

## UNRAVELLING QUILTED TEXTS: AN ALTERNATE INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF LIFE

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*ABSTRACT: Motivated by our need to embrace and work with a diverse group of participants, the following inquiry explores an innovative, practical visual methodology. The creation of a quilt, when used as a social text or essay, affords the researcher a unique, practical opportunity to work collectively with participants, to gather and interpret meaningful data and display it in a manner which provides ease of dissemination to a diverse audience. Our focus in this paper is to show that the art form called quilting can be utilized as a specific mode of inquiry in social research.*

*Key words: quilting; visual methodology; alternate data representation*

The practice of quilting has been around for many centuries. Although no definitive timeline has been established, Conroy (1976) suggests that quilting developed simultaneously in China and Egypt and has been utilized in a broad range of ways. There is evidence that some quilts were used as vehicles to express the meaning of an experience (Colby, 1978; Conroy, 1976). For example, in the quilting field, it is generally accepted that quilts were transported throughout the world during the Crusades in the eleventh century, in the form of "armorial bearings, cloaks and banners" (Conroy, 1976, p.7). These armorial banners which were rich in symbolic meaning, often formed a rallying point for battle. It is this notion of the quilted, as an appliquéd object, containing symbolic representation of meaning of experience that is the foundation of this article. Our goal in writing this paper is to propose and support the value of applying the art form of quilting as a specific mode of inquiry in social research. The creation of a quilt, when used as a social text or essay, affords the researcher a unique, practical opportunity to work collectively with participants, to gather and interpret meaningful data and display it in a manner which provides ease of dissemination to a diverse audience.

Our inquiry began in August 2001 at the Civicus International Conference in Vancouver, B.C. Participants from numerous countries, representing various cultures, languages, and generations attended the conference. Several youth workers, including ourselves, were invited to share our communities' experiences and learning around the issues

associated with sexually exploited youth. As presenters, we were challenged by the process of engaging a diverse audience in a meaningful way, and enabling them to share their knowledge and insight. As quilters, we were familiar with the idea of shaping fabrics and patterns around specific themes, as our own quilts often proved to be representative of our current lived experiences. With this insight, we contemplated the idea of introducing quilting as a method to explore meaning making and we searched to discover how other researchers had utilized this collective approach.

### Literature Review

A literature search using the University of Victoria's Library database and the World Wide Web with the keywords, "quilting and research" initially identified literature pertaining to the history of quilting and specific cultural traditions (Cooper & Allen, 1989; Zopf, 1997). Subsequent searches revealed literature related to the contribution quilting has made to the lives and roles of women in the domestic sphere (Cerny, 1991; Hedges, Ferrero & Siber, 1996; Langellier, 1990). Documents discussing the use of quilting as a way to explore mathematical concepts with children were also discovered (Borasi, 1992).

Unfortunately, we found limited academic consideration of quilting, which was specifically employed as a mode of social research intended for making meaning. However, several authors (Conroy, 1976; Cooper & Allen, 1989; Lavitt, 1993) concur with the assertion that quilts can exist as material artifacts, which may offer the social researcher significant chances to piece together valuable knowledge about culture, politics and economics. Quilts may be seen as a reflection of the values and influences as they exist in the particular contexts and periods in which they were created. Mary Conroy (1976), a Canadian quilt historian, echoes these sentiments. "If you look closely, the political and economic history of our country also becomes evident for, as in other art forms, quilts always reflect the environment in which they were created" (Conroy, 1976, p.1). As researchers, we found that the essence of her suggestion resonated with our own search for a mechanism, which would facilitate a methodology allowing conference participants to express their voices without spoken language.

Provoked by the prospect of using this creative methodology, we delved further into secondary sources resulting in the discovery of pictorial quilts. Of particular relevance to this article is the resurgence of the nineteenth century political pictorial quilts often referred to as action or cause quilts (Lavitt, 1993). These quilts no longer depend on function or serve only as beautification in the traditional sense. Rather, they depict political movements, heighten awareness to causes and may act as a catalyst for change. Several recent examples of these types of quilts exist. *The Scrap of Pride Quilt* (1996) initiated by Luanne Bole-Beckner (1966) was used as a tool to address and deal with racism. *The Canadian AIDS Memorial Quilt* (1997) coordinated by The NAMES Project, serves as a permanent

memorial to those who have died of AIDS, and has been used to raise awareness and money for the cause (see [www.quilt.ca](http://www.quilt.ca)). Another pictorial quilt called *The Quilt Project: A celebration of survivors*, was started by Carol Millar in 1998, and also helped raise awareness of breast cancer (see [www.thequilt.co/a\\_lookback.html](http://www.thequilt.co/a_lookback.html)). Of significance to our area of interest, is the recently created quilt by Katarina Thorsen (2002), which is dedicated to and honours the missing and presumed murdered women from Vancouver's Downtown East Side sex trade (see [www.missingpeople.net/print-and-quilt-a-legacy-to-miss.html](http://www.missingpeople.net/print-and-quilt-a-legacy-to-miss.html)). It was at this intersection of an interest in pictorial quilts, combined with the conception of art as a form of knowing, which prompted this present conceptualization of quilting as a unique form of inquiry.

### **Methodological assumptions**

As youth workers, researchers and quilters, with an interest in art as a form of expression, creating a quilt with participants to meet the complex needs identified seemed a natural solution. However, in suggesting the possibility of adapting quilting to meet this purpose resulted in initial reactions of perplexity and complexity. We found that asking the majority of people about quilting, usually conjured up one of two visions: either a traditional impression of women sitting and tracing, basting, cutting and sewing small scraps of material together forming an overall design: or the image is of a utilitarian, fabric creation to be used as a warm, decorative covering or as beautification such as a wall hanging. Even though both of these notions about quilts are fitting, when unravelled we find that quilts are also infused with many other explorative opportunities.

In order to entertain quilting as an acceptable alternative within the qualitative research inquiry paradigm, certain assumptions must be considered. From an ontological perspective, there must be the belief that quilting represents a method for knowing something exists as it does. This is based on the premise that reality can be represented in multiple ways, and by its very nature is subjective. In conducting qualitative research, research participants must also be acknowledged as having numerous ways of considering and representing their realities and that the creation of a quilt block is one such way. Accepting that quilting qualifies as art, which is representational in form and from which insight can be derived, is also a vital component of this method. Specifically, as explained by Young (2001), we must accept that quilts provide interpretive illustrative representations of a perspective. Young clarifies this definition by adding "interpretive illustrations are the ones that present perspectives on objects which are not a part of the ordinary experience of the objects. As such, interpretive illustrations can change how things are perceived" (2001, p.81). This is particularly pertinent when unconventional pictorial quilts, such as those depicting war, divorce or famine, are considered from this perspective (Lavitt, 1993).

In these quilts there can be seen a certain juxtaposition of disquieting

imagery in a medium most often associated with comfort and safety, and grounded in the familiar. The very nature of the pictures or depictions chosen for these quilts can focus the viewer's attention in a different way. As stated by Young, "a work of art can, by judicious use of selection, bring an audience to focus on objects which have been overlooked, or thought unworthy of careful attention" (Young, 2001, p.82). It is perhaps for this reason, Lavitt (1993) suggests, that "many artists dealing with women's issues speak of the fascination of expressing unorthodox ideas in a conventional framework" (p.117). The combination of unconventional representations of knowing in a conventional frame such as a quilt creates a powerful tool for presenting patterns and themes around a specific issue or topic.

With grounding in the above concepts, and an understanding that the emergence of patterns and theories can help lend meaning to a phenomenon, such as sexual exploitation, we were excited to consider the use of quilting as a method of capturing the voices of the conference participants.

### **Quilting together all the Pieces**

Our presentation utilized quilting as a visual medium. The conference participants were asked to create canvas squares individually, which would answer the question "what does sexual exploitation mean to you?" Arrays of material were provided for the participants, including fabric paint, and an assortment of buttons and ribbons, to use in creating their squares. Of the eighteen participants who completed squares, eight chose not to have them included in the final quilt. Six youth workers and youth who were unable to attend the conference, but wanted their voices heard, also submitted squares. Each participant was asked to share their completed square and talk about the meaning they had attributed to their creation. Once completed, each square expressed individually, without the barriers of language, and across cultures, the impact sexual exploitation has on individuals and on our global communities.

With the workshop completed and the participants gone, we grappled with the issue of organization and how to display and arrange the blocks or pieces. We decided to take the squares along with the fabric pieces to an existing youth sewing group. Together with the youth, we decided upon placement of the squares within the framework of fabric. As the quilt squares were sewn together, we were struck at how personal experiences can be constructed into universally impacting images. The squares were transformed into a quilt which visually depicted the stories and experiences of participants and also created dialogue about the issue with other groups, including youth and local communities.

Susan Long-Behuniak (1994) sums up our process of using quilting as an alternative method of inquiry by describing quilts as touchable art that symbolize the importance of connection. Quilts do not only cover people, they "hold" them (p.166). Realizing how powerful the completed quilt was, we decided to use it, like other pictorial quilts, to heighten awareness

around the issue of sexual exploitation. With funding from the Ministry of Public Safety and the Solicitor General (2001, 2002), the quilt was made into posters and continues to raise awareness and provoke discussion about issues of commercial sexual exploitation. The threads of our quilt are the stories, experiences and voices of youth, youth workers and participants, which have been intertwined to give meaning, in an inquiry that challenges ways of knowing outside borders of traditional discourse.

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