A mixed methods study exploring how participation in art and craft activities relates to health in women aged in their eighties

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Statement of originality

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Abstract

More people are living longer than ever before, with those aged eighty years and over forming the fastest growing segment in Australian society. Participation is seen as an important way in which older people can remain active and engaged in the world around them, contributing to their own health and quality of life. This thesis considers the specifics of how participation in art and craft activities may relate to health in women aged in their eighties living in Australia. Art and craft activities appear to be a popular activity among women in this age group. Few studies have explored potential relationships between participation in art and craft activities and health in this age group of women. Previous empirical studies have suggested relationships may exist, however, research involving Australian populations appears limited. Further, more conceptual understandings of how participation in these types of activities could relate to health are underdeveloped.

This thesis consists of three interlinked studies involving women enrolled in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH). Regular postal surveys have been sent since 1996 to a cohort of women born between 1921 and 1926. Secondary analyses of data from the 1996, 2005 and 2008 surveys considered the relationships between health and participation in art and craft activities at one time point (Study 1) before going on to consider change in these relationships across two time points (Study 2). These analyses showed that participation in art and craft activities was common and that women who undertook these activities appeared to have better physical and mental health compared with women who did not. In Study 3, open text comments from the ALSWH 2005 and 2008 surveys, along with data from twenty-three in-depth interviews, were analysed qualitatively in order to explore and describe characteristic features of art and craft activities, as practised by women aged in their eighties living in Australia, as well as to develop a theoretical model that
explained how participation in art and craft activities may relate to health. Health was considered in its broadest sense taking on psycho-social as well as physical and cognitive dimensions.

Participation in art and craft activities was found to involve several interlinked, dynamic processes. In the act of making an art or craft item, women used their physical senses, manipulated tools and materials and thought about and felt emotionally for what they were doing. They also responded to and managed their own internal health and external social and physical environments. They decided the degree of control required in each of these processes to achieve what they wanted in terms of both participation and finished art and craft items. Participation could be described as a process of “enabling self” through purpose and pleasure. Doing good for self, helping and sharing with others motivated the women to continue their art and craft interests in spite of deteriorations in health and other difficulties. By participating in art and craft activities women were able to demonstrate capability and productivity. Their efforts were appreciated as they contributed to the welfare of others. Over time women developed an art and craft identity which they continued to express through participation. That identity was recognised by others. Through participation women developed an awareness of self as able to do, and as such took on new art and craft challenges.

Overall the thesis provided nationally representative estimates of participation and Australian data for this age group of women for the first time, as well as providing evidence supporting the effects of health on participation in art and craft activities and the effects of participation on health. In understanding the multiple factors involved in participation, the thesis identified reasons why older women chose to participate in art and craft activities, and why they chose to stop. Understanding the circumstances under which participation occurred or ceased can be of assistance in implementing programs aimed at encouraging participation by older people.