to pick Kate up once bed time comes so that Irene can have some alone time with the group. In this particular group, a male presence doesn't often change the conversations of the group, but does elicit apologies or sarcastic jokes about how we are "scaring him off." A later section on female homosocial groups illuminates this phenomenon further.

As noted by interviewees and as observed, common topics of discussion are as follows: work, knitting, significant others, children/family and pets, and television. Discussion can switch fluidly from debating the pros and cons of a child entering the gifted program in school to what constitutes reckless sex. Though the group is diverse, in age, religious beliefs, and lifestyle choices, the occasional tension, usually political in nature, diffuses easily, as the women always have one passion that binds them together: knitting out.

Because the group meets in public, with one member bringing her spinning wheel, audiences tend to gather. When they do, they are sometimes taken aback by the language coming out of these women's mouths. One dark and rainy night, a member stumbled in the door shaking off her umbrella and grumbling about the "cock-master" in the parking lot who nearly ran her over. In my presence, members have discussed when particularly offensive words are or are not appropriate, including cunt, twat, and nigger. Cunt was discussed most intensely, with the agreement that it is appropriate when used as a sign of empowerment by the woman herself, and yet, can also be derogatory when used as a slur towards someone. When Sarah's relationship was ending, she mentioned having started him a pair of socks, but only having one completed at this point. A fellow member suggested that she give him the sock for him to use for masturbation purposes. These discussions display the openness the women feel with each other and are also similar conversations to those that may take place amongst groups of women in traditional societies. Further, swearing is typically considered to be a part of male conversation. By adopting swearing into their conversation patterns, they are performing in a masculine manner. They then act in resistance by feminizing this masculine performance through analysis of the moral value of these words. They resist masculinity by imitating it, but then stake their claim on it by making it feminine.

While topics are not always so blatantly sexual, bawdy jokes find their way in more often than not. Interestingly, no one interviewed mentioned the tendency for sex to come into the conversation, either as a broad topic or as something about which they tend to joke. I find that the close-knit group of women, women who lead professional lives ranging from church staff and social workers to engineers, use this opportunity to uncensor themselves. As a women's space, the group is a safe place for the women to talk about topics which they may not discuss often otherwise, as many are professionals and take care of their families. Therefore, knitting is a leisure activity which not only gives them time for relaxation and the enjoyment of the process, but it is also, in a sense, a ticket to an all-girls' club, one where they are able to let loose for a few hours at the end of a tiresome week in a place without rules, regulations, and obligations. Furthermore, there is a sense of solidarity in the group. Members were hesitant to return to one location where they had previously met, as an employee and member was treated negatively by the owner. Other locations have been abandoned due to what the group agreed upon as unethical business practices.

The women in my group talk about the diverse personalities within the group, going so far as to jokingly give everyone a classification. Emily is the purported "matriarch" of the group, the one that members can go to for advice, whether it's about a relationship or knitting. Sally is the "Malabrigo junkie," the one who knits incessantly in the lusciously soft yarn which is loved by knitters everywhere. Ava is the "tattooed burper," the one who can take any conversation and make everyone laugh. Katie is a pastor in a church, who is teased that she has the mouth of a sailor when with the group. It is here, in this group, that these women feel comfortable enough to express themselves. There are no pretenses here, only open minds. Every new member is welcomed into the group warmly, put at ease by gentle sarcastic ribbing about the core members'

qualities. Typically, the women who join the group stay. They become a part of the core, or sometimes, become peripheral members, stopping by less frequently. Whether in-person or online, the characteristics of the group are the same. Most important is the open mindedness, the acceptance of differences, and the choice to avoid conflict. Since my official entry into the group in March 2009, there have been no conflicts of which I'm aware between the group members. The beauty of this knitting group is the close friendships formed between women who, otherwise, may never have met. The women admit that, had they met in a different setting, they still may not have formed the friendships.

For the Alphabet Knitters, the most important aspect of the group is an opportunity for sociality. According to Kerry Wills, "Knitters are using their craft to carve out personal space and to revive real, face-to-face interactions. Some do it through knitting circles and related organizations. Others make their communities online" (2007:45). For the Alphabet Knitters, the online aspect is nearly as important as the in-person meetings. Although being an online member is not a requirement, the conversations that are held throughout the week enhance the social connectedness amongst the group. A member who showed up but hadn't been on the community was directed to the site. She had heard from a friend of hers that there was a knitting group meeting at the local teahouse on Friday evenings and stopped by to join. However, because the meetings are weekly, the group chooses to stay in touch with the goings-on of the other members' lives via posts in the online community. Therefore, if she was interested in understanding and keeping up with the threads of conversation, membership in the online community is vital.

Several women talked about not having social activities outside of their work and home lives. Some attended other knitting groups prior to joining this one. In talking about their

experiences with other groups, they talked about a sense of not belonging. For most, there was nervousness in attending an established group's meeting for the first time. Everyone will already know each other and have things to talk about, and inevitably, there will be topics of conversation which a newcomer simply won't have the background to follow. The level of acceptance into the group is somewhat dependent on the new members' willingness to participate in the group. Although the group will try to include the new member in conversation, there will inevitably be some threads which will be about people or conversations or events of which the new member has no knowledge. However, an openness, a willingness to ask questions, and an outgoing personality all help for a new member to feel comfortable and be accepted as a member of the group, rather than simply a spectator. Further, although the old members will attempt to engage the new member, there needs to be some of this on the part of the new member. The old members will not sit and drag conversation out of a new member. Some new members find this process of integration to be easier than others. For some, it takes a few weeks to feel integrated into the group. For others, the integration is immediate. Again, it's all dependent upon the personality of the new member and how well it meshes with the other personalities present within the group.

#### **4.5 Intergenerational Friendship**

Some of the closer friendships cross age barriers. Sarah and Emily are particularly close. Sarah is 23 years old, while I would estimate that Emily is about 40 years old. Unmarried and without children, Emily has formed a close relationship with Sarah, one that extends from knitting to discussions about Sarah's relationship, which has been rocky in the recent past. Sarah and Emily get together outside of the group, which is typical for these women. Some events are

opened to the entire group, while others are more spontaneous and planned through text messaging, phone calls, or emails. Sarah is also close with Irene, who is 30 years old and is a new mother. Since Sarah's job is relatively close to Irene's home, Sarah sometimes visits Irene on her lunch break, snuggling the baby and giving Irene a brief break from the demanding care for a newborn. These relationships provide both women with the support and understanding they need to persevere through the difficult times, as well as the camaraderie necessary to fully enjoy the good times.

For the women who engage in these friendships that cross generations, there seems to be a particularly interesting form of mentoring, one which does not limit itself to the technical aspects of knitting, but which includes discussions about family life, home, and relationships. There is a sense that the older woman has had valuable experiences through which she is able to advise the younger woman. Further, for the older woman, it seems that there is a sense of feeling useful, in addition to a sense of living vicariously through the younger woman. If she is able to save someone else from making the same mistakes she made, it's a lesson well-learned.

Emily is single, but spent 10 years in a relationship with a man who treated her badly. Seeing Sarah struggling with similar issues, that of a significant other who sometimes treats her poorly, Emily is able to say, *I've been there. Here's what I did, here's how it turned out, and here's how I think you should handle the situation.* In a sense, this relationship is almost one of fictive kin, similar to a mother-daughter relationship, yet without other factors that are implicit in an actual mother-daughter relationship. Without the complications, the advice is well-received and appreciated. Furthermore, there is no judgment if Sarah chooses not to take the advice. Sarah and Emily (and the rest of the group) all know that, regardless, the friendship will remain strong.

There is a true sense of social solidarity amongst the women, a strength to their friendships that crosses the boundaries of age and beliefs. Interestingly, in spite of being a group of fairly random women, at first seeming to share only their common love for knitting, there is the need for a social outlet and companionship with other women. Further, there are some themes within this particular group that are somewhat unexpected. For instance, a majority of the women in the group enjoy some aspect of science fiction. Science fiction television series are often a main topic of discussion amongst these women. Although the group does not share unanimously political or religious beliefs, with as many different religions present in the group as there are people, there is a trust and respect which allows the members to share and bond without strife over particular clashing beliefs.

#### **4.6 Knitting as Resistance**

Although only three survey respondents answered that they consider knitting to be an act of resistance, there are many ways it can be a subconscious form of resistance. As Wills notes, “Knitting has long been a way for women to express passions, political stands, and individuality. Like the confines of a particular poetic form, constraint to the realm of domesticity motivated women in prior ages to find creative ways to contribute to the social discourse, and often they did so through the use of their knitting needles” (2007:3). Early restrictive definitions of feminism made the claim that any performance of domestic activities by females reinforced their domination by men. Feminists during this wave of feminism took great pains to avoid participating in domestic activities. Betty Friedan’s *The Problem With No Name* pointedly blamed the role of the woman as domestic housewife as being a part of a movement to confine women to the domestic roles inside the home. In reaction, because the feminine was seen as

constructed by males, women began to dress and act like men. And yet, in their own abhorrence for the feminine, they essentially reinforced the gender hierarchy.

Later waves of feminism have struggled with the idea that being a woman should mean having the same rights as men: politically, economically, but also in the freedom to participate in the activities they enjoy, without feeling that they are inferior based on their choices. There is nothing inherently feminine about knitting, just as there is nothing inherently masculine about carpentry. Cultural constructions determine the ways we classify and categorize leisure activities and the gender roles we associate with them. In Wills' words, "A new 'problem that has no name' emerged for many women in Generations X and Y, in their teens, twenties, and thirties during the nineties. Again, the problem was a discrepancy between the female identity crafted by a prior generation and the identity these women wished to create for themselves" (2007:49). Through associations of earlier generations, there was a need for a renegotiation of the understanding of the ways in which identity and craft intersect. Debbie Stoller was successful in renegotiating ideas of who knits by publishing books with patterns sassy enough to attract young men and women to a craft touted as grandmotherly and solely feminine.

Because knitting is traditionally associated with women and the domestic sphere is traditionally the place of women, the act of public participation in knitting groups can be viewed as a form of everyday resistance. Knitting groups are everyday resistance for women who refuse to feel ashamed about their passion for something which is associated with female domesticity. Further, because this women-only context provides them with an escape from their domestic lives, this public act is even more so one of resistance. Kerry Wills quotes Debbie Stoller as saying, "Part of the new knitting revival, I really think, is reclaiming the domestic sphere. Also, a lot of young people feel very manipulated by the larger corporate culture" (2007:31). This

mainstream corporate manipulation results in the desire to react against the mainstream consumer culture. For crafters, by creating one's own goods, providing one's own labor and choosing one's own materials, one can show their ability to recognize their role as a consumer, and for choosing to not fully participate in the culture of mass consumerism. Knitting, then, can serve as a reaction to that corporate culture, an opportunity to resist and instead make the choice to create something with our own hands.

In this way, knitting can act as a resistance to the mainstream consumption of mass produced goods. Most people would bristle at the thought of spending \$20 on materials for a pair of socks, as an entire pack can be purchased for \$8 in just minutes from the store. At federal minimum wage for the time spent making the socks and factoring in \$20 for cost of materials, a single pair of socks would cost \$78. Yet, it is precisely this self-reliance which is attractive in this act. By participating in the do-it-yourself (DIY) affinity group, knitters are able to subvert consumption of mass produced goods. Furthermore, there is truly a sense of pride associated with making an item oneself: choosing the fiber, the yarn, the pattern, and then putting in the hours of time and skill necessary to make the garment wearable. This is a long process, one which frequently spans months for the average knitter.

Sustainability of materials is not a serious concern of this particular group of women. While this seems like it would be pertinent to a group which so often focuses on the quality of the materials, the product and the process are more important than the idea that they are affecting any sort of large-scale changes with their choices as to what types of yarn they purchase. For the women in my group, self-sufficiency is a more attractive outcome than sustainability. While the two are certainly intertwined, the desire to be self-sufficient and not be tied to consumption of mass-produced goods is not so much about environmental concerns as it is a way for them to feel

productive and creative in their own personal lives. So often, time is devoted to activities which feel rigid and scheduled, and which allow for little creativity: work, taking care of their children, household chores. Knitting, then, provides an opportunity to create something with their hands, an end product which they can feel proud of and which illuminates their skill and can be an act of love for those who they choose to gift these knitted items.

Another way resistance is possible through knitting is by the consumer choices the group makes, as a whole. The Alphabet Knitters collectively value local businesses which are run ethically, and have struggled since their early days to find a location which fit these criteria, in addition to those which are important to them as crafters: enough comfortable seating, good lighting, and food. There have been a number of places where the group has tested the waters, but was unable to stay, for a variety of reasons. The first café at which the group met, Café Lisette, was a good fit. At the time, the group had about 5 members. There was enough seating, enough lighting, and plenty of food and drinks for the group to enjoy without getting bored. However, the owner found herself moving back to her home in Virginia, and Café Lisette was closed.

Next, the group met at a café called Alcove. While Alcove seemed to be a fit at first, one of the group members worked as a barista at the café. Despite the owner's politeness to the group, the group felt that she was not treating her employees well and that she was behaving unethically. The group waited to move locations, knowing that they would be making it difficult for the employee, but as soon as she quit, they left Alcove for good. The group then tried a few places, including the Starbucks where we met the first night I attended. The Starbucks was not a local business, but the group was fumbling and felt that they may be willing to forego their desire for a local business if the group was comfortable and welcomed at the location. Unfortunately,

Starbucks carried limited food selections at the time, important to the group due to the time of night. The meetings officially meet at 6 pm, so most of the knitters are coming directly from work, hungry for dinner. While the Starbucks was in a prime location, close to many of the members' homes and close to a number of different restaurants within walking distance, the preference was obvious for food at the actual meeting location. Furthermore, the group was going through an expansion at the time. Several knitters had joined at once and there was limited seating at the Starbucks. While we were able to fit into an area with a comfortable couch, many were in wooden chairs and the space was overwhelmingly tight.

After the meeting at Starbucks, the group changed locations again, to land at Jake's Ice Cream Café in Decatur. The location was a privately owned café which carried ice cream owned by a local chain. While the food selection was limited, it proved satisfactory. There was a large seating area with comfortable couches and chairs which typically held the group with room to spare. However, the group transitioned to Jake's in late February. By the time the early summer rolled around, we realized we'd be facing more and more crowds, eager for Jake's, and more and more kids. The owner of Jake's, Amy, and the managers and workers were all overwhelmingly kind. They clearly appreciated our business and made us feel welcome each Friday. In early August, however, after braving summer crowds, the owner sold the café. The new owner wasn't too keen on the group, and in turn, the group was not too keen on the new owner. Several ethical issues were raised about her daily operations, and as such, the group took the opportunity to move...again. Brevity Teahouse was just opening, so two of the early members checked it out and suggested a test run. Our first night at Brevity was August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and the group has been absolutely pleased with this location. In addition to having a plethora of food and drinks, there is a comfortable seating area, good lighting, and the owners are welcoming and truly appreciative

of our business. On multiple occasions, members have been in the teahouse outside of knitting nights and have overheard conversations where patrons were suggesting Open Mic Nights and music for Friday nights. The owners responded that they couldn't do that, because Friday nights were for the knitters. This story holds evidence for the group that we are well appreciated at Brevity. And with good reason: most Friday evenings find at least 6 knitters, often as many as 8 or 10, and each person buys at least a drink, with many of us purchasing a drink, food, and a dessert. (They have a wildly tempting case of delicious treats every day, ranging from bread pudding to cupcakes and scones.)

As a group, we are influential and powerful in our consumption practices. One member, for instance, is allergic to gluten. When the owners found this out, they began working on gluten-free dessert recipes for her to test out. She often gets free desserts to try, and when they find something that she likes, they'll be able to offer it as an option for her. Furthermore, the owners are consistently available to us and are often the ones who bring out our drinks. As someone who has been to the teahouse often on evenings when the group doesn't meet, this seems to be a bit out of the ordinary. Oftentimes, the tea baristas and kitchen staff are the ones to deliver food and drinks to the tables. And yet, on Friday nights, more often than not, our group is taken care of by one of the owners.

Another welcoming aspect of this location is the connection to the art community. Elena, one of the owners, is a clay artist and painter. She sells her work at Brevity, including mirrors, magnets, mugs, and tea bag holders. In addition, the teahouse hosts art from local photographers, turning the walls of the teahouse into something of an art gallery. This love of art is obvious in all that Brevity does, from their pastry case to their décor, and I believe it is an important part of why our group feels connected and welcome in this location.

#### 4.7 Knitting and Feminism

My research is feminist by definition; it seeks to understand the identity construction of the women who build communities through knitting groups. Knitting is conventionally a women's craft, perhaps because it is so frequently passed on to women by women. Furthermore, my participants experience certain privileges by nature of the fact that they are a group of predominantly white, middle-class women. Their social positioning governs the experiences they have had and dictates the ways in which they relate to each other and the world around them.

Minahan and Cox discuss cyberfeminism, a topic which is integral to the discussion of Stitch 'n' Bitch groups. Cyberfeminism is "a construct developed to allow a voice to women who wish to participate in technology on their own terms" (2007:9). *Ravelry* and Stitch 'n' Bitch groups are a prime example of cyberfeminism: the intersection of craft and technology to facilitate the construction of virtual women-only communities. The cyber-world can provide an outlet for women to form relationships with other women, something that they may not have the time and energy to do in their daily lives which are consumed by jobs and families. With the stresses of this busy lifestyle, women are left without a lot of time to themselves, often unable to carve out more than a couple of hours to spend outside of the home. When this is the case, how can they meet people, have enough time to form relationships, and then create regular times to see each other?

The Internet provides an excellent, low-pressure opportunity to meet people with similar interests, and often, similar lifestyles. At all hours of the day and night, a woman can sit at her computer in sweatpants and without makeup, taking part in the social interaction which is so absent from her life. Furthermore, once connections are made, they are able to be maintained at

convenience. With *Ravelry*, for instance, conversations are extended, taking place on the participants' own time, over days and weeks. Much like email, there is no need for both members to be present in order to make responses.

#### **4.8 Friendship**

For many of the women in the Alphabet Knitters' group, another impetus for looking for a knitting group to join was seeking friendship. While the interest was further fueled by similar interest, several noted the difficulty in making friends as an adult. When life becomes hinged upon work and home, the avenues for meeting new people are diminished and friends can be hard to come by. This is further complicated when new to the area.

For Sarah, a cross-country move from her home in Oregon to live with her long-distance boyfriend in Atlanta left her without a support network. Now that she's become a part of the SJK, "some of them are really close friends, the kind of people that I would call at two o'clock in the morning in an emergency." She also regularly spends time with group members outside of Friday nights and her life has become quite intertwined with some of the other members. For Sarah, this group has become her circle of friends, her surrogate family, and a primary support network.

Irene remembers moving from a small town in Alabama where she attended college and not understanding how people make friends as adults. "I've always had somebody I knew or whatever whenever I'd moved, and I hadn't moved a whole lot, and so to me I just didn't understand how you meet new folks." She first tried to make friends through work, but wasn't finding much success there. Her husband suggested joining groups with people with similar

interests, which spurred Irene's search for a knitting group to join. These days, Irene relies on her friends from the knitting group for last-minute babysitters, extra hands on Friday nights, and people to spend time with and share a common interest.

For every member of the group, there is a story which tells how much this group of friends means to them. The emotional needs of the group vary widely, but range from a sympathetic ear to physical assistance with caring for a child. As long as the group member voices their need appropriately by asking for help, the group responds favorably. There have been no instances in my participant observation when a group member has been struggling, asked for help, and has been denied.

#### **4.9 Knitting Out**

There is an interesting perceived dichotomy between public and private space which is often cut-and-dry. For the Alphabet Knitters, there is significance in the fact that they do not meet at each other's homes, but choose to conduct the meetings in public. Without a doubt, knitting in public is a part of the fun. The attention garnered from passers-by further fuel the feeling that they are artisans of a unique, nostalgic ("my mother knit when I was child"), and gratifying craft. Tucked away in a church basement, the group would benefit from saving money, since food and drinks could be brought from home. However, the public aspect of the group would be lost.

Furthermore, the activity which the group participates in is a domestic activity, one typically restricted to the private, in the comforts and quiet of the home. By participating in knitting in public, there is a sense of the domestic taking over the public. As noted by Parkins (2004), "new knitting is performed publicly; it is something one is seen doing." Further, there is

an interesting phenomenon which takes place when the group meets each week. Especially when there is a large turn-out, there is a feeling that the group is able to carve out a private niche within the public space, in line with the assertions Lofland (1973) makes. By gathering collectively with other members, there is the creation of a sense of private space within the public space. As Mitchell (1995) notes, social groups become public only when they can speak for themselves in public. As such, Brevity has provided a public space where there is a level of comfort and familiarity, allowing the knitters to speak for themselves and become a public group.

Although the group meets physically within this space only once a week, Fridays from 6 pm to 9 pm, give or take the early arrivals and the night-birds, there is the sense of continuation throughout the week which is facilitated by technology, specifically, the online forum on *Ravelry*. Communication through the week is paramount to the maintenance of the group's social relations, as there is a fluidity between the weekdays and Friday nights which allows for conversations to be ongoing and regular.

Something which has come up repeatedly in my interviews is the worry that the group soon will hit a point when it is too big. Recently, we've had a few nights where there were between 12 and 15 people crowded into the corner of the teahouse, fighting (amicably, of course) for the comfortable leather chairs, but settling for the hard, straight-backed chairs when necessary. Although the circle expanded each time a member joined, the members talked about the difficulty of having conversations and maintaining relationships with that many people. The group doesn't have the cozy feel that it used to have. Each new member brings something to the group though, and has formed relationships with the other members, so there is no obvious split dividing the new members from the old. Some talked about the desire to add on a second night

during the week, for those who find Fridays to be inconvenient, while others would simply like to see a more fluid division, one that happens naturally each week, resulting in the mingling of the two groups, but also allowing for more in-depth and personal conversations. Those conversations are not always possible right now, simply due to the seating arrangements, size, and volume of the group.

#### **4.10 Social Support Network**

There have been a number of instances which come to mind when I think about the ways in which the women in the Alphabet Knitters act as a social support network for each other, in a number of different ways. The one who has received the most support throughout my time as a participant observer seems to be Irene. I think there are a few reasons for this. First, Irene has simply had a number of circumstances where she's had to reach out to the knitters and ask for help. Secondly, Irene is a confident woman who is not afraid to ask for help. As a social worker and as someone who is not afraid to speak her mind, if Irene finds that she is in need of anything, she does what is so hard for so many people: she simply asks. She does not do so in a way that is pressuring or manipulative, but she simply makes her needs known.

Before Irene gave birth to her daughter, Kate, the group held her a baby shower. The shower was fairly low-key and typical, held during a normal Friday night at our usual meeting place. There was plenty of lemonade, cake, and small gifts. The larger gift of the evening, however, was a blanket knitted by the collective group. The knitters who chose to help make this blanket (of which I was not one, simply due to the timing of the project) each made a square or two of a predetermined size. Then, several of the knitters gathered together for an evening to stitch the blanket together in time for the birth of Kate Clementine.

I find this gesture to be sweet, not only in the way that it so clearly shows the camaraderie and love between the members of the group, but also in the nostalgic and traditional way that Irene's daughter's birth was honored. With the love and support of her mother's friends, Kate has a keepsake which is both symbolic and useful.

There are numerous other occasions which bring to mind the reality of the knitting group as social support. Sometime during fall 2009, there was a period of time where several of the members were finding themselves in stressful situations. Irene decided to organize a night for morale boosting. The group talked it over and decided to have a night with Wii at member Allison's house. There was Wii bowling, karaoke, and a couple of the members coordinated to bring dinner. The night was a big hit for those who were able to make it, a reminder to make time for friends, fun, and that there were people there for them if they needed them.

Ava's break-up is an instance where the close-knit relationships between the group really stood out. She and her boyfriend had been living together, so the break-up was a large change in lifestyle for her. Although she told the other knitters and talked briefly about the break-up, she never went into great detail about what had happened. The other knitters were careful in what they said and not to ask too many questions. If she wanted to talk about it, she would bring it up. Irene mentioned in her interview the fact that it was something we hadn't talked about, but that we were giving her the space to sort out for herself. When she was ready or if she needed the other knitters, we were there. But the group maintained a very low-pressure manner of dealing with this particular situation.

Jill, a woman who attended the group only once, found herself on bed rest at 20 weeks for the remainder of her pregnancy. Although there was often support for Jill online, through

conversations and well wishes, the group recognized how difficult and lonely it must have been for her in that situation. On several occasions, Irene went to Jill's house and sat with her to knit for a bit, giving her the gift of in-person interaction. Jill expressed such gratitude, and now that her baby has arrived safely, we all look forward to Jill's return to the group.

#### **4.11 Migration**

With a firm understanding of what the women who joined the Alphabet Knitters were seeking, a sense of community and support in a city where making close connections can be difficult, there is a trend among the women who participate in this group. Many of the women I interviewed were not originally from Atlanta. In fact, several women cited their move from a more rural area to the metro Atlanta area as inciting a desire to reconstruct the close-knit support group they effectively lost when they moved.

As members of close-knit communities from birth, they were socialized as members of community. As such, they grew to expect certain relationships. Upon removal from that particular setting, however, they were left with a primordial desire for that which was no longer the norm. They found themselves seeking the social stability of the feminine connection, an affinity group where they could express themselves as women in ways unlike in any other arena of their lives. At home, they are care-takers, responsible for the well-being of the domestic sphere. At work, they are constantly competing in the rational masculine world that is professionalism. Between these obligations, there is little room for self-indulgence and little room for making strong connections with other women. They are consistently meeting obligations and playing roles.

At the knitting group, however, they have the opportunity to stop playing roles and to indulge themselves as women. They no longer have to conform to the socially constructed roles, but can simply relax and enjoy time to themselves, without the stresses and worries of their day-to-day lives.

## Chapter Five: Weaving in the Ends / Conclusion

### 5.1 Conclusion

For the women in the Alphabet Knitters, knitting is a way to take a collective deep breath at the end of the week and spend time participating in a leisure group which gives meaning to their lives. Through the construction of a sense of community, friendships with women they may never have met otherwise, and the interplay of craft and technology, knitting provides more for the women who participate in the activity than meets the eye.

Research on knitting groups by anthropologists is lacking, despite the fact that aspects related to knitting groups, such as leisure and friendship, have been studied (Allan 1989; Foucault 1967; Green 1998; Piercy & Cheek 2004; Rosaldo 1974), . Through the research I conducted in the knitting community, I integrate understandings of gender, leisure, friendship, and community to argue that the urban setting is a place where there is a contemporary nostalgia for a sense of community and a craving for the intense social connections which result in the formation of a social support network.

By occupying public space as a homosocial women's group, knitting provides women with an opportunity to experience this community, outside of connections made through work or family. Thus, the leisure group, and in this case the knitting group, provides a nexus for women to create their own communities and to meet like-minded people in an environment free of pressure. If they are unable to attend a meeting, there are no repercussions, aside from disappointment, and the relationships between the women are maintained from week to week through the Internet forum *Ravelry*. In more extreme cases, friendships are maintained with group members who have left the region and live in other states. Without this technology, the

knitting group would still be possible, but I argue that it serves to strengthen the relationships of the participants by allowing them contact outside of one night a week.

An important point to consider is the implications of this research. For so many of the research participants, knitting is a stress relief. Knitting has been used as a therapeutic activity for recovery from drug addictions and eating disorders, and for dealing with emotional stresses, such as divorce. For those who stray from the craft, relearning brings its own pleasure and a sense of returning home. For all of the knitters who participated in my research and learned the craft through instruction from a person, that teacher was a woman. Knitting can be a way to reconnect with older generations of women, a way to reinforce intergenerational sociality in a society where cross-generational friendships have become less common. Newspaper articles write that knitting is the new yoga, and for many women, knitting provides a similar state of meditation. Those who worry about family histories of Alzheimer's are often instructed by doctors to take up a new hobby. For Irene Sage, learning to knit was a way to combat dementia. Knitting groups are even better, according to her doctor, because "socializing stimulates the brain" (Sage 2009).

What is the meaning of all of this? My intention is to provide a short list of some of the benefits of the craft. For my participants, the greatest benefit of joining a knitting group is the true friendships formed based on the sharing of an interest. Despite differing political opinions, differing religious beliefs, and lifestyles that run the gamut, the sense of support and friendship found within this knitting group is incredible. In a society where it can so often seem to be every man for himself, women are taking back the nostalgic sense of community that they feel they've been missing, in a way that allows them a sense of freedom and privacy within the public sphere

they may not otherwise be able to enjoy. And they're doing it by creating their own communities, such as the one created by the Alphabet Knitters' Friday night knitting group.

Potential future research possibilities are endless. I find particularly interesting the ways in which knitting and medicine can intertwine, particularly in the cases of eating disorders, addiction, and depression. I'd be interested to know how similar the experiences of other groups are to the Alphabet Knitters, as well as comparisons between the experiences of male knitters to female knitters.

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