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Introduction to First Person Research

# The mundane and the unusual in academic work: “Knit your bit”

Sally Riad

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What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central. (Babcock, 1978)

Writing two decades ago, Gergen (1992: 207) posed the following question: “Why do we find it congenial to talk of organizations as structures but not clouds, systems but not songs, weak or strong, but not tender or passionate?” In the interim, the literature on management and organization has signaled an explosion of interest in, and use for, a wide range of metaphors – both conventional and unconventional. Taken as a *metaphor*, knitting is widely deployed in the organizational canon. For example, “stick to the knitting” is one strand of advice in diversification, and it is not unusual to read about “closely knit” teams. We are comfortable with knitting as metaphor because we know that this is what metaphors do: they establish relations of similarity between objects in *different* domains. However, the mundane activity of knitting becomes highly evocative when *placed* in the 21st century workplace. Derry sums up the sentiment towards knitting as a *practice* within organization; she states, “I get it that knitting doesn’t fit everyone’s idea of professionally approved recreation. It isn’t golf.” Her paper in this issue brings to the fore the ways in which some alternative experiences of organizational day-to-day life have eluded organizational accounts. It is also not unusual for everyday activities traditionally associated with mothering – like knitting – to be excluded from organizational representation (Riad, 2007). Though back in fashion, knitting is both gendered and aged.

Over centuries in the “west,” knitting was increasingly a women’s activity. Artists in the 14th and 15th centuries created several vibrant paintings featuring knitting Madonnas, thereby engraining the activity into an ultimate icon of motherhood (Rutt, 2003). Knitting was also sustained by the work ethic: busy, productive hands were good; their antithesis, idle hands, were the devil’s tools; (MacDonald, 1990). The industrial revolution threatened women’s everyday home knitting with the scale and scope of mass production, which drove a replacement of the activity from home to factory. Yet, it was still largely women who were employed to undertake the factory work. During World War I, the American Red Cross produced posters to drive knitting campaigns to supply soldiers with warm clothing. Figure 1 features one of these. Produced in 1918, it boldly prods, “Our boys need sox; Knit your bit.” Such efforts sought to engage women on the home-front with men in the battlefield, thereby enabling them to contribute to the war efforts both practically and emotionally (Nicholson, 1998; Rutt, 2003; Strawn and Falick, 2011). The gendering of knitting as a women’s activity needs to be placed in context, however. For



**Figure 1** American Red Cross knitting poster by L. N. Britton, 1918. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

example, in the “east” knitting was undertaken by men in both Russia and China (Rutt, 2003). Meanwhile, where knitting thrived as a cottage industry, it was the entire family’s business (qualms about gendering could dissipate when a living was to be made).

Turning to the 21st century, we find many ways by which knitting captures the current zeitgeist: it is retro, a means of re-use that signals self-sufficiency, hip with a touch of nostalgia, and even pro-social (when undertaken in resurgent community circles). No wonder it is making a comeback.

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Yet there is a difference based on *who* adopts the trend – which brings us to our second point, Derry’s statement that she engages in a “traditional grandmotherly activity.” There is an age factor as well: what is cool for younger women can appear stale for older ones. Yet increasingly, knitting – yarn, needles and all – is a symbolic resource commonly deployed in subversive parodies (e.g., animated features) that reframe grandmothers as turbo-charged super-grannies. The message seems to be: look beyond what you see. Knitting, as Derry illustrates, can be a very meaningful organizational activity.

One of our concerns in *First Person* is with addressing the marginalization of everyday experiences by including some of these activities into the organizational picture, so to speak. Knitting, for example, offers prime illustrations for some of the ideas we currently circulate as academics: learning by doing, developing tacit knowledge, embodiment and its relevance to management and leadership, and the list can go on. In this vein, Derry’s account is also consistent with the current interest in practice approaches to organization. It offers our readers one of the many embodied ways of knowing academic organization and doing academic work. There is also something deeply ambivalent about knitting in the workplace. On the one hand, it resonates with comforting care and warmth, the placation that comes with the familiar and repetitive. On the other hand, it stands for resistance to the dominant norms. Knitting signifies *both* conformity and subversion. It is entwined with politics and evolving social mores (Strawn and Falick, 2011). Here we return to its utility as metaphor. Since what is peripheral is often symbolically central (Babock, 1978), *First Person* continues to invite accounts that interweave personal organizational experiences with academic relevance. So, go on, knit your bit.