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TASA 2011**Local Lives/Global Networks****Applied Sociology or Rural Issues****Older women crafting ethical subjectivities in rural places**

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Older women crafting ethical subjectivities in rural places

Abstract

Over the last two years my colleagues and I conducted research conversations with older women living in rural Victoria about the meaning of craft in their lives. These conversations are the basis for our speculations on how women constitute ethical subjectivities through specific craft activities and through their engagement with Country Women Association (CWA) craft groups. The CWA is recognised as a 'community of practice' with local, regional, state, national and global networks, aiming to improve the lives of rural people. The focus of this paper, however, is on how ethical subjectivities by rural women are fashioned through specific involvements in craft activities and craft groups. I aim to elaborate on how Foucault's later work on the 'Care of the Self' may open possibilities, even if limited, for understanding the complex ways women take up subject positions in interaction with historical, political, economic and social arrangements and through engagement with specific institutions. For Foucault, 'care of the self' is an inherently social practice. Currently, modern power relations incite us to relate to our selves through self-confessional and self-disciplining technologies. Could a differently constituted mode of self-care be drawn from the Ancient Greeks to offer us ideas for enacting personal and social transformations today?

Keywords:

Care of self, Foucault, subjectivities, rural women, craft

Introduction

This paper is based on research interviews and observations of older rural women engaged in craft through the CWA in Victoria. The interviews are the starting point for some theoretical speculation inspired by Foucault and his later writings about the Care of the Self. The connection between how these women related the meaning of craft in their lives and Foucault's Care of the Self is informed by our interest in exploring how people constitute their subjectivities through techniques of the self that 'emerge[s] at the intersection of a technique of domination and a technique of the self' (Foucault 2005: 526). In thinking about the way the women articulated their relations to themselves, their crafting work, their families, their CWA craft groups and their wider community it occurred to us that to some extent that these women were articulating something about fashioning their ethical subjectivities within specific historical, economic, social and rural contexts.

The women, in describing their engagement with craft over their lifetimes, strongly indicated how craft was both an individual and inherently social practice. At times the women described personal transformations and changes which occurred through their taking on responsibilities for teaching and coordinating craft within the CWA organisation that led to further personal development and for some to engaging in political issues. However, this paper is focused on how ethics is a kind of technology of the self. This working on our selves as ethical subjects is understood by Foucault to develop through practices that are 'exercised by the self on the self' and 'by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms,

and transfigures oneself' (Foucault 2005: 11). Foucault explored Ancient Greek ethics to assist us to think about the way we historically constitute our subjectivities in relation to current power relations and dominant discourses. In 'Care of the Self', Foucault is referring to older spiritual practices used to transform one self, through technologies like meditation, examination of the conscience, and reflection on representations that appear in the mind. We are interested in how through engagement with craft practices and craft groups women develop ethical subjectivities that form attitudes 'towards the self, others and the world' (Foucault 2005: 11).

It seemed to us that through their engagement with craft and craft groups these older rural women are on to something that may have broader application for redressing modern power relations that position women as workers, mothers, consumers, customers and now specifically as above all efficient, productive, entrepreneurial and competitive people in the market place. 'Care of the self' suggests a broader notion of a life lived well. 'For practices of the self are neither individual nor communal: they are relational and transversal' (Gros, 2005: 544-545). For these reasons it seems a worthwhile exercise to speculatively briefly on how Foucault's later work on the 'care of the self' relates to the fashioning of ethical subjectivities as glimpsed in these research conversations.

We will briefly outline the historical, economic and social context of the women belonging to the CWA. The CWA institutionally is a formal, hierarchal and networked organization that facilitates rural women's connectivity. Then we will focus some of the accounts by the women about the meaning of craft in their lives, in relation to their self-care, their health and well being, the social transmission of

knowledge and the pleasure and play women enjoyed through their craft practices. In discussing these aspects drawn from the interviews we will speculate on how fashioning subjectivities through crafting practice relates to Foucault's theorising about Care of the Self. We are seeking in the longer term to distinguish between ethical and political subjectivities in relations to various social practices with a view to thinking about undoing or unmaking ecologically unsustainable daily practices. Our hope is that this kind of speculation may allow an exploration of the current challenges human societies face which may offer some new ways to mediate between the instrumental world and taking care of our selves.

Belonging to the CWA

Right from the beginning of the CWA (the national association was formed in 1945) its purpose was to address the needs of rural Australia. The CWA is recognised as being involved in and at times leading change on a wide range of different issues to improve the lives of people living rurally. Teather (1992: 167) argues that the CWA expresses the rural ethos of 'proud independence; family centredness; strict adherence to gender roles by men but far less by women... and a strong commitment to, and enjoyment of, life on the farm or in small communities'. It is an institution that has been a strong social and moral compass in the lives of rural Australians (Gregg and Bell 2008). The CWA through its organisational arrangements rural women, some who may be remote can connect with other women, develop friendships and also do good for the community, locally and globally through various craft gifts including fundraising for various charities. The CWA's local branches provide the opportunity for rural women to get together to undertake craft activities. This is an opportunity

that women have used to transmit knowledge, expertise and high level technical skills related to many traditional and contemporary crafts. These nested institutional arrangements facilitate regional, state, national and global networks on the basis of what Benkler (2006) calls the 'gift economy' as women share their knowledge and create crafted gifts for people in need, locally and globally.

Regular interactions between women across the state are facilitated through regional and state craft exhibitions and agricultural shows, part of the CWA's proud competitiveness and encouragement of members to continually refine, reward and delight in each other's crafting skills and expertise. These social gatherings allow for the cross fertilization of ideas and provide public recognition for women for their deft skills in a wide range of craft activities.

Belonging to the CWA is part of the rural history in Victoria and is part of a tradition of not only supporting domestic practices, but of good community service. The women find like-minded other women to associate with and in this way these interactions are 'communal' rather than relational, in reference to Foucault's notion of the 'Care of the Self'.

Rural Australia has often been characterised as masculine and as positioning women in marginal ways. The gendered culture of rural settings is described by Alston in these terms:

'...if they do marry a farmer, their role is all encompassing and ranges from livestock care to business management, includes most of household work and

responsibility for the children. Some scholars point out that farming is seen as a male occupation' (Alston 1995).

This supporting and secondary role can make it difficult for women to fashion ethical and political subjectivities that do not incorporate the expected feminine ethic of care associated with the domestic sphere. The way the women we interviewed described their experiences of their crafting and attendance at CWA craft groups suggests that although this space is sanctioned in relation to their domestic role and the refined traditional knowledge to be learnt, it also provided a social outing, travel away to other places and a 'women only space' where women's achievements are encouraged, rewarded and celebrated. In this way crafting is somehow simultaneously reinforcing and subversive of the notion that 'a farming woman's *place* is in the home as wife and nurturer' (Muensterman 2009: 9, italics in the original).

Research conversations

During 2010 we interviewed 20 women that belonged to CWA craft groups throughout Victoria. The women were aged between 54 and 87. Three participants were in their 50s, six in their 60's, seven in their 70's, and four were in their 80's. Participants were recruited through volunteering their involvement at the St Arnauds CWA state craft exhibition, through contacting us via a magazine article published after the exhibition, and through us making personal contact with some group leaders. This research project has ethics approval from both Deakin University's and Monash University's Human ethics committees. The twenty exploratory semi- structured interviews were conducted by the researcher(s) with one of the craft women either

face-to-face or over the telephone. The women self-selected to be interviewed by the researchers through nominating themselves as interviewees after being informed of the research. For the purpose of this paper we are using these interviews not to simply tell a 'truth' about the meaning of craft as these women have described it. Rather we are using the research conversations as a starting point to speculate about how ethical subjectivities are constituted by exploring how the women describe their relation to them selves through craft practices and in relation to others and the world through their engagements with CWA craft groups. As we theoretically relate these accounts to Foucault's later writings on 'Care of the Self' we are conscious that we are producing readings of these interviews which the participants themselves would not necessarily recognize or agree with (Lather 1991). This theoretical speculation is intended to open a space for considering how ethical subjectivities are fashioned through social practices, in this instance craft within the context of a 'community of practice' like the CWA.

'Care of the self'

Foucault makes the point that 'Care of the Self' is an older ethical injunction to 'attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of your self' (Foucault 2005: 5). To some extent the space that the women found through their craft practice both individually and with others clearly allowed them to 'attend to themselves', to take care of themselves within specific historical, social, cultural and institutional frames that many consider exploit women labour. The notion of 'Care' in feminist theorizing, especially eco-feminist writings, has taken on a particular meaning and it is worthwhile to distinguish this notion from Foucault's notion of

‘Care of the Self’. We are using Foucault’s notion of ‘Care of the Self’ to articulate a way of relating to one self that has the potential for subjectivities that are ethical and political and shift the notion of care to a relational rather than communal configuration. The ethic of care that has been explored by feminists in all its complexities is usually directed towards others. In distinguishing this notion of ‘Care of the self’ we are not suggesting a ‘selfishness’ in this care of the self, or a turn to the self, but a rather more complex way of thinking about the social, highly personal and potentially transformative aspects of caring for the self.

Caring does have ethical possibilities for women, but it is the way that women are caring for themselves, each other and the world through their craft practices that we seek to explore. We do not seek to romanticise women’s labour nor the laudable and incredibly valuable ‘gift economy’ these women engage with and maintain. We do not seek to argue that craft practices lead necessarily to particular kinds of ethical subjectivities. Rather we seek to explore Foucault’s hermeneutics of the subject in relation to this older spirituality of ‘Care of the Self’ that links, ‘the activity of knowing, and the conditions and effects of this activity, to a transformation in the subject’s being’ (O’Sullivan 2010: n.p). Craft practices are not an activity to specifically and directly transform these women’s being. The women’s accounts relate that craft is ‘an inherently social practice’ (Gros 2005: 538). And in many ways how women describe their lived experiences of craft practices is intensely individual and communal. Foucault indicates that ‘care of the self’ and the relation to the self it encouraged was not individual or communal but relational and transversal. Perhaps this distinction explored further may offer a way to think differently about how social practices and ethical and political subjectivities interrelate.

Several of the interviewed women relished the private and public space craft provided for them. Some referred to a space literally in their homes, as well as to the public space to display their highly developed skills and gain public recognition through winning prizes, while showing and expressing their creativity. Crafting also offered a way for contemporary women to evade housework duties. For instance, the following quote from:

‘And turned that little room into a craft room ...and occasionally I can find the vacuum in there [laughter]...’ (Jen).

The practice of crafting is experienced as beneficial to both the mental and emotional well-being by the women we interviewed. The following quotes reflect the reported benefits and joys:

It calms me down, reduces stress. And my painting class the same group of us, have been going for many years, we’ve become close friends. We talk about it being our therapy... (Jen).

‘...[craft keeps] my sanity [mild laugh] some days. And I think it’s relaxing...so I just think it’s probably the mental aspect of it ...’ (Violet).

In a sense these women are indicating how crafting could be part of an ethical practice focused on self-confession as an on-going ‘shared therapy’ based on communal discussions. Foucault in his theorising suggests that when people use these techniques without renouncing their selves, these practices can constitute a break from previous

ethical practices that required a self-sacrificing relation to the self. The joy of craft is expressed often by the women. For example these two quotes:

‘Oh I just love it (crafting)[laughs] It’s just a passion and it’s relaxing and I enjoy doing things to either give to somebody else or to give to our CWA for worthwhile causes and things like that...(Violet).

‘...when I’m using my sewing machine I just feel my heart singing away to it because I just love sewing... (Violet).

The social transmission of traditional and contemporary knowledge about how to craft is intermeshed with support in living life and resolving issues in the home. This ‘gift economy’ extends beyond the CWA groups to other groups locally and globally but has a firm basis in this practice. For instance, this quote indicates the sharing culture in relation to the women’s knowledge and the excitement for learning new or more refined crafting techniques.

‘There’s also the learning from each other, which is very big in CWA. We teach each other. And you know how to do something, so you’ll show someone else...’ (Jen).

Foucault in exploring the way we relate to our selves, others and the world, by elaborating on how the ‘Care of the Self’ considers that it required some change in the subject, some transformation of the subject, that knowledge alone did not or can not achieve. Again, although we are not positing that these women are necessarily fashioning specifically or intentionally ethical subjectivities through their craft there are transformations and fashioning of lives affected through their craft. For instance,

this quote indicates the way craft becomes something the women relate to and that in turn becomes part of them:

‘Well they’re (completed craft projects in room] just part of me. Just – yeah part of me and my life’...(Violet).

Although crafting is not usually identified as a spiritual practice there are similarities in the way the women speak about their experience of crafting that relates to Foucault’s exploration of Care of the Self as an Ancient Greek spiritual practice that is broader than the relations modern power promotes between the subject and the ‘truth’ (Foucault 2005). Many of the women we interviewed highlighted the health and well-being benefits they experienced through their craft. The women stated that craft helped them keep sane, supported them through tough times, their own and other’s illnesses, bereavements, transitions from work into retirement, moving from the city to the country, distracting themselves from living with their own or other’s physical pain and chronic conditions.

Foucault was exploring the older ethic of ‘Care of the Self to look for ‘principles for a connection between ethics and politics’ (Gros 2005: 542). One of the critiques that could be made of the women’s engagement with craft is that it reinforces their current position in the power relations in rural Australia and does not challenge these.

Relating these women’s accounts of their joy and pleasure in crafting is not to ignore the structural or the gendered context of their lives, nor is it to hail these women as heroes for finding a space within oppressive and exploitative situations for some ‘fun and madness’. Or by hinting at the ‘ethic of care’ that is often associated with

women's roles especially in rural contexts where 'Christian obligation of self-renunciation or of a "modern" obligation towards the others' can inform the constitution of ethical subjectivities (Foucault 2005:13). Rather Foucault in searching the history of practices of subjectivity is attempting to provide us with a way to think about how to care for our selves in a way that promotes a 'practice of freedom' based on 'a subject of sound action rather than a subject of true knowledge' (Gros 2005: 528).

Foucault's notion of the 'care of the self' encourages us to think very seriously about the kinds of individuals that we form ourselves into. Many of the practices that the CWA women engage in by sharing of their knowledge, their 'gift economy', their comportment and values around community and the support of rural women locally and internationally encourage a care of the self not based on neoliberal entrepreneurial or human capital notions. Perhaps 'some practices can be understood as ones that allow access to a self that is not sovereign, but which "takes care of oneself" as a way of "knowing oneself"' (Dilts, n.d., p. 12).

Conclusion

Currently many people are said to be feeling mentally stressed in work places and in our view people are continually incited to account for their every activity within modern power relations that operates like a type of 'permanent book-keeping' (Lacan, cited in O'Sullivan 2010). The pleasures described and the meaning attributed by the women to their craft activities indicates how crafting as a practice linked to a 'community of practice' like the CWA or other craft groups, guilds or regular classes can as Foucault suggests 'give one's life a certain form in which one could recognize

oneself, be recognised by others, and which even posterity might take as an example' (O'Sullivan 2010: n.p). There are elements in this exploration of the fashioning of ethical and political subjectivities in relation to particular social practices that may be useful for rethinking contemporary neoliberal and entrepreneurial relations of the self to the self.

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