



Methods for Change

Making Textiles Together

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Making Textiles Together



Making textiles with others is an exciting and unconventional way of doing research. It has developed from the discipline of textiles practice, but can be readily adapted within other disciplines, bringing arts-based research approaches into conversation with social science research. Textile-making activities can include knitting, sewing, crochet, weaving, dyeing, braiding and embroidery; we consider 'making' to also include related activities such as handling textiles or playing with clothes. There are many ways of Making Textiles Together: it should be thought of as an approach rather than a single method.

Making together is the key element of this approach. Activities can be highly diverse in terms of context, format and intention, from drop-in workshops to open-ended creative projects that might extend for months, or even years. They might be synchronous or asynchronous and might take place in person or online. Participants might contribute to one shared piece of work or work on individual textile pieces side by side.

These activities can be used to generate rich data of multiple types. Data might take form in the creative work itself or data might be generated alongside the things being made, for example in the form of audio recordings of discussions, observational notes, or video footage of gestures and interactions. Data can be generated by the researcher, by the participants, or both.

Making Textiles Together offers flexibility in terms of research questions. The approach can be used to investigate something that is closely linked to the act of making, such as how people with different cultural backgrounds learn hand-crafting skills. Alternatively, it can be used to research a completely different topic. For instance, the research focus might be to explore people's coping strategies when grieving and the researcher might choose a textile making activity to create the desired environment for sharing these personal and sensitive stories. A third possibility is an action research approach that uses making to address and solve problems or create items that can be used directly by the participant group, such as mending garments or creating objects to meet specific needs.

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How does Making Textiles Together create or contribute to change?

Perhaps the most important contribution of this approach is the possibility for change in the participants themselves. People often get involved in textile making projects because they are hoping to get something out of it. Looking back on their experiences at the end of a project, participants might reflect that they have developed new skills, forged new social connections or gained in confidence. They might also have gained a new perspective on something that they were already familiar with, learned about textile craft heritage, or developed their cultural understanding.

Sharing the textiles made by participants is a way of communicating the issues addressed by the research to a wider audience. For example, researchers using textile making methods have worked with [sex workers](#) and [prison inmates](#) – marginalised groups who face real barriers in society – as a means of taking their voices out into the wider community. The qualities of textile works, made in cloth, yarn and thread, touch people in profound ways. The communication of messages embedded in them can have greater impact than a conventional text. Collective textile works made by many hands carry a lot of power, which has the potential to contribute to social change. These works speak for themselves and, if exhibited or shown in different contexts, can have the capacity to live a long time, reach new audiences and continue to have impact.

What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

Making Textiles Together in community settings is a long-established way of working for many textile practitioners. In our case, developing this approach for research has grown out of our creative practices as professional fashion/textile designers and makers. As part of these practices, we worked with community groups and made collective textile works in different contexts. We noticed that there was something rather special about the experience of making textiles together: the sense of connection between people, the topics of conversation that are opened up, and the way that social interactions are interlaced with making processes. We each explored the potential of making textiles with others in our doctoral research, as both subject and method. Whilst there is an established practice of using participatory methods in the social sciences to investigate questions of significance with particular communities, we work within the context of art and design research, which is relatively young in disciplinary terms and did not offer relevant research models for our projects. Co-design methods came close, but tend to emphasise participant involvement in the search for an improved product or service and draw on design thinking but not necessarily making. With few established methodological paths for us to follow, we worked quite intuitively, drawing on our prior professional experience to inform our research methods.

Later, we initiated the Stitching Together network to connect people who are using participatory textile making as a research method and as a form of creative practice to share their knowledge and experiences.

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Over the last decade, since completing our PhDs, creative research methods have become more established across the arts, humanities and social sciences. The value of participatory methods in art and design is now recognised more broadly and creative activities are increasingly incorporated into social research methods.

Why might I want to Make Textiles Together with people?

- Making Textiles Together is an accessible activity. While some textile processes require a high level of expertise, the basics can be easily shared. Tools and materials for processes such as hand sewing, hand knitting and crochet are readily available. Many projects are also portable, meaning that textile craft activities can be accommodated in different contexts.
- Textile making projects are highly variable in format and duration, so can be customised for different settings. Outcomes can range from the functional to the expressive, the speculative to the necessary, and the individual to the communal.
- The ubiquity of textiles in everyday life means that the relevant making skills are widespread within and across cultures. Textile-making projects can provide a platform to bring together individuals who might not otherwise meet due to cultural, age or language barriers.
- Something special happens when people are making together: the relative intimacy created by textile making fosters open conversation that often spontaneously touches on personal experiences and sensitive topics.
- The diversion offered by a shared hands-on activity, as well as not having to look people in the eye, supports a sense of connection and trust, and helps people to feel comfortable in contributing as much or as little as they wish to a discussion.
- The slow rhythm of hands-on making brings us back in touch with our interior selves. Stitching slowly and engaging the hands with materials allows time to consider topics under discussion. This slowness contrasts with methods such as interviews, where people can sometimes feel put on the spot.
- Textiles have significance in everybody's lives as household possessions and through wearing clothes. They connect to identity, family and memories, supporting discussion centred around personal and relational experiences.
- Making activities offer people a way to express themselves without using words: expression can come through colour, texture, structure and form. Textiles can be used to express things that, for whatever reason, are not able or ready to be spoken.

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Step by step to Making Textiles Together:

- 1. Getting started:** Establish the research question(s) and devise a textile-making project to explore it: a vision of how the workshop/project will run, who will be involved, how it will be organised and what will be needed. This structure might be tightly defined from the start or more open, evolving as the project develops. Consider involving participants in the planning process. Ensure that key information is communicated clearly so that potential participants understand what will be involved.
- 2. Making activities:** The core of any participatory textile workshop/project is, of course, the making activity. Choose from the many possible options in terms of textile techniques, processes and materials, workshop format, duration, scale and skill level. Consider whether the work created will be individual or collective, all-at-once or sequential, pre-planned or open-ended. Be creative when considering how to integrate the generation of data for analysis. Plan each session well, with consideration for the activities of both participants and facilitator – and for the unexpected!
- 3. Resources:** Every participatory textile making workshop/project needs resources of various types. Select the venue carefully: it needs to be appropriate in practical terms and will shape the feel and format of the sessions. Pay attention to the textile-related materials and equipment that will be needed, along with refreshments and materials and equipment for data generation. Ensure that the workshop/project fits within the time available. Bearing in mind the many roles involved in a busy workshop session – e.g. host, teacher, observer, tea-maker, photographer – consider bringing in additional people to support the activity.
- 4. Working together:** Participatory textile workshops/projects, whether short in duration or extended over a long period and even if coordinated remotely, are based on people making together. While this shared activity can help people to connect, the experience will be shaped by the facilitator's approach and whether people feel respected and valued. Design the workshop/project with consideration for everyone's needs. If partners such as specialist textile facilitators are involved, ensure that working relationships are based on trust and mutual respect.

A well-designed workshop activity is essential for a positive participant experience, but researchers may not have the expertise needed to design and facilitate a textile making activity appropriate to their research project. In this case, rather than attempting to lead a workshop without the appropriate knowledge and experience, consider collaborating with a specialist participatory textile practitioner and work together on the design and delivery of the workshop activity. Need help finding a specialist? The [Stitching Together network](#) includes many experienced practitioners and can pass on news of opportunities to its members.

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5. Reflection, evaluation and analysis:

All textile-making workshops/projects involve some reflection, evaluation and analysis, although the form will vary greatly depending on the scale, context and purpose of the activity. Research projects will require a rigorous and detailed approach to analysis, relevant to the data and the overall methodology. Consider whether it would be appropriate to involve participants in analysis activities – and if so, how this could be organised. If appropriate, integrate reflection or evaluation activities to help you understand participants' experiences and improve the workshop/project design in the future.

6. Minimising risk of harm: Minimise the risk of harm to workshop/project participants and facilitators. Be aware that the intimacy and slow pace of textile making can often lead to sensitive personal information being disclosed, even when this is not the explicit aim of the workshop/project, and that participants from groups who are marginalised in textile craft environments – such as [Black people, who are underrepresented](#) in the knitting community – might experience microaggressions or hostility from others. Consider these risks to emotional wellbeing alongside physical risks and safeguarding issues.

7. Sharing and dissemination: Consider whether the workshop/project will be shared. Sharing could take place at the end of the project or as part of the activity, e.g. if the workshop/project takes place in a public space. It could also be shared online. Consider the intended audience(s) for any sharing and dissemination – which should include the participants themselves – at the planning stage, as this will inform choices such as location and format. Also consider ethical issues relating to the way in which the work, process and findings are shared and disseminated.

8. Aftercare: After taking part in the workshop/project, participants may wish to further develop their practice, skills and knowledge or to remain in touch with the workshop/project team. Make a plan for what will happen – without it, participants may feel let down or even abandoned. Plan what will happen to the work created in the workshop/project, as well as the data generated and any leftover materials or equipment. It may be straightforward to decide what will happen to individually created items, but can be tricky for large-scale collective textile pieces.

The guidance provided here is taken from the [Stitching Together Good Practice Guidelines](#), which we published in 2020. The guidelines drew on the input of over thirty Stitching Together network members, who have expertise in participatory textile making in diverse settings. The guidelines are structured in eight stages, as represented here. More detail on each stage is provided in the full document; see Further Reading.



Examples of Making Textiles Together in social science research

The two examples outlined below are drawn from the authors' research, both of which were undertaken in an art and design context. As such the research approaches were framed within art and design practices. However, as discussed above, these approaches can overlap with social science research and can suggest valuable and interesting methods for social research projects.

Articulating Stitch

Researcher:

Dr Emma Shercliff, Arts University Bournemouth

'Articulating Stitch' is a workshop example drawn from Emma's doctoral research, which investigated ways in which the relationship between an individual and a group is articulated through their hand-stitching skills. She explored a variety of different ways of Making Textiles Together for the research.

This particular workshop was devised to explore specific questions concerning people's perceptions and assumptions about hand-stitching as both a functional and an aesthetic craft. Emma hoped the workshop activity would shed light on the sensations and experiences of hand-stitching that can be hard to put into words, especially retrospectively. The workshop was attended by a small group of undergraduate and postgraduate students and lasted approximately two hours.

Emma developed a series of specific tasks designed to focus participants' attention on the manner in which they make stitches, what they choose to represent using their stitching, and how they might interpret this in words.

Question prompts inspired spontaneous and intuitive responses to the stitching tasks. The data generated included the stitched and drawn tasks as well as the recorded discussion. The stitched pieces of work were analysed on site by the group during our discussion, and the discussion was analysed thematically off site, following principles from grounded theory approaches, and building on analysis from other workshops held elsewhere.

Devising specific stitching tasks was an effective way of exploring in depth a variety of perspectives on a precise aspect of the research. Making together helped to create an open space for the sharing of thoughts and experiences without prejudice and for participants to follow up on particular lines of discussion initiated by others in the group. Furthermore, the learning was reciprocal. The participants also learnt about themselves and their own assumptions.



Figure 1
Sitting side-by-side: workshop participants focused on the reflective hand-stitching tasks with hands engaged in making and eye contact avoided. Photograph: Emma Shercliff.



The Knitting Circle

Researcher:

Dr Amy Twigger Holroyd, Nottingham Trent University

The Knitting Circle activity, which formed part of Amy's doctoral research, aimed to investigate people's experiences of making together and their lived experience of wearing homemade clothes. This method grew out of activities which Amy was already running as part of her practice as a knitwear designer-maker. For a number of years, she had run a knitting tent at summer music festivals, facilitating a free communal knitting activity that welcomed knitters of all abilities. The completed pieces of knitting were left on display, growing in number as the festival progressed. The activity was popular, and created a constantly shifting community. To inform her research, Amy asked participants to 'share a knitting memory' or to 'share your feelings about wearing homemade clothes' on small cardboard tags, after their time spent knitting. The tags were attached to the knitting and become part of the display.

In total, the activity generated over a thousand responses. The tags provide an interesting insight into the thoughts that are provoked by the activity of knitting, rather than more distant reflections, as would be gathered by a conventional questionnaire or interview. Some comments are very short; others squash a lot of writing into the small space. Many indicate an intention to continue knitting after learning or re-learning at the Knitting Circle, suggesting an impact on those who took part.

Amy transcribed every comment and analysed this data via thematic coding using NVivo software. The findings of this method were combined with a more in-depth participatory project and written up in Amy's doctoral thesis, which was subsequently developed into her book *Folk Fashion: Understanding Homemade Clothes*.



Figure 2

The Knitting Circle was a free communal knitting activity run at summer musical festivals; participants contributed to a connected web-like textile. Photograph: Cybèle de Jong

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Where else could Making Textiles Together be used?

While the authors' examples above discuss Making Textiles Together to investigate questions related to aspects of textile craft, these examples introduce research projects undertaken by members of the Stitching Together research network that explore questions initiated in other contexts.

A first example is the doctoral research of [Alison Mayne](#), who explored the subjective perceptions of wellbeing in women amateur makers who knit and crochet individually at home, rather than in physical group settings. Alison invited participants to join a closed Facebook group to share their projects and experiences of making. In an [associated project](#), a small, self-selected number from the group then recorded their experiences of making and its impact on their wellbeing in a journal over several months.

Researcher Sarah Green sought to examine the complex facilitation of wellbeing through the therapeutic use of textile making for men experiencing vulnerabilities. She set up [ManCraft](#), a community-based textile craft group for men, and worked with the participants over an extended period. Integrating making with discussions about aspects of wellbeing, Sarah was able to generate valuable new knowledge about the value of relationality and social interaction.

A third example uses participatory textile making in a more unusual context. A team of researchers from the UK and Colombia explored the under-studied life trajectories of former guerrilla fighters. Through narrative and textile conversations, the [Un-Stitching Gazes](#) project offers deeper understanding of the participants' multi-layered autobiographical stories and opportunities for societal dialogue through audiences' textile resonances with the aim of supporting ongoing peace efforts in Colombia. Finally, [The Partnership Quilt](#), co-facilitated by interdisciplinary academics Angelika Strohmayer and Janis Meissner with Changing Lives (a North East-based charity), was a collaborative project between a sex work support service, professional quilters, and social justice-oriented Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) researchers. It combined the traditional textile craft of quilting with do-it-yourself digital technologies to develop a living archive of the stories and experiences of the women involved.

These are just a few examples: there are so many other contexts in which Making Textiles Together could be used. We are excited to see the method develop in the future – and particularly to see what could happen if textiles were used to explore research questions that might initially seem unrelated.



Top tips

1. Don't underestimate the complexity of planning and running a participatory textile making activity. It's a great approach to research but there are many elements to be considered in order for the workshop/project to be a success for all involved.
2. Think through everything that sits around the making activity: chairs, refreshments, breaks, parking, photocopying. All of these elements will affect the experiences of the participants.
3. Test out your activity before you unleash it on your participants: make time for a pilot activity with a few people ahead of your workshop/project to see what happens.
4. Plan well but be prepared to improvise if the situation requires it. For example, you may end up welcoming more participants than anticipated, or need to move to sheltered premises if your activity is planned outside and it starts to rain.



Figure 3
Generating data alongside a making activity: participants in this drop-in knitting activity were invited to capture their thoughts on small cardboard tags. Photograph: Amy Twigger Holroyd.



Further reading

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- Mayne, A. (2017). Making Myself Well: Participant Collaboration in 'Woolly Wellbeing Reflection Boxes'. Available at: knitrospective.blogspot.com/2023/03/revisiting-making-myself-well.html

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To read about more exciting social science methods, the full range of Methods for Change 'how-to' guides can be found here.