Crafting Communities: Promoting inclusion, empowerment and learning between older women

While social policy and planning documents are replete with ominous warnings about the cost of an ageing population, this article tells a different story about the productive and self sustaining networks that exist amongst older women in the community who do craftwork. From our research conducted in Victoria, Australia during 2007-2008 we discovered a resilient and committed group of older women quietly and steadily contributing to community fundraising, building social networks and providing learning opportunities to each other in diverse ways. Through our conversations with nine craftswomen we have been able to articulate clear links between the theory and models commonly espoused in the community development (CD) literature and the life enriching practices used in organising informal community craft group activities. From our interviews with the older women we provide evidence of sustained participation, the generation of social capital, and the fostering of life-long learning. While none of the women we spoke to were trained in CD and did not use language commonly associated with feminist ideology the relationship between the informal group work with principles of empowerment and self efficacy were unmistakeable. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for critical social work practice.

Key Words: *Ageism, Social Capital, Capacity Building, Craft, Community Development*

Introduction

It is difficult to escape the pessimistic messages about the 'burden' of Australia's ageing

population. Public policy planning reports and academic commentary abound with references

to the critical fiscal, health and social challenges presented by this population cohort

(Productivity Commission 2005; Borowski 2007). Newspaper headlines such as 'Aged-care

crisis is looming' (Courier Mail 2008) and 'Babies bear the ageing burden' (Canberra Times

2008) reinforce messages of gloom about ageing to the general public. While ageing in

contemporary Western society is undoubtedly a complex and diverse personal experience and

challenging social issue, there are alternative discourses that challenge dominant stereotypes.

Through our conversations with two groups comprising of older women who meet and do

craftwork we have discovered a counter discourse that solidly reflects the principles of

community development, and challenges stereotypical thinking about older women as

dependent, isolated, and unproductive. Through this article we will document the hitherto

unexplored practice possibilities for drawing upon community development strategies in work with older people (Hughes & Heycox, 2010).

Research Method

Ethics and Interviewing. Prior to initiating our face to face interviews with women who participated in craft activities, we submitted an application to the Deakin University Ethics Committee for approval to conduct this research. After receiving approval we contacted two craft groups operating in our local area (regional Victoria) and sent group leaders the research Plain Language Statement and consent forms, asking if we could meet with the groups and then interview individuals using a semi-structured interview format. In total, we conducted nine audio taped interviews across the two groups. The recordings from these interviews were transcribed and became the basis for the data analysis. The interviews were conducted between November 2007 and February 2008, and ranged in duration between 30 minutes and an hour and a half. Eight of the nine participants we interviewed were aged between 75 and 85, with the remaining participant aged at 57, being the daughter of one of the original group leaders. An interview schedule comprising of 10 questions was developed to provide some structure with reference to literature on ageing women, the social determinants of well being and group work process and included questions such as: What do you get out of being involved with this group? and, How does your involvement with the group fit in with the rest of your life activities?

Data Analysis. The interview transcripts were independently coded by three individuals, two using NVIVO and the third coding manually. The initial coding of the transcripts was deductive in that it linked to specific categories identified in the literature related to ageing and wellbeing, including factors such as physical and mental health, participation, and contact with family members. The next level of analysis was inductive and involved

interrogating the text material to identify issues that have not been predetermined. Categories identified at this level included meaning making, peer interdependence, and community development processes. Once complete we came to a consensus of the overall themes generated from transcripts. We used this style of thematic analysis as this technique does not depend entirely upon the presence of *a priori* categories for coding (Kellehear, 1993).

Participant Groups. The groups differed in size and structure, though both were composed entirely of women. One group, which had a closed membership of seven accomplished craftswomen, had been in existence for over 30 years. The second was a large community crafting group with 76 members, started 17 years earlier from a small gathering of nine women. This group included women with all levels of crafting ability, and had a focus on peer teaching and learning of new skills. While the larger group met fortnightly at the local sports club, the smaller group met on a rotating basis at each others' homes. Each group had its own history, with one group developing out of a gardening group and the other from a class of women learning to spin. Both groups produced craft items for local charities and persons in need, ranging from quilts for children in hospital, to comfort cushions for women being treated for breast cancer, and quilted bedspreads for nursing home residents, as well as knitted items for local opportunity shops.

Research Limitations: Clearly the small sample size included in this research does not allow for the findings to be generalized. In addition the one participant aged 57 may not be considered to be an 'older' woman for the purposes of examining women and ageing as a cohort, although distinctions based strictly upon chronological age are subjective. A third limitation is that the research sample included women living in a regional city, and as such the findings cannot begin to reflect the unique experiences of older women living in rural or remote locations.

Throughout this article we explore some of the key concepts associated with community development that we discovered, and how these relate to women's participation in informal craft group activity. Drawing upon the interview transcripts of conversations with the older craftswomen, we illustrate these concepts through the lived experiences of the people we spoke to. We suggest that a counter discourse on ageing, characterised by the vibrant creative energy and civic contribution of older women such as those we interviewed, may be given a greater voice in the public arena.

Connecting Craft Group Activity with Community Development Principles
Susan Kenny, a leading Australian practitioner and academic in community development refers to CD as ' the processes, tasks, practices and visions for empowering communities to take **collective responsibility** for their own development' (Kenny, 2006, p.10). She reinforces the centrality of collective responsibility in bold as a counter to the current dominant political discourses that refer to individual accountability and duty for ensuring sustainability, health and agency. At the same time, we are mindful of current trends for policy makers to turn to 'communities' and the 'informal sector' to provide support, caring, social services and resources as the welfare state shrinks (Jamrozik 2009; Keating *et al*. 2003; Ife 2002).

From the outset of our research, we were looking for the connections between doing craft work and fostering wellbeing. We were not looking for evidence of sustained community development, transformative social relations or political activity…but this is what we found. While we were initially examining the connections between the social determinants of wellbeing and craft work (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2008), we found a resilient and committed group of older women quietly and steadily contributing to substantive efforts in community capacity building, fundraising, fostering social networks and providing

learning opportunities to each other in diverse ways. Each of these endeavours was firmly embedded in drawing from the local knowledge, relationships, crafting skills and resources that existed between the older women.

Recognising the Local

The literature on community development highlights the centrality of fostering community self determination through the valuing of local knowledge, culture, skills, resources and processes (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). These authors also note that the lack of success of many formal community development initiatives can be attributed to failure to move beyond the rhetoric of these ideals to seriously challenge taken for granted assumptions and powerful interests (2006, p. 121). The women we spoke to belonged to craft groups that operated entirely on a local level, using the knowledge and skills of participants to teach other women how to craft, while drawing upon donations from local businesses and individuals to make items for community fundraising. While the structure and organisation of each of the two craft groups differed, both were characterised by grassroots membership of older women informally meeting up to craft, where their efforts were directed towards addressing identifiable local needs, such as making traumas teddies and cancer comfort packs for use in local hospitals.

The local culture was evident in the way both groups supported diverse community fundraising events such as the Australian Bushfire Appeal, the local football club and supporting activity programs in nearby nursing homes. Their respective activities were situated within the milieu of an older age cohort, where traditional home baked food and home based hospitality played a major role in the process of coming together as a group. Indeed, the women themselves commented on their own historical location and how making

things, sharing resources, norms of social reciprocity and intergenerational support were part of their makeup as girls, women, wives, and mothers of a certain era.

Several women reflected on how they had learned to sew or knit as a child and how, in their view, times had changed. One woman described sewing from the age of five or six:

> 'that was always part of your life then, and if you had children then you knitted for them – all that's gone now… life was different – we didn't have the important clothing that you could buy at a reasonable price for your children, you made their clothes…and when you got a hole in them you mended it' (Thelma)

Several women observed that many young mothers today were too busy to engage in the sorts of activities that had been an integral part of their own lives from childhood, continuing through to old age.

Practically all of the craft enterprise in both groups was centred around the sharing of participant knowledge and skills. Both groups actively encouraged members to teach and learn from each other in order to enhance and diversify crafting options. This sharing not only extended the skills and artistry of the women, but the act of teaching and learning itself generated a sense of self efficacy in the teacher, and stimulation for the learner. As one woman put it,

> 'I love it when someone asks you, 'how did you do that?'…and I say, 'if you do this and that'… and you feel, I don't know, a bit important.' (Elsie)

Women commented on how their interests grew as new people joined the group – 'we are all learning,' one 79 year old described - learning and sharing 'keeps your interests outside your own four walls.' (Thelma)

The mutual sharing of resources such as knitting/sewing patterns and specialist equipment, car pooling, recipes, health information, home

maintenance help, financial tips and hospitality were as prominent in the groups as the activity of simply doing the craft. Drawing on local expertise and supporting local causes was a strong feature of the women's activity in the groups. 'Craft with a purpose' was how Thelma described their activities. One participant painted a dynamic image of how the women rose to the occasion as a community need became known, for example the boredom of children confined to hospital 'with nothing to look at.'

> 'We'll stand up at [the group] and say, 'Right, girls, we've got a whole lot of quilts that need to be put together.' (Elsie)

> As well as producing their own craftwork, the women in the groups also engaged in bringing other women outside the groups into their activities.

> 'We give the (name of cancer treatment centre) hats and scarves, and these are mostly knitted by people in nursing homes because they are always looking for something for the ladies to do' (Betty).

In return, the women in the craft groups made quilts for people in nursing homes. Such acts of reciprocity within communities are at the heart of generating what is often described as social capital.

Social Capital

While there has been a great deal written and theorised about the nature of social capital, its exact meaning and definition remain contested. For the purpose of examining the relationships between the women in the craft groups, and between the craft groups as entities and the external world we found the definitions offered by Putnam (1995), Woolcock (1998) and Gray (2009) to be most applicable. These authors describe social capital as …

'features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995, p. 67)

'the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inherent in one's social networks'
(Woolcock 1998, p. 153)

'the array of social contacts that give access to social, emotional and practical support. The support that is available is an outcome of network ties, the *quality* of relations with others, their practical availability, the values that they hold, and the trust placed in them' (Gray 2009, p. 6).

Notions of reciprocity, accessible informal help and support, trust and the existence of quality relationships are common to each of these definitions of social capital. Fostering the capacity for people to work together, taking initiative as active participants rather than passive recipients is central to the notion of developing social capital (Williams & Onyx, 2002). We found these attributes amongst the women we spoke to that belonged to each of the craft groups.

All of the women we interviewed commented on the friendship, support and relationship aspects of their involvement in the craft groups.

'Friendship is the greatest part of it… we have discussions on all sorts of things: if something is troubling somebody, we all have a whinge about it and it helps, not like men who don't talk! (Thelma).

'Companionship and laughter, talk about your family, and things you can't say to them – it's great! I think honestly it adds to well being, if you've got company; if you do nothing as you're getting older you really feel terrible' (Ruby).

One woman in her late seventies made the following comment about older womens' changing social roles and networks…

'Older women now have got the chance to participate in so much more than they used to… once they outlive the usefulness of a grandmother, when the grandkids grew up, they weren't needed any more, so they sat down and became un-needed' (Thelma).

These observations led us to consider how changing demographic trends, including increased female participation in the paid workforce, greater geographical mobility and

decline in intergenerational helping (Johnson, 1995), were influencing the degree to which older women relied (or not) upon their adult children to meet support and friendship needs. Certainly studies suggest that in recent years older people have grown more reliant upon their own 'personal community' rather than kin to provide companionship (Gray 2009, p. 8). The craft groups we visited and the women we spoke to attested to the fact that other group members contributed significantly to each others' personal support networks.

For some of the women, ageing had brought health problems and challenges that group involvement assisted them to deal with…

> When women are 'in their middle years,' as one woman put it, 'sometimes you're not at your best … I have a few health problems and sometimes you get up and think 'I feel terrible today,' and you can really go down when you feel like that… then I think to myself, 'I can't do this to myself, I'd be better off sewing… there's nothing we can't talk about and if you've got an ache or pain, someone will have it too' (Betty).

One woman described how a former group member…

> 'had cancer and she kept hanging on and coming to the group… she died… but that's what we're up against and you have to not dwell on it…' (Ruby).

As well as support with physical health problems, the women provided companionship and support for each other in dealing with loneliness. One woman observed …

> 'A lot of the girls who started out as loners have now formed friendships in the group and quite often go to patchwork shops together and have been able to mingle and form new friendships' (Elsie).

All the women interviewed felt that having company was an important part of their own and other's healthy ageing. One interviewee described the loneliness she had felt since her husband died; for her, involvement in the craft group was vital.

> 'It's good for me to go out and be with great people… I get involved with the work that I do and I'm not thinking about other bad things… I just have to do some craft- [if I didn't] I would sit down and think too much' (Helene).

One group in particular, where the members met on a rotating basis in each others' homes, provided a social outlet that was greatly appreciated by group members.

> 'When they come to my home – it's the same with all of us – we make an extra cake or two… and we make ourselves at home in everybody's home, and its welcome that way, that's how it is. You don't get old that way, haven't got time' (Thelma).

For another woman, the intrinsic benefit of the group was simply being together, whoever and however you were at the time, that was important.

> 'Some days,' she said, reminiscing about a group she had belonged to, 'we didn't do anything, we just sat there and laughed. We never put pressure on ourselves to have anything done. It's a matter of getting together and spending a day like women do… swap the odd recipe and talk about the grandchildren, and too, if anything is wrong' (Elizabeth).

Thus the women defined their own level of participation in the groups.

Participation

Participation is a key component of community development and social capital theory and practice. Ife (2002, pp. 132-3) writes that people will participate in community structures if they feel the activity or issue is important, they are supported in their participation, and if the structures and processes are inclusive and not alienating. He observes that participation is an important part of empowerment and consciousness raising, and that community involvement is strengthened when a range of forms and degrees of participation are equally valued and legitimated. This appeared to be very true for the women we interviewed.

While the older women we spoke to had been engaged in their respective craft groups over a period of many years (for some up to 30years), a number of participants cited barriers to their continuous participation in the group activities. These included specific health

problems, particularly impacting upon mobility, lack of access to suitable public transport, and competing calls on their time for providing care to grandchildren and unwell spouses. These barriers have been identified elsewhere in relation to sustaining older womens' participation in community initiatives (Setterlund & Abbott, 1995). Even so, group members organised their activities in order to accommodate those who had difficulties participating. In particular, one group, as previously mentioned, had arrangements with local nursing homes to connect with residents who still wanted to be involved in knitting and sewing for aid work. This arrangement fostered inclusion of those older women who potentially were most marginalised in terms of participating in community initiatives due to mobility, health and pain management issues. In this way the women we talked with were very aware of the need to proactively promote the inclusion of those who might not fit the image of 'fit active retiree volunteer' (Setterlund & Abbott, 1995, p. 277).

We found the women in the craft groups addressed a number of structural inequalities associated with ageing, through finding ways to overcome some of the practical obstacles to participation, while at the same time 'allowing' each other to participate at whatever level each woman felt capable of at the time. As one woman said…

> 'I think that I will snatch at little bits of craftwork so that I can stay with my friends… as long as you've got a little bit of something in your hand you've got the perfect right to be there! (Thelma).

This acceptance of various degrees and types of participation seemed to enable the women to construct and reconstruct their own discourse around 'healthy ageing' and participation in ways that were flexible, empowering and validating. In relation to these concepts Kenny writes 'to ensure full citizenship, people must be empowered to participate in the continual processes of shaping their society, their communities and their identities' (2006, p. 24). This process is sometimes referred to as community capacity building.

Capacity Building

The notion of capacity building has gained ascendency in recent years with increasing focus on community based action to promote social change and development. Even so, clear definitions of what community 'capacity building' might actually mean remain elusive, being frequently conflated with discussions about social capital and participation. After an extensive review of the literature on capacity building, Chaskin found definitional agreement around four dimensions of this process (2001, p. 292). These include

1. Recognition of existing resources and skills embedded within both individuals and organisations; 2. Networks of relationships, both of an affective and instrumental nature; 3. Leadership, which is often vaguely defined; and 4. The existence of mechanisms and processes to promote participation in collective action and problem solving (Chaskin 2001, pp. 292-293).

While the craft groups we had contact with were not part of any formal program to 'build capacity', the older women in these groups experienced diverse economic, health and social disadvantage associated with ageing that compromised inclusive citizenship. Even so, each of the dimensions of capacity building outlined above was evident in the way the craftswomen worked together. As such, we believe the transformative opportunities arising out of the informal craft group participation deserve attention in terms of providing a counter conversation challenging dominant discourses about ageing, which are often around non-productivity, dependence, and disempowerment.

Fostering empowerment amongst ordinary, and structurally powerless people is a key feature of community development initiatives, including those who have been rendered marginal through attributes associated with age, disability, or unemployed status (Kenny 2006, p. 9). These particular dimensions are commonly associated with older people, and together provide the conditions under which ageism flourishes.

Ageism

The newspaper headlines we highlighted earlier signal the significant ageist attitudes that can be found promulgated in the media, where negative stereotyping of older people contribute to shaping discriminatory practice and policy making in relation to older people. We are reminded by Thompson that 'age is a social division; it is a dimension of the social structure on the basis of which power, privilege and opportunities tend to be allocated. Age is not just a simple matter of biological maturation it is a highly significant social indicator' (Thompson 2006, p.98). While we did not overtly discuss the notion of ageism in our interviews with the women, their claims of empowerment through craft participation signalled that in other contexts the women we spoke to felt marginalised. This status was hinted at rather than overtly spoken about.

A number of older women described the trajectory of their family life, as centred around their family, with children growing up and leaving home, husband dying , and coming to a point of being alone. One of the women, nearing 70, commented that it was common for women her age to 'feel you are not really needed as much, because your children have grown' (Betty). For another woman who had migrated to Australia in her younger years, loneliness after her husband died was compounded by having no extended family nearby. Her children were busy and while they came to visit, 'they've got their young families'; grandchildren who used to enjoy her handmade items didn't 'want anything anymore' (Helene). For one woman, who had never worked outside the home, the craft group brought 'emancipation… for the first time, I am in contact with Australian ladies of my age… funnily enough, this is my first time out – unbelievable, isn't it!' (Anastazja)

While the notion of participation is a cornerstone of community development as we discussed above, in our conversations with the women we were also reminded of the

dominant discourse that exhorts ideals of activity, productive contribution and 'healthy'

ageing, (Sheriff & Chenoweth, 2006), where individuals are held responsible for their own

health choices (Setterlund & Abbott 1995).   For older women, dominant discourses around

their role as nurturers and carers may compound and add further layers to discourses around

successful ageing. The women in the groups talked about their work and lives in ways that

robustly challenged ageist stereotypes, but also reproduced in some ways, dominant

discourses around life-long productivity and caring.

Minichiello *et al.* (2000) comment from their discussions about ageism with older

people that those who do not wish to overtly participate in community and family activities

risk being labelled as 'not trying', creating the social context for defining that person as 'old'

(2000, p. 270). Paradoxically then, while the women's participation in the craft groups did

foster connectedness and a sense of inclusion, this dynamic in and of itself reinforced the

dominant discourse of productive participation, thus providing the context for potentially

marginalising further those older women not involved in these activities. It is interesting to

note how this potential was, at least to some extent, minimised, by the women's acceptance

of different levels of participation from each other.

A Counter Discourse on Ageing

From this research we have been alerted to the fact that in the local context older

craftswomen are going about their business making significant yet unrecognized economic,

social and political contributions to their communities, while at the same time building and

maintaining sustainable individual and group health and well being through these endeavours.

It is possible that the combination of older women with crafting only contributes to the

marginalisation of these efforts with domestic craft work traditionally being considered a

'lowly pursuit' (Wolfram Cox & Minahan 2002, p. 211). Even so, these endeavours very

much reflect the notion of an 'invisible economy' generated by women in ways that sustain and nurture others while contributing to market production (Folbre, 2001).

Despite these consistent and substantial efforts older women continue to experience ageist attitudes from the general public and from health professionals in particular (Maidment, Egan & Wexler 2005; Minichiello *et.al.*2000). Supporting alternative discourses on ageing that acknowledge older women's capacity to create and enact diverse narratives of empowerment and participation, which truly sustain their wellbeing, is an important role for social work. Further, while there needs to be universal responsibility for promoting an anti-ageist discourse, key institutions such as the media and providers of professional education for those working with older people are influential stakeholders in this process. It is apparent that serious attempts are still needed to change attitudes and promote awareness-raising within these spheres in order to address the status of older women in society.

Implications for social work:

What can we learn, as social workers, from this small piece of research? At first glance, we are reminded of the value, and perhaps increasing importance, in these globalised times, of informal networks of support, belonging, problem-solving and empowerment. As family groups are increasingly dispersed, familial structures diversify and the ageing population grows, non-kinship networks may progressively become a more important source of empowerment, strength, inclusion and resources (Gutierrez et al. 1999, p. 152).

Indeed, the importance of informal local networks has been increasingly recognised in the social policies of 'western' nations (Trevithick 2005, p. 226). At the same time, Trevithick (2005) cautions that informal social supports – provided mostly by women (Ife 2002, p.12) – should not be seen as replacing state obligations to provide needed services, but

as complementary to them. Ife (2002, p. 2) reminds us that community-based supports and community work in general 'must always be seen within the context of the crisis of the welfare state.' While the women in our study described their involvement in craft and charitable groups as empowering and nurturing, social workers need to be critically reflective around the empowering or disempowering nature of care-giving and volunteering in specific contexts, and the impact of class, race/ethnicity, gender and other structural factors on individuals' and groups' capacities to engage in these activities. Some marginalised groups may not be in a space to organise themselves to 'gain control over resources and issues which face them' (Payne, 2005, p. 221). Community-minded social workers may have a role in facilitating such groups to engage in community action and group involvement, assisting individuals to connect, advocate for resources, provide consultation or skill community members to deal creatively with issues they have identified as important (Ife, 2002, p 93).

As noted earlier, Ife has highlighted the use of sustainable local resources, the value of existing local skills and processes as important attitudes and practices for community minded social workers. Each of these factors were clearly evident within the self-generated craft groups we connected with. The women's craft groups provide an excellent example of local people being involved in locally sustainable enterprises: the groups produced little pollution, engaged in recycling of materials such as fabrics and patterns and were able to survive and grow in ways that were not harmful to the environment. Such groups demonstrate that small-scale, ecologically sound, local initiatives are not only viable but strengthening on many levels (Ife, p. 2002), developing social capital and growing civil society, building community capacity and promoting social inclusion (Hendersen & Thomas 2002, cited in Payne 2005, p. 223). From this research we would urge social workers to consider ways in which they might both support these informal group networks, while

acknowledging the significant contribution such endeavours can make in the lives and well being of individual people.

While 'all group work can be seen as empowering because of its democratic, participative and humanist values' (Payne, 2005, p.304), it may not impact directly on structural change in relation to oppressive social conditions. As the aged population grows, social workers will undoubtedly become more and more involved in working with older Australians, whether in designated aged care settings or in other fields of practice. While the experiences of aged Australians are diverse, common psychosocial needs for this age group centre around economic, health, social, emotional, cultural and environmental needs. Meeting the requirements of daily living, such as having adequate nutrition, housing, healthcare and income, socialising and staying connected with wider society, maintaining a sense of meaningfulness, engageing in enjoyable past-times, feeling safe, and having access to community services all contribute to well-being (Wiles, 2005, p.167), and are underpinned by structural factors requiring social policy responses. Class, gender, ethnicity/race and other structural components influence experiences of older age, as they do throughout the lifespan. Social workers need to be mindful of both the shared and unique features and needs of the older persons with whom they work, and how individuals are placed in relation to accessing resources across the spectrum of needs identified above.

Practitioners also need to be mindful of how dominant discourses around ageing shape their own, their organisation's, public and policy attitudes towards ageing. Discourses of 'activity,' which, in recent years have displaced discourses of 'disengagement' in gerontological theory, powerfully shape our views around healthy or 'normal' ageing, and have had a significant impact on social and cultural expectations of older people (Wiles, 2005), as well as older people's expectations of themselves and their peers. While for some

older people, this discourse may have encouraged a more empowered approach to and experience of ageing, it can also be felt as another social control mechanism whereby older people who fall outside the 'active' expectation are further marginalised.

'Successful,' 'positive' or 'productive' ageing models attempt to replace notions of ageing as a time of inevitable decline with new narratives of ageing as a time of continued well-being, vitality and productivity (Holstein & Minkler 2003; Bowling & Dieppe 2005; Moody 2005). The work of critical gerontologists is highly relevant to social workers working with elder Australians. Critical gerontologists highlight that while discourses of successful ageing challenge negative ageing stereotypes, they also are embedded in sometimes hidden " underlying values and consequences" and contain " hidden normative possibilities" (Holstein 1998, cited in Holstein & Minkler, 2003, p. 788) which may not be in the interests of the elder persons we work with. Heycox & Hughes remind us that current discourses of successful ageing are overly individualistic and ignore or minimise structural factors that shape personal experience throughout the life course and into older age. They note ' social workers need to be aware of how 'success' might be interpreted in different people's lives. We have to reflect on our own preconceived ideas about what is an active, successful and meaningful older age and whether there are alternative ways for considering these concepts'. These authors go on to provide a robust critique of the notion of 'successful' ageing. (Hughes & Heycox, 2010). It is clear that current discourses promote normative assumptions of ageing that deny self-definition and diversity (Cruikshank 2008; Morell, 2003; Minkler & Holstein, 2008) and have the capacity to impose coercive standards (Holstein & Minkler, 2003) that produce "totalising ideals about the meaning of a 'good old age' (Minkler & Holstein, 2008, p. 197). Late life itself, Cruikshank proposes, should be seen as "inherently worthy, not requiring qualifiers like 'positive' or 'successful' to render it desirable" (Cruikshank, 2008, p. 151).

As discussed in this paper, an important aspect of the women's participation in craft groups was their capacity to choose the level of involvement they wished or were able to engage in, and know that they were accepted for who they were, rather than what they could produce. Minkler & Holstein (2008, p.203), self identified ageing women gerontologists, echo this view, saying "we wish for a valuing of *who* we are, simply because we *are*, and not because of what we *do*." Older age is not a heterogeneous experience; as social workers, we may need to challenge and critically reflect on how core values and approaches such as empowerment play out in the specific contexts of our work. Morell (2003, p. 70) observes that discourses of successful ageing carry "implied hostility towards ageing bodies;" an emphasis on strengths that ignores physical weakness and lessened ability, she concludes, is "ultimately disempowering." Similarly, Minkler and Holstein (2008, p. 197) caution that a focus on 'fit and healthy,' while encouraging and supportive for some, can devalue those "no longer able to make recognisable contributions," reflecting "an uneasy mix of obligation, expectation and choice."

The policy implications of successful ageing discourses have also come under the gaze of critical gerontologists, in ways that resonate with critical social work perspectives. Morell argues, for example, that the privileging of individual successful ageing, eclipses "the collective needs of long-living people" (2003, p. 81). An emphasis on individual responsibility for health, well-being and social engagement may minimise larger patterns of oppression and disadvantage (Holstein & Minkler, 2003): a key focus of social work practice. From a critical perspective, civic engagement in older life, while life-enhancing for some elders such as the women we interviewed, should not be based on "dominant ideals of autonomy and productivity" (Holstein 2006 cited in Minkler & Holstein 2008, p. 197). We need, as social workers, to be mindful that change at socio-political levels may also be required to meet the needs of our elder citizens.

Social workers clearly need to be aware of how dominant discourses serve to both enable and oppress, and acknowledge diversity and inequality amongst older persons, and how this plays out in specific contexts. The principle of diversity is crucial to community work and community development: the capacity of systems – groups, informal networks, communities – to 'evolve to meet the needs of particular circumstances,' and to encourage and embrace a range of responses, forms and levels of participation, and different ways of doing things (Ife, 2002, pp. 43-4). The ecological principle of diversity applies to differences within communities, as well as between communities. As social workers we need to remain mindful that one group of older persons, or, in relation to this study, older women, may be quite different to another, and within each group, diversity will also be a feature (Ife, 2002). Social workers can help find ways to validate and celebrate diversity, acknowledging the rights of potentially marginalised and invisibilised persons – such as older women – to define their needs, ways of meeting those needs, and providing support to enable truly successful (or perhaps more appropriately 'meaningful') ageing. In this article we have attempted to highlight the need for critical analysis and reflection as social workers, on discourses of ageing, participation and gender role expectations.

Conclusion:

We began this paper by suggesting that alternative, more empowered community-based discourses around ageing exist alongside discourses that construct the aged population as a growing burden on society. We drew on our interviews with older women whose involvement in informal craft group activity provided connectedness and support as they continually 'gave back' to their local community. Their experiences, we argued, reflected community development principles of empowerment, participation, capacity building, and sustainability, while also challenging ageist stereotypes.

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When considering the implications of our research for critical social work, we reflected on the growing need for informal networks of support, which can, as we found, be a vital source of empowerment. At the same time, we acknowledged that social work needs to remain critical so as not to impose one stereotypical expectation over another: in other words, ageing women should themselves decide the level of community involvement they find beneficial and be adequately supported to participate at that level. While governments increasingly acknowledge the benefits and contributions of volunteering and community-led projects, we must continue to analyse how much this distances and relieves government from responsibilities in the provision of needed services. As a final note, we thank the inspiring women we interviewed, who are probably working on a new craft project as we write.

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