

the Creativity collection

Passing yarns forward: unravelling the dimensions of knitting and birth

Sara Wickham, Cecile MacNeille & Kristan Lee Read



I have a childhood memory of a midwife once casting off my knitting for me when my mum was busy, a simple act of kindness which cemented my lifelong view that midwives are lovely people who knit. Since becoming a midwife myself, it has become my belief and understanding that midwives have knitted at births for eons (Wickham 1999), but even in my lifetime the relationship between knitting and midwifery has been continually changing shape. I can personally recall the days when the toting of a bag of knitting was almost an essential prerequisite for a night shift, and I have been present at group lamentations following the sad day when midwives in one trust were told they must cease knitting booties during the wee hours because it was (and I quote) *unprofessional*. I have been gawped at for sitting quietly with my knitting in some midwifery-related circles, and been the source of envy (from those who wished they had thought

to pack their own project!), knowing smiles and conversation in others. There also exist circles, of course, in which the presence of knitting midwives is as unremarkable as it was to my ancient sisters.

This article explores a few of the dimensions of knitting and birth, considering what we can learn from the little that has been written about this and from our own reflections. In this latter effort, I am delighted to be joined by two other knitters, and we also offer a small basketful of resources that might inspire others to pick up their needles.

The unremarkable everydayness of knitting

To the best of my knowledge and that of the MIDIRS Reference Database, it was a male surgeon, Michel Odent (1996, 2004) who first made the very practical art of knitting a topic for debate within the midwifery literature. Perhaps it was such an unremarkable, everyday activity to the midwives who were doing it that it didn't warrant special mention or consideration. Often it is the 'foreigner' or anthropologist viewing a culture from the outside who sees what

is of interest in the everyday, and so the story began to be written from the outside perspective of a man who is not a midwife. He is, however, a knitter of sorts. Michel Odent was taught to knit as a child when all hands were needed to help to knit socks for French soldiers during the war, and I can reveal that he re-kindled this skill in order to participate in the 2012 Silent Knitting workshop that is the topic of Cecile MacNeille's reflection below. I know this because I helped him to re-learn, but this story has been told elsewhere (Wickham 2013).



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There may be an important point here about the relationship between something being unremarkable and it being uneventful. The latter term is often applied to pregnancy and birth, although it can be problematic. In many ways, uneventful is what most women and midwives want, but using this word may deny or denigrate the value of the work that women do. As Cecile reflected while we were writing this article,

"Families are often shocked when I share my attitude about the unremarkableness of birth — it's just another everyday miracle, but that's not how it's seen by most people. I remember a recent birth that illustrated the 'everydayness' of the birth process — it was a daytime birth, and the woman was labouring alone in the bathroom while I sat and did craft with her four and six year old sons. As birth approached she asked us and her husband to come in — I held her littlest son while she gave birth and received her baby in the bathtub. The normalcy, safety and uneventfulness of

this birth were so tangible, but this did nothing to diminish the exquisite beauty of the moment".

We must take care to consider the differences between how an experience is viewed from the inside or the outside. We are acknowledging the great value of the personal perspective by sharing stories in this article, but there is also value in the more external, analytical perspective. It was in observing Gisèle, a French midwife, that Odent saw something remarkable in the unremarkable:

"When Gisèle looked after a labouring woman, one could often find this typical scenario: No-one was in the small, dimly lighted room other than the mother-to-be and Gisèle, who sat in a corner, knitting. She could spend hours and hours knitting. Her technique and speed were impressive! And it was usually unremarkable when a first baby was born in three to four hours. In a very small number of

cases, Gisèle was in a position to decide that a technique other than silent knitting was needed. Then the woman was transferred to another world, the world of surgery... Gisèle had a deep-rooted knowledge of the birth process which she could not express with scientific words. Her understanding of birth physiology was infectious: Apart from a discreet auxiliary nurse called Simone, no-one else dared to enter the room until the woman had delivered the placenta.' (Odent 1996:14)

In this first article, entitled *Knitting needles, cameras and electronic fetal monitors*, Odent (1996) focused on Gisèle's knowledge of physiology and on the importance of privacy and darkness. In simple terms, a woman may feel less observed by a midwife whose attention appears to be focused on knitting, and Odent has continued to speak about the importance of privacy, the significance of which is reinforced by doula Kedi Simpson:

'I wish the midwives who had attended my second birth — one warm August night, at home — had knitted. My abiding memory of the birth is looking up from a contraction to see three of them, leaning in a row against my kitchen work surface, watching me. I felt as if I had an audience, and it inhibited me. Not so badly I didn't push out a beautiful little girl just before dawn, but it is not a pleasant memory. Liz [Nightingale] says: "I offer to knit a baby hat for each baby I look after. I sometimes do sibling hats too. Parents choose what style and colours of hat they would like." To watch my midwives produce love in stitches for my coming baby would have warmed my heart rather than irritated me!' (Simpson 2011)

Later, Odent (2004) returned to this topic in print and cited further research showing that repetitive tasks are an effective means of reducing tension. He has also proposed that, from the perspective of a birthing woman, the knowledge (which can be gained through the audible clicking of the needles, even if she doesn't actually watch her midwife) that her midwife is knitting can be reassuring



(Odent 2008, personal correspondence).

If the midwife is knitting, then she or he cannot be too worried about what is happening. Knitting helps keep midwives' adrenaline levels low, ensuring a sense of security all round. As such, 'knitting needles might become the symbols of a renewed, simple and cheap technology' (Odent 2004:22). These ideas are further illustrated by Cecile MacNeille's reflection on her experience of the Silent Knitting workshop which she and I both attended during the 2012 Mid-Pacific Conference on Birth and Primal Health Research in Hawaii. This session was facilitated by Italian doula Clara Scropetta and its existence was rooted in Odent's (2004) suggestion that we could dream of the day when midwifery conferences would include knitting workshops.

Silent Knitting Session: Cecile MacNeille

I enter the room full of knitters a bit late, my bikini still wet under my dress from my lunchtime swim. Silence reigns, and I slip into the first empty chair I see. I rummage around for my knitting in the bottom of my bag. I'm making a pair of wrist warmers to ward off the chills of Dunedin winters (and summers) and prevent the need to apologize for the coolness of my hands every time I touch a lady's growing belly.

Once I have started knitting, I begin to settle in, look around. I notice acquaintances across the room (why didn't I see them when I walked in?) and check out the variety of techniques and projects being worked on around me. Knitting, crocheting, spinning, embroidery, I give a glance to them all. The silence in the room puts my mind-chatter into sharp relief: the thoughts "I wonder if I make that funny face while I'm knitting?" or "Does working on an iPad count as a repetitive task?" are not lost in the swirl, but can be duly noted as extraneous questions of little value.

Once I have thoroughly examined the room, my mind begins to wander... knitting. I was taught to knit by my mother. She was taught by her mother. Who taught my grandmother? The story is lost now. Grandmother died before we were born,

but she was a legendary knitter — we still wear the jerseys she made, and she had her knitting bag with her wherever she went. A true child of the great depression, she would unravel old knitwear to reuse the yarn, even if the garment was past repair. My mother knitted all our socks as children, but had a busy life once she re-entered the paid workforce as we grew older. She has not knitted in years. And me? My project was started especially for the conference, the first time I have picked up needles since my babies were small enough to finish a jersey for them in three days. I have taught my son and daughter to knit, and who knows? Perhaps they will reclaim the artistry and prolific creativeness that has diluted down to nothing more than competence in my generation.

But then I think about the birth culture I have inherited. While my grandmother was an artist with the needles, she had no birth stories to pass on to her children: she gave birth after inductions under the amnesiac effects of scopolomine, and never discussed her births with my mother. Her mother gave birth to her at home, with chloroform-administering doctors, following the stillbirths of her two elder brothers. In the absence of birth stories, my mother and auntie created their own: they gave birth at home, in their own power, with midwives who practised outside the law to attend them. The story of how I surprised everyone by coming breech has been a central part of my identity as I

grew, and the births of my own children at home have been added to a renewed family culture of birth to pass forward. So while our knitting has declined, we have been at least succeeded in nurturing another key womanly art.

As I ruminate on knitting and birth, I am acutely aware of little noises in the room — if someone shifts or stands. The clicking of needles, the noise of traffic in the heart of Waikiki. I notice my breath — in, out. Time takes on the soft and slippery feeling that comes at a birth when everything is going perfectly, and before you know it, our beautiful Clara announces that an hour has passed. We all have the opportunity to comment and reflect. I think about the craft that I undertake in groups of women, and how silence is never an element in those gatherings. I sit in awe with the experience of balanced well-being and sense acuity that has accompanied silent knitting, and have a renewed commitment to making knitting and craft an 'everyday' part of my life, including attending births.

Towards the end of the discussion, I notice that my ribbed section of knitting appears much larger than my finished wrist warmer. I count my stitches — sure enough, I have cast on 72 stitches instead of 60. So by the end of the silent knitting session, my work lies unravelled on the floor, ready for another day.

It is clear that the value of knitting for midwifery or birth is not unidimensional, but includes elements that are physiological, psychological, emotional, social and, as Kristan Lee Read's reflection below also shows, spiritual.

Perhaps we should not be surprised when we consider the other meanings of the verb 'to knit', which inevitably include the notion of weaving, joining, binding, braiding or tying something together, because this is exactly what we are doing with the yarn as we knit. But quickly the thesaurus takes us further, into ideas of uniting, bonding, mending and healing and, while these parallels may be seen by some as coincidental, literary or etymological accident, it cannot be denied that craft in general and knitting in particular hold significant and multidimensional meaning for some people.

One element of this multidimensionality on which I am currently musing concerns the way in which different crafts — and different aspects of different crafts — can create a wide variety of experiences, encounters, possibilities and touchstones for reflection. For instance, we might ponder the question Cecile raised about what counts as a repetitive task. I, like many crafters, am not exclusively loyal to one medium. I knit, quilt and cross stitch, often while travelling, always by hand. Cross stitching tiny pictures for birthday cards gives me a permanent handbag activity and something to work on when waiting, yet the counting that this craft entails is not repetitive in the way in which Michel used this word (Odent 2004), and, when I am cross stitching, my mind isn't in quite the

same state as when I knit something simple. Neither can I cross stitch as well in semi-darkness, whether at births or on night flights, but the act of hand quilting nearly a thousand patchwork hexagons by hand as I flew about the world was repetitive and undemanding of light and attention in the most positive way. Certain knitting patterns, on the other hand, can be complex and I think it likely that all but the most experienced of knitting midwives would balk at the idea of knitting up a cable sock pattern during a woman's labour if they had the makings of a simple jumper or baby hat. Clearly, the concepts of knitting and repetition are not synonymous. The value in the repetitive nature of knitting may be immense, very deserving of further analysis and reflection and potentially just what is needed to reinforce the value of the unremarkable at a certain stage of labour and birth. Yet the volume of what we might be able to learn from pondering such simple, unremarkable, everyday activities and the ways that they might enable us to reflect upon birth and midwifery are far deeper and wider than this.

I see many parallels and connections between birth, midwifery, craft and the knowledge, skills and ways of knowing and being that relate to all of these endeavours. I believe that we have much to learn and explore in all of these areas, and that it is vital we refrain from allowing these personal activities to become solely academic ones. I see great hope for craft-related conversation to continue, though ideally in circles of knitting midwives and women as much as in journal articles (however beautifully illustrated!) and am



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excited by the way in which craft has recently experienced a resurgence. This has allowed for the further exploration of these ideas and, as Kristan Lee Read describes in the final part of our article, is inspiring women and midwives to reclaim the craft of knitting in the most practical ways and to relate it to other areas of our lives and experiences.

The Crafting Womb: Kristan Lee Read

I am a crafter. I always have been, since the days of my first knitting nancy! During my first pregnancy, I cross stitched and during my second pregnancy, knitted squares which became my baby's first blanket. I remember fondly sitting into those wee hours of the morning by the fire, rocking my pregnant belly in my rocking chair, stitching, knitting, and dreaming of when I would rock my baby in that same chair.

There have been many other patches and squares, knitting, and stitching along the way for friends, family and community, weaving from one project to the next, and I am not alone, I join with an ancient form of social networking, a rich herstory of interconnectedness of yarn and yarning, warp and weft associated with female friendships. There is

something about craft for me, something about making with my hands that deeply connects me to my heart and to a sense of surrendered peace.

Several authors have spoken about the tradition of midwives sitting in a corner and knitting while waiting for a woman's labour to unfold. Identifying this quiet reassurance as a metaphor for 'presence' — sending a message that all is well, creating a safe space in which a woman can labour and tap into her personal strength. Sheila Kitzinger describes, this 'presence' as a skill which helps a woman in labour have confidence in herself and the 'power of her uterus' in terms of *patience and the willingness to wait for the unfolding of life* (2006:12).

This gift of creating safe space, the 'let it be' space, has been described as "midwifery guardianship" and is linked to the protection of all the



intricacies of the psychological, spiritual and neurohormonal processes that promote straightforward, undisturbed birth. In Jane Hardwicke Collings' (2011) article, *Meditation during pregnancy*, she writes:

'To best facilitate the natural process of birth the labouring woman needs to feel safe, and have her physical and emotional needs met. Once in this situation, she can relax her mind as per meditation, be in an aroused or relaxed body state and access deep levels of consciousness. Then she can connect with her innate body wisdom and give birth in a blissful painless state of complete awareness — the evolved mind state. This is the biologically intended space from which to give birth.'

In Bernadette Murphy's (2002) research for her book, *Zen & the art of knitting: exploring the links between knitting, spirituality, and creativity*, she discovered that for many knitters, there is often a spiritual component to why people knit. She says:

'Something comforting, magical, and other-worldly happens when I knit. I become centered. Giving that word-centered portion of my brain a break, clearing the mind, a meditation, an opening, tapping into the subconscious. My knitting shares with me; that we are all joined together. That each stitch is vital to hold the garment together, just as each person is vital to this world' (Murphy 2002:16-17).

It was my own healing experience with crafting that led me to opening a community crafting space in Hobart, Tasmania, The Craft Hive (TCH). I wanted to create a place where connections could be made as I knew in my heart, craft can be a most powerful agent for change, serving as a universal, non-verbal language of love. Friend and midwife, Alison Walker, came into TCH one afternoon and shared with me an article by midwives Rachel Lockey and Nicky Leap, *Yarning at the yarning table* (2011), which spoke of their initiative in providing a crafting space at the ACM National Conference in 2011. Alison asked if I would like to explore this theme further as an option for the 2012 Home Birth Conference in Hobart. I said, YES!

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The dreaming that came from that initial meeting was The Crafting Womb! Over 80 midwives knitting throughout the conference, the click-clacking creating exactly the experience I had presented at the conference. The heart-hand connection, the meditative space of healing, stillness, integration and community. We all felt it: the space was imbued with what I would describe as 'nourishment'. Certainly, the experience of what we co-created, nourished me and the inspiration of The Crafting Womb has continued.

'She' has developed beyond and further than I could ever have imagined and has created a branch of my work that will always be indebted to that initial meeting with Alison, to the work of all I came across in my researching, in particular the work of Michel Odent and to that initial birthing of The Crafting Womb. 'Her' birth, was a tangible, beauty-filled reminder and reflection on how birth can be! How 'birth' with an awesome team of 'consciousness', those in your birthing sphere holding the space of meditative stillness of heart connection (the Shamanic Midwifery perspective),

can allow for the experience of an empowered birth resulting in an empowered Mother. Anything feels possible after such an experience.

Since the initial birth of The Crafting Womb, she has travelled and workshop installation spaces have been held at the Red Tent Dreaming Events, and the Gaia Goddess Conference. This year she has travelled throughout Australia offering sacred crafting at the Being Woman Festival, the Seven Sisters Festival, the Passage to Motherhood Conference and in August she will go to San Francisco, to the SquatFest! It is a dream come true, when all that you love converges and creates a perfect manifestation — birth!

At any given moment, throughout our Gaia home, crafting is connecting us, like a web of yarn. No matter where we are, who we are, whether we speak the same language, share the same customs, eat the same food, dance the same dance or sing the same songs; with craft at hand, we are speaking the same language: a universal language of heart and hand.

Knitting resources

- www.thecrafthive.com
www.ravelry.com
www.knitty.com

Charity knitting projects

- www.knitforpeace.org.uk
www.projectlinus.org
www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/bigknit
www.oxfam.org.uk/donate/donate-goods/what-you-can-donate/knitting-for-oxfam
www.ukhandknitting.com/knitting_for_charity.php
www.lovinghands.org.uk
www.knitone2saveone.com



Sara Wickham

is a midwife, teacher, author and researcher. She created *Essentially MIDIRS* and has served as Editor for three and a half years. She also works as a freelance midwifery lecturer and consultant. Sara has lived and worked in the USA and New Zealand as well as the UK and is currently based in Wiltshire where she lives with her partner, their cat and a large stash of craft materials. She is the author of over 200 books and articles relating to birth and midwifery, and many of her articles are available online at: www.sarawickham.com



Cecile MacNeill

is a woman, mother, and homebirth midwife currently living on a farm overlooking the sea. She loves almost everything about midwifery, especially the opportunity to observe human nature in its purest moments. When not otherwise engaged, she is collecting dinner at the beach, practising her surfing (with her pager inside the wetsuit) or dreaming up new adventures.



Kristan Lee Read

was conceived on Bougainville Island, born in Brisbane, Australia, and had a nomadic childhood including 10 years in the USA. A shamanic experience in Central Australia led her to Steiner education, her husband and home birthing two sons. Home birth led her to Jane Hardwicke Collings and her School of Shamanic Midwifery of which she is now a graduate and an apprentice. She now lives in a star studded rivulet in Tasmania, loves yellow roses, planting fruit trees, moon gazing, crafting and singing with and dancing to Florence & the Machine. Rhubarb pie is her favourite!

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