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# ‘So That You’ve Got Something for Yourself’: Knitting as Implicit Spirituality

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## Abstract

Knitting is a popular activity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, experienced by many practitioners as personally, socially, and politically meaningful and transformative. This chapter, based on qualitative research with knitters in central Scotland, explores contemporary knitting as implicit religion and spirituality in terms of wider patterns in religion and society. Firstly, there are echoes of religious community and identity found in the knitting subculture, which are discussed in reference to shifts in congregational modes of belonging. The chapter then considers knitting as an expressive-therapeutic practice, part of the rise of subjective wellbeing culture and the phenomenon of spirituality.

Knitting<sup>1</sup> as a craft practice and leisure activity is widely thought to have surged in popularity in the 21st century. This resurgence has been characterised by an emphasis on communal practice (Minahan and Cox 2006; O’Sullivan and Richardson 2011; Prigoda and McKenzie 2007), with many knitters joining groups that meet in public places such as cafés, and participating in online knitting communities such as Ravelry.com (Minahan and Cox 2007; Orton-Johnson 2012). Knitting is now a popular activity among younger women (Stannard and Sanders 2015), sometimes in explicit relation to the feminist movement and activism (Bratich and Brush 2011; Clarke 2016; Groeneveld 2010; Myzelev 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, the related fibre-arts of crochet, spinning are included under the umbrella term ‘knitting’ for the sake of brevity.

As a personally, socially, and politically meaningful and transformative practice, knitting has been a thriving topic of research, yet it may not seem immediately relevant to the study of religion.<sup>2</sup> What I explore in my research—conducted through questionnaires, participant observation, a focus group and unstructured interviews in central Scotland—is how the significance of knitting for some practitioners has a certain religiousness, which in turn may contribute to debates about the ways in which scholarship understands ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’.

### **Reworking ‘Religion’**

A major shift in the sociology of religion in the last twenty years has been the turn to religion in new places, with an emphasis on religion as *lived* (Orsi 1985; McGuire 2008) in *everyday life* (Ammerman 2013; Bowman and Valk 2012; Harvey 2013; see also chapter x of this volume). This approach foregrounds the meaning-making and religious expressions of those who have previously been marginalized in the study of religion, such as women. It also forms a response to the ways in which the definition of the term ‘religion’ has been problematized, both in the face of the secularization thesis and in the recognition that the long-held conceptions of religion—in terms of belief, transcendence, organized ritual and institutional belonging—have been shaped by (Protestant) Christianity, and neglected other forms of religion (Vasquez 2011, Woodhead 2011). This shift in sociology away from the understanding of religion as belief has led to interest in the permeable boundaries between the religious and nonreligious, the sacred and the secular; and increased recognition that religious practices and identities are overlapping and various rather than exclusive and unified (Day, Vincett and Cotter 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> See Bowman 2016 for discussion of knitting in the explicitly religious context of prayer shawl ministries.

These recent trends in reconceiving religion complement research into the religiousness of ostensibly nonreligious practices such as rave culture (Lynch 2004), football (Percy and Taylor 1997), environmental activism (Benthall 2008), horoscopes, soap operas and graveside visits (Stringer 2008). Foremost of this scholarship is Edward Bailey's concept of *implicit religion* (Bailey 1998, 2011; first developed in the 1960s and arguably ahead of its time), and the continued work of the journal *Implicit Religion*.

My research on knitting practice builds on this work in investigating how, for some practitioners, their knitting has an implicitly religious role in their life, incorporating ritual, structure, belonging, identity, wellbeing, and meaning. It does so without drawing a simple equivalence, recognising that, whatever the family resemblances, implicit religion and the common-sense of religion are not one and the same. The rationale of this project is twofold: firstly, that thinking about other-than-religious activities (such as knitting) is valuable in understanding what religion does. Secondly, concepts and categories influential in the study of religion may be fruitfully applied in other contexts not usually classed as 'religious', whether in detailed ethnographies, or the identification of wider social trends.

Research into the religiousness of knitting could very well proceed with the concept of implicit religion alone—perhaps with some reference to everyday or lived religion—without invoking one of the most contested terms of the study of religion in recent decades: spirituality (Huss 2014). Key aspects of the spirituality debate have included the 'fuzziness' of definitions of spirituality (Zinnbauer *et al* 1997; Swinton and Pattison 2010); and the phenomenon of 'spiritual but not religious', with spirituality as the acceptable 'other' of religion (see Barker 2008; Zwissler 2007). However, I do not use the term 'spirituality' in this research in the latter sense—as a word that has less negative connotations than religion

and thus seems more relatable to participants—but rather because of the specific contents of the term, and how these correspond to specific aspects of knitting practice.

In this research, I work according to a cluster of understandings of spirituality as a distinct religious form—or particular mode of religion—that is the result of, and reaction to, modernity. This cluster includes a spectrum from mind-body-spirit practices to New Age to Paganism, all of which have the common key features of emphasis on inner experience of the individual, valuation of seeking and self-development, pluralist tolerance of other paths, embodiment, and interconnection and holism (see Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Vincett and Woodhead 2009), much in the same way as the ‘spiritualities of life’ identified by Paul Heelas (2009). My research with knitters considers how crafting works as a form of spirituality (perhaps *implicit spirituality*) that has many of the same aims, and is the result of the same conditions of modern life, as that of more ostensibly ‘spiritual’ practices. These I group within two broad categories: *subjective wellbeing*, which encompasses self-development and expressive-therapeutic practices; and *sacred connections*, with practices that seek a ritualizing and rooting of relationships, traditions, and places. For reasons of space, this chapter focuses on knitting and subjective wellbeing, after a brief discussion of the more ‘congregational’ aspect of knitting: community and belonging. Here I am playing with the influential theoretical categories of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead’s Kendal Project, and subsequent book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005), of the ‘congregational’ and ‘subjective life’ domains, the latter of which is associated with ‘spirituality’.

The empirical component of this research consists of 1) participant observation conducted over the course of nine months with two knitting groups in Glasgow; 2) focus group session held in conjunction with a yarn festival, with all five participants being attendees of the

festival; 3) interviews, conducted over the course of one month with 16 participants, recruited via a notice placed on Facebook, Twitter, and Ravelry.

### **Community and Belonging**

I came to research knitting through being a knitter myself (see Fisk 2012). As a researcher, my status as insider in the knitting community was significant in the process of data gathering, in that both myself and the participants knitted during the focus group and the interviews. I had previously been a member of one of the two knitting groups I observed, and in the participant observation I took part just as any other member (apart from brandishing consent forms and jotting down notes), working on my own knitting projects and joining in the conversations. It was my intention to present myself as a fellow knitter rather than an outsider scholar partly in order to be related to as a member of the ‘the knitting community’, and thus to show how members of that community, or subculture, relate to one another; for the recordings to be reasonably representative examples of what knitters talk about when they talk about knitting. On reflection, my experience of these unstructured interviews also worked as an example of the effect of knitting on social interaction: on the whole the conversation flowed and had a certain rhythm, the participants mostly seemed very comfortable speaking at length about themselves and their experience.

The literature also attests to an easy conversational intimacy amongst knitters, which is arguably facilitated by the very act of knitting; having a knitting project to work on removes the awkwardness of the right amount of eye contact, and silences are also not as noticeable when those sitting together are all busy knitting (see Corkill 2014). Two of my participants who had facilitated craft groups in a healthcare context commented on how it had enabled service users to share with others in a way that they would not otherwise, because their hands are occupied and there is not the same need for direct eye contact.

In my observation of the yarn shop group, there is often ribald humour, and (sometimes interlinked) personal sharing—about work, relationships, housing—that is more readily intimate than one would normally expect among a group of strangers and acquaintances (with a few burgeoning friendships). The common interest provides a wealth of topics—such as yarn, choice of needles, knitting shops, patterns, designers, and upcoming events—to talk about. Asking about another’s knitting project is a ‘non-threatening conversation starter’ (Prigoda and McKenzie 2007, 104), and keeping up to date with the progress of a garment—and providing opinions and advice—is a way of building friendship connections over time. The pride and excitement one knitter has as she shows the group a completed project is often echoed by others in the group who have seen it progress and have offered advice and moral support along the way, with solidarity with difficulties and mistakes an important aspect of this, and a social glue. The investment in each other’s creative projects is cohesive of a group, even when the participants are working on individual projects.

The social value of knitting groups, the profound friendships of regular meetings and shared endeavour, the means of joining a new community, meeting people and making friends, has some parallels with the role that religious groups play. At the yarn shop, two participants with mental health difficulties told me that they come to the shop just to be there and knit when they know they need some social interaction, and the act of knitting makes that possible for them. Here craft groups are fulfilling the social needs that are also met by religious communities, once to a much greater extent than with today’s much documented, dramatic, decline in the congregational domain. One of these participants, a man in his fifties, commented to me that ‘people go to church more as they get older for the social reasons as well as religious ones’, but the social connections that others get from church he gets from knitting. For the young women who meet once a week at the yarn shop knitting group, it has clearly been a way to make friends and become part of the community when moving to a

new place—many are students or professionals who have recently moved to the city. Miranda (57) told me of the importance of her knitting group after moving to a new city for her husband's job:

So I Googled online about knitting groups [...] and it was what saved me. You get out, you chat to people and they were so welcoming and lovely.

A regular churchgoer, Miranda also used the word 'fellowship' to describe what she gets from her knitting group, and commented that she was glad she did not have to choose between church and the knitting group, as she is not sure which one she would pick.

Amidst transitory urban life, with the general lack of enduring and emplaced community, knitting groups and yarn shops are, like religious congregations, a locus of social life. Yet attending a knitting group meets these social needs in a 'subjective' rather than 'congregational' way: it leaves space for individual choice and flexibility without demanding that one commit any more time than one wishes to on a casual basis. While all of the interview participants had attended a knitting group at least once, only a couple were at the time of the interview regularly attending a group, although several intended to start again once they had the time. Knitting group membership seems to be something that fits into one's life, rather than requiring that one's life is shaped around it. However, I found in my fieldwork that many knitting groups have a core of several members for whom attending the group is an important commitment. While some of the interview participants said that they had not made significantly close friendships through knitting, several others had: in particular the two pairs of women that I interviewed together, as well as the three women that came together to the focus group, demonstrated warm and close friendships that are mediated by knitting.

Online knitting communities, which are for many thoroughly enmeshed with the in-person knitting world, are described as ‘a lifeline’ by more than one of my participants. In the focus group discussion, Kate described knitting as ‘a lovely way to build up relationships from afar [...] you can make friends across the world because of it’. Leslie then spoke of the generosity she experienced from the online knitting community after losing her home and possessions in a house fire, because ‘any crafter [...] can imagine how it feels’:

I just kept getting parcels. Groups that I had been involved in had got together [...] ‘the Pay It Forward people have all put this together and they’ve all gone in the stash and found their favourite piece’.

Knitting’s status as a subculture, with the attendant senses of belonging and identity, arguably has some echoes of religious belonging. For many of the knitters I observed and interviewed, there is a shared language, patterns of behaviour and consumption (spoken of in a semi-ironic manner, for example referring to one’s yarn collection as ‘stash’). Throughout the interviews and participant observation, the same designers, yarn-dyers, shops and events came up again and again, and without wishing to offer facile parallels with gurus, sacred texts, pilgrimage, and so on, the intricacies of this shared passion created a sense of belonging on a macro-level. For example, Pauline felt comfortable during a yarn festival staying in a rented house with strangers she had got in touch with on Ravelry:

And one of them, who’d come over from Detroit, her partner actually said to her ‘You mean you’re gonna go all that way and stay in a house with somebody you’ve only met online?!’ ‘It’ll be fine. They’re knitters, it’s fine’. And it was, it was absolutely fine.

Another participant told me she can tell if the person looking at her on knitting on the train is a knitter herself by the expression on her face, and then two strangers can talk to each other

as if they have known each other for years, because they have knitting in common. One knitting group member responded to the explanation of my research on the consent form by saying to me:

I'm glad you're researching [knitting and religion]—when I was at Edinburgh Yarn Festival [2015] at the weekend, I thought how all these hundreds of people in this room are all so happy because of knitting.

The companion magazine of the 2016 Edinburgh Yarn Festival is entitled *Wool Tribe*:

When we think of our festival, we think primarily of the tribe of people we belong to, and whose presence—and love of wool—makes our event what it is. The chosen name represents this feeling of belonging to a very special group (Kelly and Koehlmos 2016, 3).

### **Subjective Wellbeing and Spirituality**

After I had turned off the recording of our interview and was getting ready to leave Petra's office, she asked me about my central research questions. In my answer, I used a phrase along the lines of 'the implicit religiousness of knitting'. Petra, a 52-year-old university lecturer, responded, 'I could buy that. Kind of a *spirituality*'. I did not press her about what she meant by 'spirituality' on my way out of the door; it may simply have referred to the vague 'sort of religious but not quite' meaning debated in the literature and increasingly adopted by health and social care professionals (see Gardner 2011). Or perhaps Petra has an understanding of spirituality similar to that which I work with in this research, as relating to expressive-therapeutic practices, with an emphasis on wholeness, self-development and wellbeing. Indeed, while the tape was still running, the following was part of our conversation:

P: So what got me through, what kept me sane during [that] time was really the knitting. I once saw a T-shirt somewhere in a shop window that said ‘Gardening: cheaper than therapy and you get tomatoes’. And you can transfer that to knitting quite easily. You get socks!

AF: In what way? Why do you think that is?

P: There is something very soothing about knitting. I mean, it’s the repeated actions; if you’re doing a complex pattern it kind of puts things into perspective, it takes your mind off stuff that goes wrong. I find knitting colours very soothing [...] something like that <gestures to her bright magenta scarf and shawl> really lifts me.

The aspects that Petra lists here—the ‘soothing’ rhythm of the repetitive action, the absorption of the mind in a specific and satisfying task, and enjoyment of the materials used (colours, in this example, but also the tactility of the yarn)—are mentioned throughout the increasingly voluminous research literature on the benefit of knitting to wellbeing (Corkhill 2014; Duffy 2007; Kenning 2015; Mayne 2016; Riley, Corkhill and Morris 2013), including in specific healthcare contexts (Clave-Brule et al 2009; Potter 2016).

These and similar research findings are regularly reported in popular media, for example a CNN online article (Wilson 2014) that links the therapeutic element of knitting with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of ‘flow’, the state of being fully engaged in what one is doing, ‘the secret to happiness’. Ideas about the benefits of knitting to health and wellbeing were expressed by my fieldwork participants. One knitting group attendee told me that she took up knitting to help manage her neurological condition, because of its benefit to motor skills, and wanting a hobby to help with anxiety, especially during wait times at hospital. Hazel, 54, described to me how she took up knitting again after a twenty-year gap having come across an online article that ‘knitting was a good way to prevent Alzheimer’s’.

Interviewee Carla responded to the question ‘What do you get out of knitting and spinning?’ with the following:

It’s very relaxing. There’s a whole kind of thing about...I don’t know if you’ve heard of EMDR? It’s all to do with sort of your left and the right side of your brain and putting things back in the right compartments. And knitting’s—that whole functionality of doing something with both sides [...] kind of re-sorts things. So I think that’s why lots of people find it relaxing, but maybe don’t realise why they do. So I find it very therapeutic in that sense.

The way that knitting is, by some practitioners, explicitly sought out as a practice that promotes wellbeing suggests that it may be considered alongside other health regimes on the ‘spiritual’ spectrum, such as yoga and aromatherapy. More explicitly, knitting is described as ‘meditative’ and linked with ‘mindfulness’, for example in Betsan Corkhill’s self-described ‘self-help’ manual *Knit for Health and Wellness* (2014, 34-35; 62). Craft activist and writer Betsy Greer compares knitting to meditation and yoga, in her description her own experience of taking up knitting, with its ‘inner rhythm’ and ‘inner stillness’ (2008, 1-2). Interview participant Vanessa, a 61-year-old Episcopal Christian, drew parallels between the contemplative space opened up for her by knitting and the more conventionally ‘religious’ practice of going on retreat:

if I know I’m getting wound up [...] if I knit, I know that just the feel of the yarn and the movement [...] I’ll pick up something like a sock, that I don’t have to look at and I can just sit and knit round and round. And undoubtedly I find that really calming [...] an almost unconscious entry into a more prayerful, more attentive way of being [...] it feels a bit like—I went on retreat to [*centre name*] every year for 20 years [...] And I would get to the gate [...] and sort of feel my, the cares of the world left behind

on one side. [...] it was somewhere I just knew for certain that I was going to engage with God, and something would happen. And I think picking up my knitting when I'm feeling out of sorts is a bit like that.

One participant had set up a knitting group at an HIV care centre, and described the impact of learning to knit for some of the service users with chronic mental health issues. One example she gave was a woman for whom 'it's really quite extraordinary to see the difference' in that she is now able to sit and knit for 45 minutes or so before taking a cigarette break:

but then she'll come back in and she'll do the same again. [...] it's done loads for her self-esteem because she is very proud of it, but I think the most significant thing is that it's completely settled her.

For some participants, the process of fibre-craft practice contributes to wellbeing not only as a way of alleviating stress and other negative affects, but also as a real source of joy, in a way much like the concept of 'flow' or (in the words of potter Cecilia Davis Cunningham) 'the easy union of eye, hand, and brain' (1995) with the materials with which one is working. The transcribed text only goes some way towards conveying the delight that suffused Beth (38, a homemaker) as she described the experience of handspinning cashmere using a supported spindle:

The yarn isn't the best yarn I've ever made but it's the best experience I ever had, because it was just like the cashmere wanted to be spun that way. [...] It was tricky at first [...] But by the end, I was just like, 'this is like magic'. You know, when everything clicks and you're like, 'this is magic, this is happening!' And I was just like 'this is the best time ever'.

In addition to the positive effects provided by the physical process of knitting, other well-documented benefits to wellbeing are the sense of achievement and creative satisfaction of the end product, the knitted item. In my fieldwork this was especially evident in the pieces the interview participants chosen to bring along as ‘a finished object that is particularly important to you’. While some were chosen because of an external emotional or relational resonance, many selected pieces that demonstrated mastery of a new technique, or those they considered to be their best work or regarded as especially beautiful; others talked me through a number of examples on their Ravelry ‘project page’. Several were able to describe in detail items that they had made decades ago. Betsan Corkhill (2014) writes that knitting works well as a creative outlet because it provides a basic foundation and structure to individual expression and creativity. Morag (52, an administrator) commented along similar lines: she enjoys ‘get[ing] really creative within the limits’ of patterns and the charity shop-bought yarn that she restricts herself to: ‘I try and create things out of whatever basically comes my way’.

A number of participants said that they appreciated how in knitting there is a physical end product, ‘something to show’ for your time and effort. Catherine (38) told me that she found the material nature of the end product to be a particular source of satisfaction, especially since she works as an academic, and as a parent ‘you are working all the time but all you have to show for it at the end of the day is that the kids are still alive!’ Janet (48), unable to work because of chronic depression, explains why she chose to take up knitting for the first time since childhood:

Because I don’t work, because of my health, a lot of the time I don’t feel that I’m achieving very much, and I think I was looking for something that I could look at and think ‘I’m achieved something, I’ve spent two hours doing it, but I’ve got something that I can show for it at the end of that time’. And, you know, I’m not an artist, so

there was no point in me taking up painting or art or anything like that. So I thought ‘Well, Mum’s got loads of knitting needles, just try knitting again’. And I did, and I’ve been hooked ever since.

The perception of knitting as everyday, domestic and lacking the status of ‘art’ meant that for Janet it was a non-threatening practice to take up for the benefit of her self-esteem. Janet knits nearly every evening, and several participants reported that they ‘need’ to knit every day, even if it is just a little bit.

Crafting for wellbeing is an aspect of the rise of ‘subjective wellbeing culture’ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), of seekers engaging with expressive-therapeutic practices as part of a project of self-development and self-care, discovering for themselves what is meaningful and valuable for them, and what most enables them to cope with the demands of family, work, and busy modern life. An explicit link between knitting and the word ‘spirituality’ is found in memoirs *The Knitting Sutra: Crafting as Spiritual Practice* (Lydon 1997) and *Zen and the Art of Knitting* (Murphy 2002), and instruction manual *Mindful Knitting* (Manning 2004).

Callie Janoff explains why she and friends founded ‘The Church of Craft’:

we asked each other, ‘What in your life is spiritual?’ [...] We all came to the same answer: making things. When we make things we are connecting to that part of ourselves that we imagine is the spiritual part, the part most resembling divinity (2008, 55).

In the quotation from Janoff, we see craft as spirituality in a more explicit sense of spirituality that is framed around beliefs as well as practices. Yet I would argue that knitting for wellbeing can be understood as spirituality in a more implicit way, concerned with the reasons and effects of taking up certain practices rather than any transcendent concepts underpinning them.

Both knitting and spirituality (whether explicit or implicit) are gendered, with the overwhelming majority of practitioners being female. While there are cultural reasons for knitting itself being regarded as the domain of women,<sup>3</sup> I would also suggest that knitting for wellbeing is predominately practiced by women for much the same reasons that Linda Woodhead (2008, see also Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Houtman and Aupers 2008) gives in response to the holistic spirituality ‘gender puzzle’. In this analysis, women are more likely to be involved with holistic spirituality because of the particular anxieties of agency and duty faced by contemporary (particularly middle-class and middle-aged) women. The rapid shift of social expectations within just a few generations, as well as the common experience of managing a career at the same time as carrying the burden of care for family, means that

[p]ost-traditional women are therefore more likely than post-traditional men to be haunted by the questions of meaning and identity that are evoked by detraditionalisation [...] ‘What is it that I really want?’, ‘Is this really the sort of life I want to live?’, ‘What sort of person am I, really?’. Post-traditional women are more likely than post-traditional men to embark on a spiritual quest and sacralise their selves (Houtman and Aupers 2008, 110).

The holistic milieu (and, I contend, knitting for wellbeing) is part of women seeking ‘more robust, independent, entitled forms of selfhood’, even if that is simply through ‘the mere fact of taking this time for yourself, paying for it, and entering a [...] woman-dominated space’ (Woodhead 2008, 157).

In autumn 2014 I facilitated a session of the AHRC-funded ‘wellMAKING Craftivists’ Garden’ research project, run by Sarah Corbett (of the Craftivist Collective) and Ann Roberts

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<sup>3</sup> Although it is becoming more popular with men (see Merz 2014) and in the participant observation strand of my fieldwork I did have two male participants.

and Fiona Hackney. One participant responded to the question ‘How does crafting enable you to contribute productively to society?’ with the answer ‘I contribute productively to society in other ways—my crafting is for *me*’. This theme emerged throughout the interviews: for example, stay-at-home mum, Laura (33, educated to degree level) emphasised that she rarely knits for her 2-year-old son:

when he was born I was a bit like ‘I’m not gonna knit anything for you because I spend all my time looking after you, my knitting time is *my time* now, it’s just for me’. So I got a bit selfish.

Beth (38) commented on how she had not experienced the same difficulties as a friend of hers had on giving up work after having a child, perhaps because her social life had always been based in craft and church rather than work, but also the role her craft practice has as a form of self-development:

I think a big part of it has to do with the crafting, because I’m in the middle of learning something new [...] and trying things that are challenging to me and things that I find not just comforting, but intellectually stimulating. It meant that not going back to work was not a big deal, because I wasn’t relying on that for my kind of...for that part of my life. Craft does that a lot for me. I read about it, I think about it, I talk about it with people [...] and so I don’t miss paid employment, because I am still working, it’s just not in the same way. But I’m working on projects that are just mine, that are just for me, and that do challenge me, and so it makes it a lot easier.

The role that women ascribe to their craft practice may also relate to the tensions of work-life balance as well as family-versus-career. Pauline (59), a public health specialist, told me that she very rarely takes her knitting to work with her because ‘it’s important to keep something

of the things that you enjoy out of your working life, your professional life, so that you've got something for yourself'.

Yet perhaps knitting is so popular as an expressive-therapeutic practice partly because it is an enjoyable process that results in practical items that can be given to other people as gifts. Several participants commented on how knitting can convert leisure time spent watching the television into time spent doing something 'useful', demonstrating a certain tension between leisure as self-care and the importance of practicality (with several participants linking this with their Scottish identity, and one indeed with growing up in a 'Calvinist' culture). This tension is also shown in knitters' attitude to yarn stash, with how much yarn they own being a topic of conversation in nearly all my interviews; for some having a large amount of costly yarn was a source of anxiety, but in the main a source of self-deprecation and non-serious guilt. Laura (33) compared her own tendency to break her resolve to buy yarn that she already has a planned project for, with her mother's approach:

It's interesting because my mum doesn't understand having a stash [...] She couldn't buy yarn and then go 'Oh what am I gonna do with it?' She's got to have a plan, and then she buys it. [...] I think it's a generational thing in a way. The way she talks about yarn is quite—I say 'old fashioned', she says that I speak about yarn in an American way.

As Woodhead (2008) stresses concerning women's involvement in the holistic milieu, practices motivated by a concern for self-care are not automatically self-indulgent. For several participants, making things by hand is a significant ethical and political choice, a reaction to environmental necessity and globalised capitalist reality. Many were involved in knitting for charity, activist or commemorative projects; nearly all knitted gifts on a regular basis. A common theme that emerged during the interviews was knitting as a source of

connection with mothers and grandmothers, even while differentiating one's own knitting from theirs.

Alongside recognising what one has learnt from previous generations, knitting for one's children remains a meaningful way of ritualising these most sacred relationships. The knitted piece 'significantly important to you' that most moved me was Janet's recently completed, complexly-cabled kilt sock:

My son's a piper and Mum always wanted him to have a made-to-measure handmade kilt for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. And, unfortunately, Mum passed away in May of 2015, very suddenly. And my sister and I spoke about it, and I said that I would like to honour Mum's wish [...] And then I thought 'That's a shame, because he knows what he's getting for his 21<sup>st</sup>, he's not going to have anything really to open [...] And then I thought 'Hmm, I could do him a pair of handknit kilt socks!' [...] it means a lot to me because it's the most technical knit that I've ever done. It's also because it's for my son, and I'm just really really hoping he likes it! But it also has a bit of my mum in it, as well. So that's why it means such a lot to me.

### **Conclusion: Knitting's Subjective Turn**

At age 67, retired NHS mental health practitioner Emma is the oldest participant in my fieldwork; I also found her to be the most enthusiastic in asking me about the academic aspects of my research. We met at a knitting group that meets one evening a week in the public library of one of Scotland's smaller cities, which I attended after having interviewed another member. Emma was knitting a scarf in dark coloured, fine and fuzzy yarn, which was looking beautiful but progressing slowly, because Emma is a relatively new knitter who mostly only knits while at the group. She was first taught to knit by group members, and she joined the group in order to learn. Emma explained to me that craft activity had been

somewhat discouraged by her family when she was growing up, and she decided to learn to knit after reaching the age of 60 and realising she had nothing she could do with her hands.

In retrospect, in the early stages of this research my thinking on the implicit spirituality of knitting was structured by models of *revival* and *conversion*. Perhaps biased by my own experience (as a relatively young woman, for whom learning to knit in my late teens was indeed life-changing, see Fisk 2012) as well as the emphasis in the literature, I uncritically accepted the discourse of a *resurgence*, of vast numbers of new and younger knitters, thus neglecting those for whom knitting never really went away (cf Hackney 2013). These assumptions were challenged by my fieldwork. While the majority of the participants in the knitting group I observed were indeed in the younger age range—and one of these (aged 22) attended the focus group—of my formal interview and remaining focus group participants the youngest was my own age at the time of the interview (33), with three in their late 30s, and all others aged 43-61. Some of the women in this age group had knitted continuously since childhood, and others had chosen to take it up again more recently after a break. Yet many of these participants did report a change in their approach to knitting in more recent years, which some contrasted with their mothers and grandmothers who first taught them. For example, during the focus group discussion Kate (aged 56) reflected:

our parents used to knit but it wasn't so much for a pleasure activity it was for [...] necessity. I think people lost the love of the knitting for a while; it became 'What's the point of spending all this much time? You can buy stuff that's nice and cheaper'. But then there's a revision of the whole attitude towards knitting out there, it's much more fashionable, popular [...] It's got a resurgence, with younger people coming back in and getting a little bit more 'this is fun, this is relaxing' [...] I mean, I used to knit a lot a long time ago, and then I just got thinking 'there's not really much point in

this'. Then I heard [of local group] [...] and I thought 'Oh that sounds great, I'd love to go along, it's been ages since I enjoyed knitting'.

For these women, knitting is no longer regarded primarily an economical way to clothe one's family, with cheap yarn used to make items always intended as gifts or donations to good causes (as remains the tendency for many of the older generation). Instead, knitting is an elective practice adopted as something personally fulfilling.

Perhaps the shift in knitting culture is a microcosm of the wider social shift to ethical individualism described as the 'subjective turn' (Taylor 1991), which Heelas and Woodhead (2005) posit as an explanation for the decline in 'life-as' religion, with its emphasis on common duty and identity, and the flourishing of 'subjective-life' religion, focused on self-development and fulfilment, of which the rise of holistic spirituality is especially indicative. Of course it is not a simplistic binary, and Heelas and Woodhead identify a 'relational subjectivist' pole of the subjective turn, of which subjective wellbeing culture and holistic spirituality is a part. While knitters of previous eras will have enjoyed their craft, found it to be a source of community and connection, there is not the same emphasis on 'this is something I do *for myself*'.

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