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## Knot Without You: Crafting in Social Groups and Subsequent Mental Health Benefits

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# KNOT WITHOUT YOU: CRAFTING IN SOCIAL GROUPS AND SUBSEQUENT MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS

Megan Wolyniec

The act of knitting has proven to have many health benefits such as lowering blood pressure, heart rate, lowering muscle tension, reducing the effects and/or symptoms of depression and anxiety, slowing the onset of dementia, increasing one's sense of well-being, reducing one's sense of loneliness as well as isolation, along with increasing one's sense of usefulness and inclusion in society (Knitforpeace.org.uk, 2018; Anderson & Gustavson, 2016). The act of knitting, or the more generalized activity of crafting, has the ability to provide a person in a period of transition with a sense of continuity and support. (Kenning, 2015).

This research study aimed to prove through an experimental design that crafting holds mental health benefits, such as increased emotional self-efficacy (measured via Emotional Self-Efficacy Scale, ESES), for participants when practiced in social groups. The Emotional Self-Efficacy Scale (ESES) is a four-factor model, designed to measure emotional intelligence. The items of the scale reflect upon the perception of emotions within one's self as well as within others, the use of emotions to enable thought processes, the understanding of emotions as well as emotional knowledge within one's self and within others, and the regulation of emotions within one's self and others (Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2008). The ESES survey consists of a series of statements that each fall under one of these four factors (perception, regulation, understanding, and facilitation). These statements were divided by factor and randomly selected so as to shorten the

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survey and maintain test-retest reliability and to maintain interest as participants would be taking the survey twice a week for three weeks.

The studied experimental group was the St. John's Bread & Life Knitting/Crocheting group.

St. John's Bread & Life is a social service center in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The center offers necessary social services to the underprivileged community of Brooklyn (St. John's Bread & Life, n.d.). The crafting group is comprised of members who attend St. John's Bread & Life for the site's services along with employees at the site. During the period in which I worked with the group, there was a surge in its attendance, leaving a weekly average of twenty members, nearly fifty percent of whom are Spanish speakers.

The studied control group was a group of senior citizens that prepare the takeaway bags for the kitchen, fold plastic bags, and handle the plasticware, napkins, and Styrofoam dishes used to store the food. The group consists on average of five senior citizens. The repetitive action of the process they undergo in preparing the items amidst a social group in the very same space as the experimental group made this bagging group a strong contestant for a control group.

The process of data collection went as such: the first week, I introduced myself to the groups and asked if anyone was interested in partaking in the research studies. Those who were interested were given a consent form which was xeroxed and then a copy was returned to the participant. Then, prior

to the group activity or as near to the beginning of the group activity as could be managed, the willing participants with a signed consent form were given eight items from the ESES (i.e. “Correctly identify your own positive emotions) with a scale from 1-5 that asked participants to rate how confident they were in their ability to act upon the statement. For the purpose of confidentiality, each questionnaire asked for “First Letter of FIRST NAME; First Letter of LAST NAME; DAY you were born” rather than a full name. This left each participant with a four-character code that could be used to track their progress throughout the study without revealing their identity. The eight items ensured equal representation of the four factors of the ESES model: Understanding, Perception, Facilitation, and Regulation. Once this survey was completed, I collected the forms and

gave those participating a post-it note that served as a receipt and a ticket for the post-group activity survey. When the groups were nearing the end of their time together, the post-its were exchanged for a post-activity survey. The pre and post surveys were the same and each week, the control and experimental groups received the same surveys. Those who required Spanish translations of the consent form and surveys were provided with them.

This data collection took place over the course of three weekly, consecutive sessions and was later analyzed via an encrypted Google Spreadsheet. In this analysis, it was found that there exists a moderately strong positive correlation (0.63) between participation in a crafting group and measurable emotional self- efficacy (see Figure 1).

### Correlation of Self-Efficacy and Social Crafting

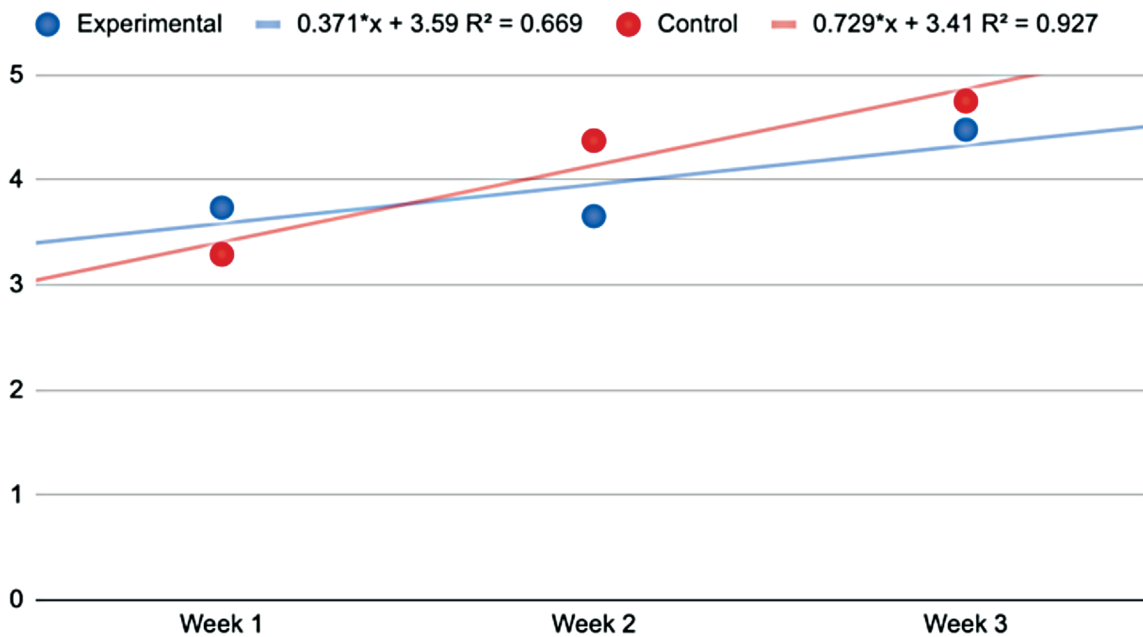


Figure 1: This graph demonstrates the relationship between measured self-efficacy and social crafting over the study’s period. Both groups demonstrate a positive relationship between the two variables, the experimental group demonstrating a 0.63 correlation. The control group’s success may be due to the fact that there were significantly less members of this population

This signifies that as participation in a crafting group increases, self-efficacy increases as well. While this finding was valuable to the study- it was not nearly as influential as the observations made during the crafting group sessions. It was observed that members of the crafting group had developed friendships and bonds with one another, but most notably mentorships. The members would walk around the room and comment on one another's work, always praising or offering some advice as to how to continue or form the project. They would keep track of the progress everyone was making and check in on projects they had become invested in, such as the creation of a gorgeous blanket for a granddaughter. Yarns would be recommended and shared, despite the weekly ration they received of one skein per person. Veteran women of the group who only spoke Spanish would be quick to take new women who did not know how to crochet or speak Spanish under their wing for the day, crossing the language barrier with their crochet hooks and yarn, teaching how to begin, how to continue, and how to finish. These kinds of bonds would result in excitement to share projects with one another and to allow the "teachers" to see how the pupils had been practicing. Even I was pulled into these mentorships and check-ins when I began to bring my own knitting to the group and found that members would praise the progress I made (though messy) and offer to teach crocheting instead since it is "easier". These relationships were important to me if not beloved. Yet, sitting amidst them- I was unsure how to proceed until I embarked on a service trip to El Paso and had the opportunity to meet with migrant families and social service groups.

In Juarez, Mexico I learned of a crocheting/ knitting/looming group that was being utilized as a form of art therapy at a shelter for immigrant

families who had successfully crossed the border, but were returned to Mexico, forced to await a court date. These families had experienced turbulent physical and psychological trauma, but came together to create necklaces, bracelets, bags, sweaters, hats, scarves, and socks that they could even sell to support their families. In learning this, I realized how diverse this particular facet of the crafting community is and how necessary its resources are to bringing both emotional and physical comforts. It was there that I realized the creation of a website focused on support and interaction amidst crafting groups would not only expand the opportunity for mentorships, but allow for increased social and economic opportunities for underprivileged crafting communities.

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The website ([www.knotwithoutyouproject.com](http://www.knotwithoutyouproject.com)) was built with the intention of exchange of lessons, patterns, and events while increasing a sense of social connectivity. The site has a link to a Google drive folder with materials that assist group members in the facilitation of group mentoring sessions. There is also the opportunity to sign up for a newsletter sent from the email [knotwithoutyouproject@gmail.com](mailto:knotwithoutyouproject@gmail.com) that would be a

baseboard for members to reach out to one another and connect over ideas or events. The site also has links to various social media pages that could increase this connectivity. This is done with the hope that crafting groups will be able to support one another and gain an understanding about global issues and how crafting provides an outlet escape from such experienced oppression. Another hope for this website is that it will raise awareness about the effectiveness of this particular form of art therapy, thus allowing for craft stores or willing community members to donate goods, services, or even purchase from these communities. At the bottom of the website, a link can be found to a survey that would enable feedback about the

site to be recorded and improved upon. To connect with the original idea of creating a sustainable service platform, the website has listed other projects that accept crafted donations to empower site visitors to partake in social development.

Knot Without You, as its name portends, is a resource that is based on community. Yes, the name was borne of a search to find a fitting pun, but has since served as an anchor for this research, acting as a reminder that while partaking in crafting is possible and fruitful on one's own- the benefits amplify when there is a sense of belonging within a greater community. Furthermore, Knot Without You exists to show that while one crafting group is strong and vital, there could exist a network of support beyond the group, ready to help and provide insight to strengthen each other's efforts. This is not to say that crafting should be the primary concern of designing social services, but rather the project aims to push those who are involved in delegating resources for such important services to seek what is important to communities it serves. Whether this importance lies in crafting, music, dancing, or other cultural practices, Knot Without You hopes to serve as a reminder that alternative therapies exist and blossom in a sense of community, but knot without your help, your dedication, and your participation.

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Megan Marie Wolyniec studied Psychology and English with minors in Social Justice, International Studies, and Theology at St. John's University, where she was a member of the Ozanam Scholars Program and Honors Program before graduating in January of 2020. During her time pursuing an undergraduate degree, Megan Marie presented at the University of Dayton at IMPACT Conference on the structural discrimination against the ambulatory disabled community in NYC in 2018. In 2019, Megan Marie was awarded the 2nd place prize in Undergraduate Research for her poster presentation on this research.