

# Altruism and Wellbeing as Care Work in a Craft-based Maker Culture

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This paper aims to examine motivations of participants for being involved in a crafts-based, women-only maker organization. Over a period of three months, we observed and interviewed ten women aged 42 – 78 to explore how they experienced being involved in knitting, sewing, crocheting, card making and other similar craft forms. Using the ethos of care as a lens to interpret our data, we found that our participants perceived making as an ‘outlet’ for them to perform activities that support their physical and mental wellbeing. Moreover, they perceived making as a tool to support others in need and help the larger community rather than a self-serving achievement. We also observed how the use of technology was inherent into their craft making activities that supported not only the making processes but also sharing these with others. Our findings highlight the ‘care work’ that goes into making in such a social setting that generally goes unnoticed when the focus is purely on instrumental and objective aspects of making. We believe that these findings will inform CSCW researchers to think about the not-so-visible qualities of making that elevate care (for self and for others), and to support these via the design of innovative technologies.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** ~ **Field Studies** • Human-centred computing ~ Ethnographic studies

## KEYWORDS

Maker culture, Care, HCI, Craftwork

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Our field has embraced new forms of maker cultures by looking into feminist makerspaces [4], community makerspaces [18], and maker cultures that involve low socioeconomic status members [19], stay at home fathers [1], differently abled people [13] and older adults [17]. With such efforts, the discourse on making and maker culture has moved from hobbyists and technosolutionists [12] to anyone who might be interested in any type of making, which calls for developing new and alternative narratives on maker culture.

This paper aims to make a similar contribution by looking into the making practices around women’s involvement in an organization that focused on making related to art and craft. Participating in art and craft activities involve cognitive, physical and social efforts. Yet, it

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provides pleasure, self-expression and social engagement [8]. In particular, being involved in maker groups enables participants spending time with others and share creative skills. There are personal benefits to getting involved in maker organizations. For example, studies have shown that by getting involved in craft-based activities older women find purpose in their lives, which contributes to their emotional wellbeing [10]. In particular, for women battling ailments (e.g. cancer) craftwork has been shown to help them look at their positive experiences, enhancing their self-worth and social identity [14]. Recent studies in HCI have also looked at ‘art therapies’ to involve people with complex communication needs into the design process [9].



**Figure 1: Members crocheting alongside technology.**

In collaboration with a women-only craft-based maker organization, we conducted a study focused on understanding motivations and values women participants derive from being involved in creative activities such as knitting, sewing, crocheting, and card making. We recruited and interviewed ten participants aged 42 – 78, who regularly attended the organization. While the organization was open for women of any age, a large majority of its participants were aged over sixty. We use Puig de la Bellacasa’s [25] work on “care” as an interpretive lens to study making in such a setting. To Puig de la Bellacasa, the focus on care can help researchers highlight often invisible and affective aspects of everyday activities that are generally missed when the attention is purely on instrumental aspects. Using a feminist standpoint, she claims that a focus on care can signify ordinary labour activities that are crucial in getting things done. Here care is defined as “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair “our world” so that we can live in it as well as possible.” [26] In HCI, we have seen the idea of care being used to study the maintenance of collaborative work within makerspaces [21]. The notion of care, as proposed in Puig de la Bellacasa’s work, is defined more broadly to encompass ourselves, our bodies, others, and the environment where intricate activities take place. As such, the lens of care provides ways of thinking about things rather than providing any specific methods. Care work is always situated, and researchers should avoid strict categorization into what goes under the ‘umbrella of caring’. As Puig de la Bellacasa [25] comments, “care stands for a signifier of necessary yet mostly dismissed labors of everyday maintenance of life, an ethico-political commitment to neglected things, and the affective remaking of relationships with our objects.”

Using the lens of care, we found that participants used craftwork as an ‘outlet’ to intentionally cater to their health and wellbeing. Away from their everyday routines, participants perceived their time at the craft organization as an opportunity to socialize and get involved in low-risk making activities. We also found that most participants’ craft-work making activities were aimed to make things for others who were in the desperate need for support through artefacts such as

quilts, beanies, warm clothing and craft-based toys – thus highlighting their altruistic motives. Making is also seen to be well grounded in local and contemporary issues and was often driven by a common interest within the organization. The use of technologies such as iPads, Facebook, Pinterest and digital cameras to support their making was quite prevalent across the organization. Fig 1 is an example where one of our participants is crocheting while reading its patterns on her iPad.

This paper makes two general contributions to the CSCW literature. First, it provides an analysis of care work that goes in supporting making in a craft-based maker organization which often gets unnoticed when the focus is on what gets made over how and why they get made. It shows how making activities associated with a range of craft supports altruism and works as an outlet to support participants' social and physical health. Second, it creates a discourse around making and maker cultures that is inherently social and creates building blocks to connect making to health issues in design research and practice.

## 2 RELATED WORK

Making involves practices ranging from fabrication, hack, do-it-yourself (DIY) to repairing of digital and non-digital objects. Research into this domain has shown how values associated with learning, creativity, innovation, peer support, use of shared resources and entrepreneurship are inherent in the maker and DIY cultures [2, 5, 7, 11, 12, 15, 20, 27, 28].

Research on making has broadened its focus from hobbyists and technology enthusiasts to involving general population focusing on feminist makers [4], older adults [17, 22], stay-at-home fathers [1], and makers from community-based organizations [18]. Common themes that come out from these studies are around inclusivity, empowerment and recognition. For example, Fox et al.'s [4] work on feminist makerspaces has shed light on women's relationship with technologies and how ideals related to 'recognition' have become important over 'access' in these spaces. A study by Rogers et al. [22] explored the use of MaKey-MaKey kits among older adults and found that participants exhibited creativity and coordination while working together and felt a sense of achievement.

Recently, this area of research has also involved vulnerable groups including refugee children [16], low socio-economic status community members [19], and people with disability [13, 9]. For example, Stickel et al. [16] involved Palestinian refugee children into 3D printing activities and explored different dimensions of self-expressions exhibited by these participants. A study involving participants from low socioeconomic status background in a makerspace-like organization has shown that such participation benefited via peer-learning, community engagement and learning of work ethics [19]. Another study [30] involving a group of migrant women in craftwork showed that their crafts activities were strongly influenced by their culture of origin.

Making and being involved in some form of craft has shown to be therapeutic. Parkins [24] suggests that while the Zen-like features of knitting enables meditative benefits to participants, the recent uptake in such craft-based activities also reflect "an attempt to live differently at a different temporality, and to find meaning and identity in the practices of everyday life." [p.426] Another study [10] involving women over eighty has shown that participating in art and craft activities can provide a purpose to their lives and being appreciated by others can help in their subjective wellbeing. The use of methods such as 'art therapy' have also shown that participants enhanced their self-worth and developed a social identity around their involvement in art work [14]. Countries like Norway have institutionalised craft-based making activities to rehabilitate people who have had mental illnesses in their work places. In a study conducted by Horghagen et al. [29], it was found that people who visited these institutional craft-based meetings had

experienced positive change towards their mental health. In HCI too, we have increasingly seen the use of methods related to art therapy that can establish new forms of communications between researchers and participants through materials and their expressions [9].

### 3 THE STUDY

We collaborated with a women-only art and craft organization, based in southeast of Queensland, Australia. It was located in a suburb that has seen economic decline over decades, with growing unemployment and increase in population relying on government and charity support. The organization had over sixty registered members, where all of them sit together in a large community hall (Fig 2). Groups are formed based on members' interest in craftwork. While most of these members were retired, a smaller number of younger members also attended the organization. There were a wide array of art and craft activities involving knitting, sewing, crocheting, card making and so on seen at the organization.

After discussing our research aims with the organization's president, we recruited ten participants from the organization through a flyer and announcements made during ongoing sessions at the organization. Details about these participants are provided in Table 1. While this was a mix demography, most of our participants can be considered as belonging to a low socioeconomic status background, as for them government welfare was the only financial support. We also saw that several participants had care responsibilities of their ailing husbands or young grandchildren.



**Figure 2: Setup of the maker organization.**

We invited these participants for a semi-structured interview at the organization itself. The interviews involved understanding participants' ongoing craft activities, their reasons for joining, creative processes they applied and the larger effects of making on their wellbeing. The interviews lasted around 45 minutes to over an hour. We took photos of their artefacts, took field notes and audio recorded the conversations. As a token of appreciation, all the participants were given a \$10 gift card.

We included field notes, audio recorded interviews and photos in our analysis. Using thematic analysis [3], we created detailed notes and memos based on the audio recordings and did an open coding across our data set. We subsequently grouped our recurring patterns into specific categories. While we were specifically interested in exploring our participants' values

and practices associated with their visits to the maker organization, we did not guide our coding and categorization through any pre-deterministic theoretical framing. Following our own analysis of the data and having developed larger themes based on the analysis, we discussed our findings with our participants.

P	Age	Domestic Situation
1	71	Cares for ill husband and foster grandson
2	70	Widower, cares for son and grandson
3	59	Single, unstable housing, lives disability pension
4	64	Cares for ailing husband
5	76	Single, lives on disability pension
6	72	Cares for ailing husband, lives on pension
7	70	Married, financially stable
8	61	Married, teaches crocheting at home
9	78	Widower, lives on disability pension
10	42	Married, mother of four children

**Table 1. Participant Details.**

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Making as an ‘Outlet’

The focus on care enabled us to see activities that are generally not considered a part of making in a traditional utilitarian sense. We found that participants perceived their visits to the maker organization as an outlet to explicitly cater to their health and wellbeing by getting away from their domestic settings. A majority of participants had duty of care towards their family members, e.g. ailing partner and foster grandchild. Visiting the organization meant that our participants had a few hours of break from their caring duties and focus on themselves. As P1 said, *“coming to this place is an ‘outlet’ for me to just be away from my family for some time. It becomes just too hectic at home. I also do gardening at home to keep myself fresh.”* P1 looked after her ailing husband and occasionally also took care of her grandchildren. For her, visiting the organization was an opportunity to get away from her everyday routine and get involved in creative craft work. Participants such as P2, P4 and P5 also visited other similar craft-based organizations to conduct similar activities and keep themselves busy and engaged in craft activities. Participants intentionally made sure that they organized their everyday activities around the visits to the craft organization, which showed that they prioritised these visits over others.

Socializing with other members and meeting with friends were also the common reasons for our participants to visit the organization. As P5 said, it was *“a reason to get dressed up”*. Participants found it very relaxing to sit and knit or crochet while talking with others. P3 said, *“On some days I just don’t do anything when I am here. I just have chats with some friends. It’s not only about craft for me.”* She has had personal struggles with moving around different homes and shelters, hence, finding time to simply sit down, talking with others and relaxing was much appreciated. These examples show that visiting the organization was a pleasant experience in itself, and making creative craft and artefacts was not a priority of many participants.

The organization offered a low-risk participation into activities that women can easily habituate or learn from others. The way different kind of craft was organized across different tables also paved ways for participants to easily integrate into the environment. Being involved in activities such as knitting, crocheting, and sewing enabled participants to be physically and cognitively engaged in activities. Some participants found comfort in continuously working on

the same type of craft work (e.g. knitting), while others alternated through different craft work so that they do not get “bored”. Most participants have learnt and applied skills across knotting, crocheting, sewing, card making so on. This alternation added new challenges and learnings both in terms cognitive and physical skills. P4 said, *“There is always something to do and something to learn here. Sometimes, the centre invites external people to teach us new forms of art. The other day we had somebody who taught us Japanese art of knitting.”* More importantly, participants found it quite natural to navigate around different materials and crafts – making the whole experience predictable and familiar, which played a positive role towards their wellbeing. Regularity of visits to the organization enabled friendship amongst participants over time, especially people working around the same table. We saw that participants influenced each other on selecting their next projects; this often led them to work on similar kind of craft work. In a way, this helped them to talk more often to each other around their craft-specific questions and experiences. Some of the participants expressed during our interview that there was a lot of knowledge around art and craft in the organization and the new generation would not have access to such knowledge.

The organization also supported paid trips to visit nearby areas. At times some members used their visits to the organization to catch-up with their old friends through group lunches at the end of their craft sessions. We also saw that participants had become so close to each other that they relied on each other’s emotional support. During an interview, we found out that P8’s daughter had died a few months earlier. P7 and others supported her by helping her get through this difficult time, by bringing her to the organization and get her engaged in craftwork. It was a common practice around the organization to provide moral support to one another in the hour of need.

It is quite apparent that while making of creative crafts and artefacts are generally considered to be the main outcomes of the making endeavour, the labour that goes towards achieving these are often under-valued in research. Using the care lens [25], we presented a set of practices that are associated with making but highlight how participants expressed care towards 1) their own health – by treating their visits as an outlet to socialize, feel good about themselves (e.g. dressing up), relaxing by indulging in a low-risk participation where they can feel active both socially and mentally; and 2) wellbeing of others by providing peer support during learning activities and emotion and moral support where others were going through a bad time.

## 4.2 Making for Others

Another common practice observed as care work was that most members made their craft works for others. This included making craft-based artefacts for their own family members and for those who are in need for support.

Some of the members of the maker organization were also closely associated with other charitable organizations. Hence, the kinds of things that were developed at the organization were influenced by what was needed in the larger community. The members would make quilts, beanies and toy dolls to be given out to children’s hospitals, knitted cloths and hand-made greeting cards to be given to charitable organizations such as Salvation Army, among others. P9 commented, *“I always check with Glenda about what is needed by the charity that she volunteers for. The other day she asked me to make some dolls for amputee kids. I have made several of these over the last few weeks.”* On specific instances, the members of the organization would consolidate their efforts towards specific causes. For example, when our interviews were being conducted the local government had placed a ban on the use of plastic carry bags. In reaction, the members of the organization started knitting and crocheting bags that can be given out to people in need. Similarly, during Christmas and Easter the organization will come together to make cards that

can be given out to hospitals and charities. While many of the participants were not financially well off, they chose to help others over commercializing their work for financial benefits. It is important to note that, there were cases where participants (e.g. P6) chose to sell their work in the markets but this was very seldom.

Through making some participants put an effort to connect with their families. Most of the participants had children and grandchildren. They knitted sweaters and beanies for their grandchildren so that they can show their love and affection. P3 who made greeting cards and knitted cloths gave most her stuff to her family members. She commented, *"I don't have my own place, while I am staying with my son and daughter-in-law I want to be useful to them."* In a different example, P2 supported her grandson who was autistic and lived under her foster care. She knitted kitchen towels, table runners and household decorative items. She regularly brought her grandson to the market to sell these items. She commented, *"I don't go to market to earn money. I want Daniel to learn how to count money and interact with others at the market."* This way P2 used her making activities to help her grandson.

In contrast to the previous section where participants' engagement with the organization can be seen as care work, the examples discussed in this section shows that the resulting craft objects such as quilts, beanies and toys are given out to support altruistic motives of the participants. It was a kind of joint care work to stand along and support people in need.

### 4.3 Sharing & Documenting via Technology

All of our participants used technologies at different levels, in order to support their making activities. Participants used websites such as Ravelry to buy patterns, Facebook to show their work, Pinterest to get inspirations and archive useful creative works, YouTube tutorials to learn complex knitting and crocheting patterns and used digital cameras to capture photos of the work they created. The organization as such did not offer any of these technological resources, these were rather participants' own initiatives. P4 (Fig 1) was quite tech savvy and kept her iPad with her all the time. She had an archive of knitting patterns, inspirational books and magazine as PDFs in her iPad. She said, *"We share things around here. If I buy an interesting pattern from Ravelry, I would share that with anyone who asks me."* Her PDFs were annotated (Fig 3), where she would write her own notes and mark specific section to help others learn those patterns. P7 and P8 who were already close friends used their phones all the time to share ideas and ask questions. P7 said, *"most of my work is done when I am at home. I frequently ask P8 about specific things where I need some help. I also send her photos with some questions and she will call me back to explain. At this centre we more or less physically see each other's work, but we already discussed those prior to coming here."* P9 who was probably the least tech savvy as she did not use a smartphone or owned a computer. Even then, she regularly took photos of her work using a point-and-shoot camera and printed them as a form of a portfolio book that she can show others. Fig 3 (right) is where P9 shows her portfolio-like diary full of photos of the work she has produced over time. This diary was kept in her purse all the time and she used it as a way to show her work to family members and friends.

This section overlaps with section 4.2 in that it shows the relevance of the social aspects in a maker culture. It also shows the role technology plays in supporting care work. Examples such as sharing of paid craft patterns, using technology to keep in touch with peers outside of the regular hours of the organization and creating identity by displaying their work on social media sites and physical diaries show that sociotechnical assemblages have an important role in supporting care work.



**Figure 3: P4's annotated PDF collection (left) and P9's diary of work she has produced over time (right).**

## 5 DISCUSSION

In this paper, we examined the care work that goes into making in a women-only, craft-based, maker organization. Our findings show that making in such a setting is driven by the motivations to support one's wellbeing and altruistic aims. It is clear that the values that came out of our investigation are in strong contrast with the technology-based maker culture studied in HCI and CSCW research [5, 6, 11, 12, 17, 18, 21]. In the following we will position our findings within the existing literature and provide ways to use these findings for the CSCW research.

### 5.1 Care Work in Making

We are clearly not the first to study making and maker cultures through the care lens. Toombs et al. [21] explored the role of care in the maintenance of collaborative work in a technology makerspace. They found that community maintenance labour that goes into making activities are expressed by a varied set of explicit and implicit methods between the makerspace participants. While the authors assert that the acts of care work and the neoliberal libertarian ethos go hand in hand, in our findings we observed that care work was given higher importance by our participants, over democratic values associated with makerspaces. We found that care work spanned from individual level (e.g. attending the maker organization to relax, feel good about themselves and be physically active) to social level (e.g. providing social and emotional support as well as learning craft work from one another at the organization) to community level (e.g. making craft objects for others outside the organization).

The organization also exhibited a kind of care ethos where there was an interest to "do good" for the larger community. As we mentioned earlier, the organization was located in a relatively low socioeconomic status suburb, the participants were keen to make an impact on the community through their making activities. Working along side other agencies such as children's hospitals and charitable organizations such as the Salvation Army, the organization as a whole made sure that their work gets used by people who would value them the most. Even when the aim was to make things for family members, the attempt here was more on rejuvenating the existing relationships.

While knitting, crocheting, sewing and card making can be seen as highly gendered activities, the values and motivations that were exhibited by our participants were unique and comparable to Fox et al.'s [4] work. In that, recognition of women as technology makers and creating a

stronger hacker identity was quite apparent in [4]. In our findings, the participants identifying themselves as ‘makers’ was not really central to their identity. Rather, selflessness and kindness propagated through our participants’ making came out strongly as a part of their identity.

What is achieved from using a care-focused perspective to study making? It is clear that care is central to any effective community-based endeavours. While our work echoes the position discussed on the social studies of science literature [25], in that the explicit focus on care brings out affective labour into specific activities that goes unnoticed and is often undervalued, our work shed light on the peripheral aspects of making that look into health, wellbeing and altruistic motives of our participants. These on the one hand are unique findings for the CSCW literature, where previously issues such as participation, access and community maintenance were the focus [4, 21]. On the other hand, examples related to altruism take care work to an extreme where our participants mainly worked on artefacts that were meant for others in desperate need of support. Making craft-based dolls for amputee children, sewing blankets for poorer kids and making bags that people in need can use (in the light of the recent government regulations) show that making in the organization took care work to a whole different level. We believe that one of the reasons for such findings is the low-risk nature of the participation and engagement with the type of material the maker organization afforded. It was clear that while the traditional narratives around the maker culture were focused on entrepreneurship, start-ups and commercializing technological ideas [11]; our findings paint a more nuanced picture where altruism and care for the larger community was coming out strongly. This was especially surprising since most of our participants were financially less stable. This showed that the sense of pride and recognition they were getting through making craft had more value for them over making money by selling them.

## 5.2 Health and Making

Recent HCI studies have shown how a range of alternative narratives around maker cultures [1, 4, 17, 18, 19] have added new insights and garnered importance around inclusiveness and empowerment. Our findings add to this discourse by bringing insights around care work through altruism and wellbeing in a women-oriented craft making. We initially did not see making in this community as being connected to health and wellbeing. However, we found that our participants perceived working in the organization as relaxing, socially and physically stimulating. We saw that community and emotional support that was exhibited by participants directly contributed towards their positive health. Health and wellbeing have inevitably become a part of the making discourse given that our participant demography was largely an older adult population. It also became clear that by getting involved in different art and craft forms, our participants broke the ageing stereotype [22, 23]. As previously shown by Rogers et al [22] older adults possess strong motivations to be the designers of new technologies.

An important aspect of our findings is that craft making and participating at the maker organization were integral to our participants’ everyday lives and over time they built routines around it. As we saw, some participants were involved in multiple craft-based organizations and were making sure that they kept themselves active and busy. Others found value in simply being at the maker organization where they can socialize and relax by avoiding their daily workloads.

Studies in gerontology literature have shown that being involved in some sort of leisure activity can lead to individual’s satisfaction and, in turn, positively impact their wellbeing [8]. We saw examples in our findings that in addition to socializing over craft activities, participants shared their ideas, knitting and crocheting patterns and used social media to display and inspire their work. While there were individuals who used external tools (e.g. Facebook, Pinterest), there were no internal tools (e.g. the organization’s own webpage) existed. We believe that technologies can be conceptualized to make sharing more accessible within the organization, where resources,

techniques and making processes can be archived and made visible to everyone in the organization. While this may seem enhancing members' making activities, technologies such as these can positively affect women's health by providing new ideas, creative challenges and social engagement with others at the organizations.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Our work has shown an instance of using Puig de la Bellacasa's [25] notion of 'care' as a lens to study making practices of a women-only, craft-based maker organization. We found that care work was inherent in making and was manifested in participants supporting their health and wellbeing and altruistic needs. Within the CSCW research, we can draw out important reflections related to how participants perceived their visits to the organization as an outlet – external to their domestic lives where they can cater to their health and wellbeing and the importance of "giving back" for important causes and rekindling relationships with their loved ones. Our findings also provided building blocks to conduct further research that can establish stronger connections between making and health. The lens of care helped us understand this affective labour practices that goes into making but are often undervalued in research.

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