

Fibre Crafting as a Creative Intervention for Adolescent Low Self-Esteem

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Abstract

This literature review examines the art of fibre crafting and its practical implications for adolescent self-esteem. Low self-esteem during the adolescent years has been linked to detrimental outcomes such as increased risk of depression, eating disorders, and poor physical health. Conversely, high self-esteem during this period can lead to positive social development and better health. The need to find easily accessible, low-cost, and low-barrier treatment methods to target adolescent self-esteem challenges is paramount. This review suggests a novel approach of fibre crafting (e.g., knitting, crochet, cross-stitch, macramé, etc.) to target adolescent self-esteem development through a biopsychosocial lens. This review covers literature supporting the benefits of these fibre craft activities, discusses implications for counselling psychology, and suggests key areas for future research. The literature review supports that fibre crafting expands the considerations for techniques to assist clients in overcoming mental health challenges and may provide a valuable addition to group therapeutic treatment, individual counselling, established art therapy programs, and/or youths' personal hobbies.

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The current field of psychotherapy and psychological research encompasses a range of creative questions, theories, and solutions as a response to the modern needs of the diverse human population. Within the human lifespan, the period of adolescence (ages 13 to 18) is a time of great transitions and development that sets the stage for later life functioning (Erikson, 1968). Establishing one's identity, self-concept, and self-esteem are key developmental tasks that must be navigated to set the foundations for adulthood (Erikson, 1968). If this development is not adequately navigated and supported during this period, adolescents may be left open to mental health challenges that persist into adulthood.

Self-esteem is one such area of development with implications for adult functioning. Self-esteem is generally defined as one's subjective evaluation of worth, irrespective of others' perceptions or objective abilities (Orth & Robins, 2014). A recent meta-analysis on the trajectory of self-esteem across the lifespan has shown that self-esteem during adolescence is relatively stable in early adolescence and increases closer to adulthood (Orth et al., 2018). Additionally, collective research indicates that both high and low self-esteem impacts long-term outcomes in several ways. High self-esteem is positively related to aspects of well-being (Orth & Robins, 2014), while low self-esteem during the adolescent years is related to outcomes such as depressive symptoms (e.g., Masselink et al., 2018; Steiger et al., 2014), eating disorders (Smink et al., 2018), poor physical health, and criminal behaviour (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). By understanding both the causes and outcomes of self-esteem differences, we may narrow the focus of interventions to specifically target and improve adolescent self-esteem to promote individual and societal wellness.

Given the positive outcomes associated with high self-esteem and the potential negative outcomes that persistent low self-esteem may have on an individual, finding optimal types of interventions to address this problem is the next step of research and psychological care. Creative interventions in therapy are valuable for aiding practitioners in creating a broad repertoire of techniques to assist clients in overcoming mental health challenges and improving well-being. Art therapy has become an increasingly popular approach for engaging clients in the therapeutic process and has shown clinical efficacy in addressing a range of presenting concerns (Slayton et al., 2010). Youth may benefit from incorporating creative and fun interventions in the counselling space as a more engaging alternative to traditional talk therapy (Degges-White & Colon, 2014; Gambrel et al., 2020; Hartz & Thick, 2005). Art therapy may take various forms depending on the clinical orientation and intended outcomes of the activity and may incorporate a range of artistic mediums such as art, dance, music, and drama (Degges-White & Colon, 2014; Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). Regardless of the medium, art therapies in practice evoke shared experiences of the establishment of a safe therapeutic space for creativity to thrive, the use of non-verbal communication, the promotion of a therapeutic relationship between client and therapist, and the use of metaphor and symbolism in the therapeutic process (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). While these common themes have been limited to the aforementioned artistic modalities of dance, music, art, and drama, one could argue that other creative activities could be included in this definition and share these same themes. The proposed research aims to further add to the collection of art therapy literature by exploring a less-studied, more specific creative medium and its practical implications for individual wellness: the art of fibre crafting.

The proposed fibre crafting extension of art therapy may offer similar therapeutic and mental health benefits seen with more traditional types of art therapy. Fibre crafting may be

defined as the practice of using fibres such as thread, yarn, hemp, and tools such as needles and hooks to create finished work, such as with knitting, crochet, cross-stitch, macramé, and more. On both an individual and group level, crafting is regarded as a beneficial activity for promoting happiness and well-being (Riley et al., 2013) and supporting positive social connection and acceptance (Sjöberg & Porko-Hudd, 2019). When applied to specific mental health challenges, such as anorexia nervosa (Clave-Brule et al., 2009) and substance addiction (Duffy, 2007), patients reported that knitting was a valuable part of their treatment in improving well-being, self-esteem, and emotional regulation. To this point, research on the processes of why crafting specifically is beneficial and impacts of crafting interventions are minimal. Additionally, most research has focused solely on adults. Given the reported wellness benefits of crafting in the older populations and with specific disorders, such as anorexia nervosa (Clave-Brule et al., 2009) and substance addiction (Duffy, 2007), this research will seek to argue that fibre crafting may also serve as a beneficial intervention for adolescents seeking specific support for their self-esteem challenges.

The following literature review will examine the collective literature describing the types, factors, and development of self-esteem throughout the life span and the reported benefits and challenges of creative crafting interventions on improving areas of well-being related to self-esteem. This literature review will be framed around a biopsychosocial approach to mental health (Engel, 1977) that will provide a framework for the underlying processes of how crafting may impact self-esteem. A discussion of implications for counselling, future research suggestions, and recommendations for practice will follow the literature review. The present research will add to the current literature by answering the question: How might fibre crafting as a hobby during the adolescent years impact the development of self-esteem?

Self-Positioning: The Researcher as a Person

Crafting and self-esteem are two areas near and dear to me professionally and personally. Having struggled with low self-esteem throughout my adolescence and into my early adulthood, I am all too aware of the negative consequences caused by holding negative opinions about oneself. Particularly striking for me are the links between poor self-esteem in adolescence and an increase likelihood of depression in late adolescence and adulthood (Masselink et al., 2018; Steiger et al., 2014). I have witnessed the interplay of depression and self-esteem in my friends and peers throughout my life, and in the teenage clients with whom I have worked. I have seen the impact that prolonged self-esteem challenges have had on the livelihood of these individuals and their families. Throughout my graduate program, I have paid particular attention to research on this topic as I hope to find creative ways to approach this problem with my future clients. While I was into adulthood by the time I discovered my love for fibre crafts, I can still attest to the therapeutic benefits it brought in helping me manage my low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Having tangible, creative, and purposeful hobbies to fill my days and occupy my mind helped me stay grounded and feel like I had something to contribute to the world around me. It seems like such a small, simple piece of a solution to a large problem, but it is one that I wholeheartedly stand behind.

I am a huge proponent of using the arts with youth and adolescent clients in my professional life. In my work as a counsellor with youth and families, I incorporated art and craft interventions as much as possible to address a wide assortment of problems. My motivation for completing this proposed research is based on my experiences with one teenage client. Like me, she dealt with low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, lack of motivation, and crippling self-criticism. As part of our work together, I taught her to crochet, and we bonded over untangling

our yarn and talking about her past, present, and future. It was a transformative experience for both of us as we learned about ourselves through conversation, developed our new crafting hobby together, and practiced valuable life skills such as persistence, patience, and forgiveness. This experience also provided me with the motivation to finally pursue a master's program so I may be of greater help to my clients by expanding my abilities and knowledge base while incorporating my unique interests and skills. This client was not alone in her struggles. In my work, I have seen many adolescents, particularly young women, who are struggling with their identity, interests, and motivation brought on by a lack of healthy self-esteem and related depressive symptoms. With this research, I hope to find ways to bring the magic of crafts into the therapeutic realm to help other struggling adolescents on a larger scale.

At the same time, I am aware that my experience is not universal. Some individuals may not view crafting in the same light I do, which is understandable and valid. I have had experiences trying to teach some youth and friends how to crochet or cross-stitch, and they quickly quit out of frustration. Furthermore, I recognize that I am coming from a place of privilege from which I had access to the supplies, online lessons, time, and social supports needed to pursue my hobbies. This type of intervention may not be possible for every individual, which I must keep in mind while formulating my conclusions and recommendations.

Moreover, I am also acutely mindful of the potential negative impacts that picking up fibre crafting as a hobby may have. As with most hobbies and interests, there is a large online and social media community established for each area of fibre crafting. While this community may be beneficial for those seeking to learn from others, find inspiration, and share their works, it may also come with negative comparisons of skills and talents to other artists and pressures to produce perfect pieces. Through the present literature review, I hope to share all viewpoints and

perspectives of the art of fibre crafting and argue that despite these potential drawbacks, crafting may still be a viable means for achieving the goal of improving self-esteem and well-being for adolescents.

Given my connection to this topic, I recognize the potential bias I bring into my work. Two central traits of my personality are my passion for crafts and my desire to help people, as evidenced by my professional work and aspirations as a therapist and my personal connection to this research topic. With this experience, I risked bringing bias into my research in the form of potentially cherry-picking sources, inaccurately presenting the available research, or avoiding topics that do not support my views. Therefore, it was important for me to bracket myself out of my work (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and view it from a neutral observer lens (Efron & Ravid, 2018) so that my personal experience and bias did not influence the research I gathered. This bracketing required a thorough and objective search of the available literature and ongoing self-reflection about what came up for me as I completed my research. While the limited available literature on crafting specifically narrowed the scope and depth of my research, it also helped me avoid bias as I was required to use all the information available on the topic to gain adequate research coverage.

Finally, this project holds importance for me in my future practice as a therapist. Given that this topic was one of my primary motives for completing a master's program, I feel compelled to ensure that it will help me pursue my professional goals. I envision myself starting crafting groups with youth or bringing these activities to disadvantaged communities, so there is particular importance riding on this project. To counter my biases brought on by my investment in this research project, I utilized a representative sample of the available literature to ensure that I explored all views of the topic. This sample included the challenges and risks of using fibre

crafts as a therapeutic intervention and obstacles in implementing this type of intervention in practice. While this representative literature sample may provide evidence that opposes my personal experience, my focus of this literature review and graduate program is learning the skills and knowledge to make a difference in individuals' lives. By keeping this central goal in mind and rolling with the challenges posed by the literature, I believe I have highlighted a future area of research and practical focus that has the potential to enhance the lives of even a portion of the struggling adolescent population.

Literature Review: Fibre Crafting and Adolescent Self-Esteem

The following literature review supports the argument that fibre crafting is a viable creative treatment intervention for youth experiencing low self-esteem and related symptoms (e.g., depression, anxious thinking). The literature on self-esteem development, trajectories, and outcomes will be discussed to provide a clear definition of the topic and explain why this topic is important to address. Art interventions in therapy will be explored in terms of their history and use with clients challenged by similar self-esteem concerns. Following this summary, the available research on fibre crafting and wellness will be summarized and tied to self-esteem. Applications for this research perspective will be proposed to answer the central research question.

Before addressing this specific research, it is important to provide a brief overview of the overarching biopsychosocial framework that will be used to scaffold the arguments presented here. The biopsychosocial approach views mental illness as stemming from three interrelated components: biological factors (e.g., genetic makeup, biological predispositions, etc.), social and cultural factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, social location, situational experiences, interpersonal relationships, etc.), and psychological factors (e.g., thoughts, feelings, perceptions, etc.; Engel,

1977). Engel first proposed this model in 1977 to address medical and psychiatric illness more holistically than the medical philosophy of the time suggested. Therapists may also utilize this approach when treating clients' mental health concerns by understanding and addressing broader factors interconnected with the presenting concern. For the purposes of this literature review and suggestions for practice, the biopsychosocial approach will be utilized to view how adolescent low self-esteem can be addressed holistically using fibre crafts as an intervention. By understanding the biological, social, and psychological impacts and factors of crafting, we can better understand the hypothesized underlying processes of how the act of fibre crafting may produce therapeutic benefits to address self-esteem challenges.

Self-Esteem: Development, Factors, and Outcomes

Current self-esteem literature is expansive and covers various topics, as can be easily observed during a simple literature search on the subject. To limit the scope of the available self-esteem research for the purpose of this review, research will be limited to articles within the last seven years and will focus primarily on the development, trajectory, and outcomes using the adolescent years as an anchor for the literature sample.

Establishing a working definition of self-esteem from the available literature is a challenge due to the varied theoretical conceptualizations and definitions provided in the extensive self-esteem literature available. Some define it as a subjective view of the self that is not dependent on the opinions of others (Orth et al., 2018). By contrast, others do consider the potential social implications that peer evaluations may have in one's conceptualization of self-worth, as evidenced in studies that review specific aspects of self-esteem including social relationships and acceptance (von Soest et al., 2016). The interpersonal view of self-esteem, otherwise known as the sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995), suggests that self-

esteem is used as a means of threat detection from social exclusion and determination of social status. Thus, social self-esteem is related to beneficial interpersonal qualities such as physical appearance, social acceptability, and friendships (von Soest et al., 2016).

Furthermore, self-esteem as a unified, global concept has also been debated in the literature. One of the oldest and most used self-esteem measures, the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), uses only ten questions to capture one's overall self-evaluation and provides a score that ranks individuals as having low, moderate, or high self-esteem. High self-esteem is generally accepted as having an overall positive view of oneself, while those with low self-esteem have an overall negative view of themselves. The stability of global self-esteem has been studied over the lifespan, and research has shown that adolescent self-esteem is the least stable compared to childhood and young adulthood self-esteem (Chung et al., 2017).

Additionally, studies of global self-esteem trajectories indicate similar self-esteem changes over the adolescent years. Chung et al. (2017) found that global self-esteem drops during late childhood and steadily increases through adolescence until early adulthood when it increases more strongly. Orth et al. (2018) instead found that self-esteem increases during childhood up to age 11, remains stable throughout early adolescence, and increases strongly at around age 16. Similar studies also show an increase in self-esteem from age 16 into adulthood (Bleidorn et al., 2016; von Soest et al., 2016). One suggestion for this increase in self-esteem during later adolescence and into adulthood is that individuals accomplish life tasks important for self-esteem and identity formation at approximately the same ages during late adolescence and into adulthood, such as developing romantic relationships and graduating from school (Bleidorn et al., 2016). In order to tease apart these potential life and developmental factors that impact self-

esteem improvement, some researchers turn to domain-specific self-esteem to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Domain-specific constructs of self-esteem represent various areas of personality and skill that one might use to conceive their overall self-concept (Schwinger et al., 2017; von Soest et al., 2016). These domains, such as physical appearance, scholastic competence, and romantic appeal, represent areas of competency deemed important for success (von Soest et al., 2016). Domain-specific self-esteem categories provide scores for individuals' subjective judgments of their abilities or worth in specific areas. These areas are also often linked to and inform global self-esteem (von Soest et al., 2016). In keeping with the sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995), social domains are observed to be some of the most significant factors related to adolescent self-concept. The domains of close friendships, physical appearance, and social acceptance were most strongly linked to global self-esteem from one study (von Soest et al., 2016). For adolescent girls, another study found that appearance is the strongest predictor of self-esteem (Baudson et al., 2016). Social rejection has also been linked to lower self-esteem in adolescence (Danneel et al., 2019). Taken together, these data suggest that self-esteem is at least partially socially determined and that these domains are important to address when implementing self-esteem support for youth.

The debate of whether to use global or domain-specific self-esteem in both research and practice appears to be undecided in the literature. As noted, some authors have considered the two concepts together, using domain-specific self-esteem to inform global self-esteem (e.g., von Soest et al., 2016). On the other hand, others have examined directional effects between the two types or if they are separate constructs altogether. One study looked at these concepts in terms of top-down or bottom-up interactional processes (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018): top-down

describes global self-esteem informing domain-specific factors and providing a buffer against threats to domain-specific categories, and bottom-up describes how the domains combine to inform a global self-concept. In this study (Rentzsch & Schröder-Abé, 2018), the authors did not find support for either effect but did find that global and domain-specific self-esteem was stable in their adult sample. In deciding which type of self-esteem measure to use, it has also been found that domain-specific models are better at predicting and describing self-esteem than the global or mixed-models (Schwinger et al., 2017). To this end, when examining the self-esteem of adolescents both in research and in clinical practice, it may be best to rely on measures that consider specific traits and skills and to target interventions to bolster areas that are both more influential in determining an individual's self-concept and ones that may be at greater risk of being lower. These areas to target will depend on factors such as gender and culture. It has been found in several studies that females typically have lower global and domain-specific self-esteem (Bleidorn et al., 2016; von Soest et al., 2016). Furthermore, in a sample of Chinese adolescents, academic and family support were the factors most associated with self-esteem (Chen-Bouck & Patterson, 2016). This finding aligns with cultural understandings of collectivist cultures, as adolescents are more likely to view their interpersonal relationships and opinions of others as vital for their identity and self-concept development in collectivist cultures compared to individualist cultures (Chen-Bouck & Patterson, 2016). Both the gender and cultural findings suggest that self-esteem development must be considered within broader life and cultural contexts.

Having provided definitions for and the approaches taken to conceptualize and understand self-esteem, we now turn to the significance of why this research is vital. Self-esteem is understood to be a cause rather than a consequence of life outcomes (Orth et al., 2012).

Generally, research points to the importance of healthy self-esteem for positive adult outcomes and the negative consequences of low self-esteem during adolescence. Beginning with the potential negative outcomes, low self-esteem in adolescence is associated with poor health-related quality of life (Mikkelsen et al., 2020), overall poorer health (Trzesniewski et al., 2006), high rates of criminal behaviour (Trzesniewski et al., 2006), increased chance of eating disorders (Smink et al., 2018), and most notably and most studied, higher likelihood of depressive symptoms and antidepressant prescription in adulthood (Masselink et al., 2018; Steiger et al., 2014; von Soest et al., 2016). Positive outcomes related to self-esteem include more positive longitudinal trajectories for positive affect, job satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and health compared to individuals with lower self-esteem (Orth et al., 2012), more positive perceived social support and social network size (Marshall et al., 2014), and better work conditions and outcomes (Kuster et al., 2013). Research into the positive and negative outcomes of self-esteem provides robust support through well-designed studies outlining the importance of healthy development of self-esteem (Orth & Robins, 2014).

In sum, the research reviewed here indicates that while low self-esteem in adolescence is developmentally typical and may naturally improve throughout later adolescence and into adulthood, having particularly low self-esteem may also put individuals at later risk for detrimental outcomes. Whether self-esteem is considered a global evaluation or the collection of several individual evaluations, research points to the importance of social relationships and acceptance as crucial for healthy self-esteem development during the adolescent years. In keeping with the biopsychosocial approach (Engel, 1977), interventions to target and improve adolescent self-esteem will need to target the various risk factors, domains, and associated factors of self-esteem noted above (e.g., being female, social acceptance, depression,

respectively) when tailoring treatment for adolescents. Having reviewed the recent adolescent self-esteem literature on the development and trajectory of self-esteem and resulting mental health concerns, we look to types of interventions that may improve self-esteem during the vulnerable adolescent period. Creative interventions such as art, dance, drama, and music therapy have been used by counsellors for years to engage clients and address a variety of problems (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006) and may meet the needs of this specific adolescent population. The following section will review the literature around general creative interventions in counselling practice that will serve as the theoretical approach for the application of fibre crafting in therapy described in the final review sections.

Creative Interventions in Therapy

Art in therapy has a longstanding practice in several forms and areas of clinical practice. From traditional visual art to other expressive mediums like dance, drama, and music, art has been used throughout the years to engage clients, explore thought and emotion, and promote mental wellness (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). Art therapy as a practice can be complicated to define given its evolution over time and its various forms (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006); however, art therapy can be generally defined as the use of art in a therapeutic setting with a trained art therapy practitioner, while art in therapy can be more flexible. This distinction will be expanded on in a later section, so for the purpose of this literature overview, art therapy and art as therapy will be used to discuss generally the use of artistic and creative means in a therapeutic way to achieve specific therapeutic goals.

The use of art in therapy has shown growing clinical efficacy and popularity in therapy over time (Slayton et al., 2010). One prominent school of art therapy is Natalie Rogers' person-centred expressive arts therapy (PCEAT; Rogers, 1993). This approach combines the person-

centred approach developed by her father, Carl Rogers, with the creative and expressive medium of various arts and crafts. PCEAT uses the same three core components of person-centred care (i.e., unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence) to develop a collaborative and safe space for clients to explore their inner emotional states and find personal meaning in the work they create (Rogers, 1993; Rogers et al., 2012). Rogers notes that the therapy space needs to be free of judgement and external evaluation to allow clients full expression. The purpose behind using art is on the process of creating rather than on the artistic quality of the work produced, thereby opening the space for the freedom to explore and try new things. Natalie Rogers also speaks about the power of art as a language (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). She has described art as a means to uncover and explore individuals' true nature and the many emotions that come with it. Similarly, she describes how art helps individuals break free of problematic cognitive patterns they may be trapped in, thereby allowing their creative minds to form new perspectives and states of consciousness (Rogers, 1993). PCEAT may also be effective in group settings as individuals are able to share a therapeutic space and explore inner emotional and cognitive states with the empathy and support of peers (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007).

Rogers' (1993) PCEAT offers a clinical orientation from which to view the use of art and the value that creative interventions may hold. Other more specific forms of art therapy that have been explored cover a range of mediums and purposes. Various art therapy mediums have been used to explore body image (Higenbottam, 2004), set goals (Burton & Lent, 2016), and control self-injurious urges (Whisenhunt & Kress, 2013). Art therapies may be used to target specific mental health concerns experienced by adolescents as well. The combination of visual art and music has been shown to decrease depression for an adolescent sample (Rahmani et al., 2016).

Cognitive-behaviour therapy has also been combined with art therapy to produce the same reduction in depressive symptoms (Sahassanon et al., 2019). Similarly, art therapy and breathing meditations together also improved the well-being of anxious and depressed adolescents (Kim et al., 2014). Increased mindfulness has also been an observed benefit of art therapy programs (Coholic & Eys, 2016; Gambrel et al., 2020), which has also been linked to craft activities, as will be explored in the following section. The social connections found within an art group itself may be therapeutically beneficial for clients (Skudrzyk et al., 2009). In sum, art therapy practices with young clients can promote a sense of self-control, provide a means to communicate visually, and explore and understand thoughts and feelings (Nielsen et al., 2019; Whisenhunt & Kress, 2013) so that clients may begin to work through and manage a variety of mental health concerns.

Traditional art therapy emphasizes the process over the final product. The skills learned through art therapy, such as mindfulness, emotional expression and communication, emotional processing, and self-control, are transferable skills that may be used when addressing a variety of mental health or other life concerns. Individuals are encouraged to connect with themselves and others throughout the process and may find enhanced creativity and skill over one's chosen medium, which in turn produces positive self-evaluations. While the product is typically considered a by-product of the process rather than the central goal of the art therapy exercise, the art therapist's role is also to help clients interpret meaning in the finished pieces for clients to gain further insight into their problems and inner emotional states (Rogers et al., 2012). In the hands of a trained art therapist, the exercise of artistic creation in an art therapy setting can be therapeutic from start to finish to meet client needs and provide room for creative expression and exploration. From a biopsychosocial perspective, the physicality of artistic activities and the

related emotional expression aspects may target biological and psychological factors, respectively. If completed in a group, art therapy as a practice may also meet the social needs of clients, as has been demonstrated in group art therapy literature (e.g., Lindsey et al., 2018). The following section will provide literature discussing the benefits of craft activities specifically to show how craft activities connect with both art therapy and self-esteem.

Fibre Crafting

To further distill the creative options for counselling, we can turn to specific artistic mediums as potential interventions. Fibre crafting (i.e., yarn and thread crafts) is one understudied creative practice that has shown potential for therapeutic use (e.g., Corkhill et al., 2014). Based on preliminary literature on the benefits of fibre crafts and my own experience with the medium, I propose that fibre crafts may be a viable yet untapped resource for addressing mental health concerns. Unlike the expanse of self-esteem literature, fibre crafts have been studied relatively minimally in academic literature and have primarily focused on qualitative research. Given the limited research available on fibre crafts, I broadened the criteria for publication dates to ensure enough literature has been covered in the present review. Due to the nature of the available literature, the following research being reviewed primarily focused on knitting and crocheting.

For this review, the discussed literature will be generalized to include various types of fibre crafting (e.g., knitting, crocheting, cross-stitching, needle felting, lace making, etc.) due to their similarities. While the construction supplies and the final products are different, they all share elements of using fibre (yarn, thread, felt) as the primary material and involve repetitive motions and moderate concentration. For this section of the literature review, the research

discussed will include the reported personal and social benefits, therapeutic treatment uses, and challenges of crafting.

Personal wellness benefits of knitting and crochet specifically have been examined using broad-scale survey inquiry. The benefits of knitting were first studied using a mixed-methods international survey using participants that frequented an online knitting web and social media site (Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). Through a mix of scaling and short-answer questions, the researchers (Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013) were able to flesh out key themes and associations between knitting and well-being as participants described their personal experiences with the craft. The primary theme that emerged from the studies was participant experiences of knitting as a calming activity that relieved stress and produced happiness. More frequent engagement in knitting (three or more times a week) was associated with both higher cognitive function and greater feelings of happiness. Notes of creativity, focus, sense of accomplishment, and connection to self and others underscored the participants' written accounts used to describe their experiences. Participants reported using knitting to cope with stressful life events and manage specific mental and physical health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and chronic pain. Knitting was a means to distract from negative thinking and focus on other background activities, such as listening to a lecture or music or engaging in conversation with others. Those who identified experiencing depression reported that knitting with others boosted their mood and generally made them feel happier when comparing their mood before and after knitting.

Burns & Van Der Meer (2020) studied crochet using a similar approach to Corkhill et al., (2014) and Riley et al.'s (2013) studies and found similar results. Participants from their international online survey reported themes of creativity, relaxation, and a sense of

accomplishment due to engaging in crochet. Most participants discussed feeling happier, calmer, more useful, more confident, and better about themselves due to their craft activities. Participants also reported using crochet to manage physical and mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, drinking, smoking, and pain. Like the previously discussed surveys of knitters (Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013), about a third of participants discussed social connections and making new friends through crochet as a positive aspect of their hobby.

The results from these studies provide specific examples of crafter experiences with the wellness benefits of engaging in their chosen fibre craft. Some of these benefits may be attributed to the physical act of crocheting and knitting. The repetitive nature of the motion of knitting specifically has been considered to have benefits akin to meditation and mindfulness for crafters (Adey, 2018; Corkhill et al., 2014; Kingston, 2012; Riley et al., 2013). The umbrella term of meditation covers a variety of practices aimed at improving psychological capacity for awareness and emotional regulation (Tang et al., 2015). Mindfulness practices are a subset of meditation that work to enhance non-judgemental awareness of the present moment and one's current internal states. Neuroscience studies suggest that meditative practices may change neural networking with positive benefits for overall well-being (Tang et al., 2015) and for anxiety and depression specifically (Yang et al., 2016). Self-esteem has also been found to be improved in adolescent populations using mindfulness-based stress reduction programs (Biegel et al., 2009). The meditative state produced from the repetitive motions of the activity and the ability to detach one's cognition from the activity is like that of flow states described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996) and Adey (2018). The flow state is described as involvement in a creative process, a balance between challenge and ability, and feeling in control of the activity. Themes from Adey's (2018) research found support for knitting as a type of flow activity that met these

conditions, adding support for the argument that knitting and related craft hobbies provide emotional and psychological benefits to crafters.

Fibre craft activities are inherently solitary by design. However, crafting as a social activity is quite common and has been shown to add to the wellness benefits noted above (Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). From the international surveys of knitters (Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013), social knitting was remarked as being generally beneficial for most participants in that being part of a knitting group allowed them to make new friends, build social skills, and talk more easily and freely with those who shared their interests. Craft circles may take several forms, including informal groups in yarn stores (Palmer & Kawakami, 2014), public gatherings as with the worldwide “Knit in Public Day” (Sjöberg & Poroko-Hudd, 2019), and virtual communities (Mayne, 2016, 2020). Crafting in groups creates a sense of connection to others and cohesion within the group (Palmer & Kawakami, 2014). The ability to share and celebrate one’s work with others and find support in a community can subjectively improve personal agency and self-esteem (Mayne, 2016, 2020).

Taking these findings together, the social, emotional, and psychological benefits of crafting can be seen clearly. Authors suggest that the physical act of knitting and crocheting may be considered a vital element of these observed benefits (e.g., Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). The physically repetitive, bilateral movements involved in most crafts coupled with the cognitive engagement and creativity required in knitting provide the optimal physical and mental conditions needed to feel calm and content (Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). These conditions align with meditative practice and targets biological and psychological factors through the biopsychosocial framework (Engel, 1977). Moreover, like with art therapy in general, the finished product may not be the key therapeutic element of the process of crafting,

but the meaning the individuals derive from their finished work may be personally meaningful (Rogers et al., 2012). The creation of new projects additionally builds a sense of accomplishment, and the ability to unravel and restitch mistakes quickly and easily may build persistence and challenge notions of perfectionism (Clave-Brule et al., 2009). Furthermore, the accessibility of crafting may also contribute to these benefits. Knitting and crocheting are relatively easy to learn, portable, inexpensive, forgiving of mistakes, and offer the ability to be creative with minimal bounds (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Sjöberg & Porko-Hudd, 2019). The easy accessibility of these activities makes them ideal for individuals of all ages and abilities.

Therapeutic crafting has also been suggested in the literature as a means of mental health treatment with links to self-esteem. As an extension of the knitting benefits noted above, “therapeutic knitting takes the benefits of knitting and enhances them to improve well-being or to treat certain medical conditions” (Corkhill et al., 2014, p. 39). Therapeutic crafting may be a simple, inexpensive, and valuable tool for addressing both mental and physical health problems. While literature testing these benefits is limited at this time, knitting specifically has been studied as a possible treatment activity for individuals managing mental illness like those related to the negative outcomes of self-esteem noted previously. One study looked at knitting as a therapeutic tool for managing anxiety during anorexia nervosa treatment (Clave-Brule et al., 2009). Adult individuals receiving in-patient treatment for eating disorders were given knitting lessons and free access to supplies during their stay at the program. The participants reported that knitting reduced anxious preoccupation with their eating disorder and treatment and provided a relaxing distraction from their negative thoughts. Additionally, participants reported feelings of enjoyment, accomplishment, and self-improvement. Knitting has also been studied as a part of

treatment for an addiction rehabilitation center (Duffy, 2007). Similarly, this study found therapeutic benefit for the participants as they reported a reduction in stress and negative emotions and an installation of hope, creativity, and connection to others. This connection and sense of community is a shared response among crafters surveyed (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013) and has ties back to the importance of social acceptance and social competence with self-esteem (e.g., Danneel et al., 2019; von Soest et al., 2016), indicating one potential underlying process for why crafting in groups may hold wellness and self-esteem benefits. Furthermore, while knitting did not directly address the presenting concerns of eating disorders and addiction in these cases, it was a beneficial tool for the participants in managing their related symptoms of stress, anxiety, and negative feelings about themselves.

As seen from these studies and the crafting literature, the act of fibre crafting can produce beneficial effects on self-esteem and other related areas. For example, for addressing social connection, crafting can provide a means to establish relationships and contribute to a larger community (Sjöberg & Porko-Hudd, 2019). For addressing self-esteem-related mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, crafting offers an emotional outlet and reprieve from distressing thoughts (Clave-Brule et al., 2009). While the benefits of fibre crafting have to this point been documented purely through personal accounts and qualitative means, the literature reviewed here provides a strong argument for the benefits of yarn craft in personal well-being, social connectedness, and mental health treatments. Based on the literature presented, fibre crafting may address self-esteem challenges through biological (bilateral movements and flow states), emotional (distraction from distressing thought and instillation of positive self-evaluation), and social (connection with others and connection to crafting community) means.

Limitations of Fibre Crafting

Despite these discussed benefits, there are also potential challenges and limitations within the literature and crafting hobbies themselves. Firstly, one challenge noted about crafting was the potential for negative feelings to be enhanced (Mayne, 2016, 2020). In a study of an online Facebook crafting group, connecting and sharing with others were generally described as positive aspects of participants' inclusion in this community. However, for some, their inclusion in this group highlighted their solitude and was interpreted as feelings of loneliness (Mayne, 2016, 2020). The online environment of the study may be cause for concern in this case rather than the online crafting group itself, as excessive social media use is linked to emotional, relational, and health problems (Andreassen, 2015), and low-self-esteem, anxiety, and depression in adolescents (Woods & Scott, 2016). The differences between online and in-person crafting communities have not been studied explicitly; however, based on the presented research there are benefits and drawbacks to both inclusion in online communities and offline craft circles (e.g., Corkhill et al., 2014; Mayne, 2016, 2020).

Another challenge noted by crafters was that those who did not experience the wellness benefits expected from engaging in their craft were instead left with frustration (Mayne, 2020). From the knitting survey (Corkhill et al., 2014), some participants also reported sadness once a project was complete and anger if their creative vision did not come to fruition or if their project's challenge level was too high for their skill level. This range of emotions may be present in any activity that involves a degree of challenge; however, to provide a comprehensive overview of the benefits of crafting, they must be considered and highlighted.

In terms of limitations to the literature, all the studies noted above included samples either entirely composed of adult participants (Clave-Brule et al., 2009; Duffy, 2007) or mostly

adult participants, as less than 1% of participants were under 20 years old (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). This overrepresentation of adult participants may be due to sampling bias; the treatment centres studied were for adult patients, the knitting and crochet websites may be visited more commonly by adults, or there may simply be a generally low number of individuals under 20 who craft. Furthermore, self-selection bias may be a factor in the survey data (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013) as those who are already frequenting crafting sites are likely those who enjoy the craft and have enough experience of the benefits to want to talk about it. These surveys would likely not include the individuals who tried out the craft and quit because they did not enjoy it or find benefit to it. Additionally, fibre crafting hobbies are traditionally seen as “domestic” activities and are primarily undertaken by women (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014), which was observed in the large gender gaps found in these studies. When considering the therapeutic application of fibre crafts, these differences must be considered. Perhaps the stereotypes of crafting as activities for older women may lead younger and/or non-female identifying individuals to feel excluded from the broader crafting communities. As such, the reviewed research must be generalized with caution.

The current data reviewed for crafting is purely qualitative or mixed-methods and sampled from participants who were already involved in crafting. Future research will need to explore if these benefits also apply to those who were not included in the samples described here.

Fibre Crafting and Self-Esteem: Applications

The literature review above argues that fibre crafting may be a valuable form of art therapy to improve adolescent self-esteem. Although primarily focused on adults, the self-esteem literature confirms that an overall conceptualization of one’s self-esteem may be a function of

both one's subjective view of their self-worth (Orth & Robins, 2014) and one's perception of their social value (e.g., von Soest et al., 2016). When self-esteem is broken down into the specific domains that influence an individual's self-evaluation, social factors are consistently the key domains most related to global or overall self-esteem perception. Social challenges are frequently noted as being most impactful in causing low self-esteem (Danneel et al., 2019). Furthermore, if low self-esteem persists into adulthood, individuals are at risk for developing mental health challenges (e.g., Masselink et al., 2018) or suffering poorer health (e.g., Trzesniewski et al., 2006), among several notable life outcomes. Interventions to bolster self-esteem to prevent these negative outcomes are needed and would be most effective if targeted at addressing the specific domains or challenges observed with low self-esteem.

The benefits of crafting discussed previously may address many of the areas that research has found to be important for self-esteem development. The link between social connectedness, self-esteem, and depression (Masselink et al., 2018) may be addressed by the social benefits observed with crafting in groups (Corkhill et al., 2014; Palmer & Kawakami, 2014; Riley et al., 2013). The benefits of feeling connected to others, improving social skills, and feeling like crafting contributes to a broader social community (Riley et al., 2013) may directly target the social acceptance and close friendships aspects of self-esteem (von Soest et al., 2016).

Adolescents who are better connected socially show patterns of higher self-esteem, mastery, and life satisfaction (Rose et al., 2019; Stewart & Suldo, 2011), lower risk of depression (Badri et al., 2021; Du et al., 2016), and higher self-esteem (Du et al., 2016), so bolstering social connection through shared activities may benefit aspects of well-being outside of just self-esteem.

Furthermore, the associated negative symptoms of low self-esteem, particularly depressive symptoms (Masselink et al., 2018), may be addressed through crafting. As per the *Diagnostic*

and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), depression is characterized by feelings of sadness and hopelessness, sleep troubles, fatigue, concentration troubles, and thoughts of harming oneself. Specifically related to self-esteem challenges, depression also features symptoms of a lack of motivation and interest in engaging in activities and negative thoughts and feelings towards the self. Anxiety is marked by symptoms of rumination, preoccupied thinking, excessive worry, and often physical sensations of headaches, stomach aches, and nausea. The crafting studies noted above reported themes of increased happiness, reduced worrying, regulation of emotions, increased concentration, and greater self-forgiveness (Clave-Brule et al., 2009; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013), which directly address many of these symptoms of both depression and anxiety disorders.

Another specific aspect of crafting relevant to depression and anxiety that is worth exploring further is the benefit of mindfulness while crafting. Mindfulness and self-compassion have been linked to self-esteem and self-efficacy; those who are more mindful and gentler with themselves hold more positive self-evaluations (Muris et al., 2016) and report greater emotional well-being (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Galla, 2016). Mindfulness may be a challenge for those who experience excessive negative thoughts or rumination present in anxiety and depression; however, it has been shown to be a beneficial treatment for these disorders (Hofmann & Gómez, 2017; Hofmann et al., 2010). Mindfulness practices teach individuals how to counter reflexive thinking patterns that contribute to depression and anxiety by instead responding nonjudgmentally and reflectively to stressful situations and emotional states (Hofmann et al., 2010). Individuals are instead able to allow painful emotions and thought preoccupations to move through the mind without rumination or becoming stuck in a negative thought spiral. From both the crafting and art therapy literature, mindfulness is a common outcome noted by crafters

and those in art therapy programs (e.g., Coholic & Eys, 2016; Corkhill et al., 2014; Lindsey et al., 2018). Mindfulness is also one of the key effects noted in Corkhill et al.'s (2014) concept of “therapeutic knitting” (p. 39). This term was specifically created to define the wellness and mental health benefits observed for crafters, including reducing depression and anxiety symptoms. Other therapeutic crafting benefits such as providing a reprieve from distressing thoughts (Clave-Brule et al., 2009) and enhancing felt self-confidence (Duffy, 2007) also directly counter the symptoms experienced with depression and anxiety.

More generally, art therapies may serve several functions in the therapy space, including increasing emotional regulation and mindfulness abilities (Coholic & Eys, 2016; Lindsey et al., 2018; Whisenhunt & Kress, 2013), reducing stress (Lindsey et al., 2018), and promoting a sense of mastery and competence over one's chosen medium to promote self-esteem (Whisenhunt & Kress, 2013). Crafting in therapy could be carried out in several ways: through one-on-one experience in therapy, through a group art/craft therapy program, in a community group outside of the therapy space, or individually as a hobby. The differences and applications of craft therapy in these spaces will be elaborated on in a later section, but the literature provided here sums up the potential benefits of crafting for self-esteem in any setting. Crafting in a therapeutic or community group may address the social connectedness needs of self-esteem and allow adolescents to build social skills, make friends with shared interests, and find social acceptance, while crafting one-on-one in therapy or individually outside of counselling would allow clients to learn tangible skills, freely express themselves without judgement, and practice mindfulness to name only some of the benefits.

Regardless of the therapeutic setting, fibre crafting may teach valuable life skills such as persistence, patience, forgiveness, and self-compassion through the process of learning and

practicing new skills (Corkhill et al., 2014). These benefits relate to the intended outcomes of PCEAT (Rogers et al., 2012) and other expressive art therapies as well (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006) in that the experience of art therapy is about the creative process, the ability to communicate non-verbally, and the symbolism that may be found in both the work and the crafting experience. Adolescent crafters may find that the sense of control over the selection of textures, colours, and projects may enhance their mood (Corkhill et al., 2014), and the physical motions of crafting may create a sensation of flow and mindfulness (Adey, 2018) to promote positive self-evaluations. Whether crafting is done in a therapeutic group or community setting to promote the social benefits or independently to stimulate mindfulness benefits, it could be a viable low-cost, easy access, and portable activity to enhance wellness during the often-challenging adolescent years.

Literature Review Summary and Further Direction

The literature summarized provides empirical support for the potential benefits of using creative fibre crafting as a form of art therapy to enhance adolescent self-esteem. Future research is needed to provide quantitative support for this concept as crafting literature thus far has focused on qualitative reports and older populations. The parallels between the well-studied and efficacious art therapies and the less-studied crafting activities provide reason enough to suggest that crafting could be used as an extension of expressive art therapy and used either as a therapeutic activity or as an individual self-help-style hobby with similar benefits. For counsellors, having additional resources to pull from is never a drawback. By having a variety of art and craft interventions to use or recommend to clients, counsellors will be better equipped to help clients with a diverse set of needs. Unlike traditional psychotherapies, crafting is relatively inexpensive, easy to start and pursue, and can be done almost anywhere and with anyone. These

hobbies may serve as low-barrier activities for a diverse population of adolescents searching for simple ways to improve their well-being. Wellness should not be reserved for those of privilege. From a social justice perspective, having tools to assist individuals of all walks of life is essential.

Having explored the literature describing adolescent self-esteem, art therapy, and crafting, we turn to the practical implications and applications of using fibre crafts to support self-esteem development in adolescence. The second half of this literature review will cover the implications of the proposed craft intervention for counselling psychology as it relates to self-esteem treatment in adolescence, the field of art therapy, and the culture of adolescent mental health. To further support this argument and novel approach to counselling, future research will be needed to validate the approach and will be suggested here. Finally, based on the research covered throughout this literature review, I will provide specific recommendations for implementing and using fibre craft as a therapeutic means. This review will conclude with a reflexive self-statement in which I discuss my insights and learnings from this project.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

As seen earlier, art and creative interventions in therapy are not new practices. For years therapists have looked to creative means to engage their clients and enhance the treatment process (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). Based on the previous crafting literature, I argue that fibre crafting (e.g., knitting, crochet, cross-stitch, macramé, etc.) can be a valuable creative intervention to benefit a specific population. The addition of fibre crafts to the list of expressive art therapy modalities in use today will bring new opportunities for practitioners and clients looking for a novel approach to a specific yet important problem. To this end, implications for the counselling profession include the addition of a new way to treat adolescent self-esteem

concerns and the expansion of the field of expressive art therapy in general. Additionally, in a broader sense, the inclusion of fibre craft therapy as a viable treatment alternative may promote a culture shift in how adolescent mental health is viewed in the realm of psychology and other social services.

Implications for Self-Esteem Treatment

As evidenced by the several self-esteem workbooks available to practitioners and the public alike, individuals are drawn to seeking means to improve their lives and well-being using self-esteem as a focus. Books like *The Self-Esteem Workbook*, a popular companion workbook by Schiraldi (2001, 2016) used in counsellor-facilitated self-esteem groups, and *Helping Adolescents and Adults to Build Self-Esteem* by Plummer and Harper (2014) are examples of ways that the field has attempted to make clinical self-esteem treatment more accessible to the public. Additionally, numerous self-help books and psychology blogs tout interventions such as positive affirmations (e.g., Camp, 2016) and gratitude (e.g., Morin, 2015) as practices to enhance self-esteem. Research suggests mixed results for the efficacy of self-affirmations positively affecting self-esteem directly (Flynn & Bordieri, 2020). As noted previously, mindfulness may be another means to address self-esteem and has demonstrated some clinical evidence (Ford, 2017; Wang & Kong, 2020).

Creative interventions to boost self-esteem have also been studied with promising outcomes. These interventions include sand tray therapy with adolescent girls (Shen & Armstrong, 2008), visual art-based activities (drawing, painting, clay modelling, etc.) with orphaned youth (Devidas & Mendonca, 2017), various art therapy activities including painting, collage, and clay sculpting for a sample of elderly individuals in nursing homes (Ching-Teng et

al., 2019), and art as therapy and art psychotherapy activities in an adolescent female juvenile offender sample (Hartz & Thick, 2005) to name just a few examples.

The standard recommended treatment for low self-esteem in a more traditional clinical setting is a cognitive behavioural approach. In this approach, individuals challenge their negative beliefs about themselves and correct their cognitive distortions. One self-esteem program with clinical validation is Fennell's (1997, 1999, 2006) cognitive approach. This model has been shown to improve self-esteem in several control studies (e.g., Morton et al., 2012; Pack & Condren, 2014) and overall is regarded as an effective cognitive behavioural therapy program that also reduces related symptoms of depression (Kolubinski et al., 2018). This program has been offered as a group therapy module (Pack & Condren, 2014) and individually as a self-help book (Fennell, 2006) with positive results.

Coinciding with this exploration of treatments for adolescent self-esteem, fibre craft as therapy should be included in this research, as will be described in a later section. As seen previously, art therapy has been used to treat an assortment of presenting concerns (e.g., Coholic & Eys, 2016) and to treat low self-esteem in a variety of populations (e.g., Devidas & Mendonca, 2017). Fibre crafts, under the umbrella of art therapy interventions, may emerge as a novel approach that warrants further research and changes the ways we treat adolescent self-esteem challenges. No two adolescents are the same, and they will experience their mental health and identity development journey differently. By having a wide range of efficacious treatment options available, practitioners have a better chance of finding a treatment modality that fits. For those adolescents who best express themselves visually through art, fibre crafts may serve to explore and express themselves, build tangible and marketable skills, and connect with a group of like-minded artists. As long as there is research support, having a range of approaches to a

problem is never a disadvantage for practitioners. Therefore, adding fibre crafting to the repertoire of treatment options for adolescent self-esteem will allow for more options for practitioners and clients and thereby enhance the field of child and adolescent psychology.

Implications for the Art Therapy Field and Practitioners

As noted previously, expressive art therapies, in general, have been used to address a wide range of client concerns in a variety of populations. Traditional expressive art therapies have included visual art, dance movement, drama, and music (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). Other mediums of expressive arts have also been studied: a rap and sing music production intervention has been used to prevent problematic behaviours and decline in self-esteem in an adolescent school group (Uhlrig et al., 2018), vision boards are theorized to help client goal motivation (Burton & Lent, 2016), and origami and mindfulness helped adolescent girls with a mix of mental health challenges (Edwards & Hegerty, 2018). With the expansion of expressive art mediums through trials and research, fibre crafts may fit into this growing approach.

For the previously highlighted PCEAT (Rogers, 1993), the core artistic modalities employed include sound, visual arts, drama, movement, and creative writing to enhance client self-expression, build creativity, and promote wellness (Person-Centered Expressive Arts, n.d.). Practitioners who train in Rogers' (1993) PCEAT complete a six-week, 450-hour in-person training program based in the United States to learn the theory and practice of using expressive arts. Students earn a certificate upon completion that allows them to practice PCEAT specifically in groups, with individuals, or with professionals in organizations. Through the course, students learn about the connection of the creative process to mind, body, and soul and practice counselling skills to facilitate individual and group sessions based on the practice of expressive arts. This training is available for all individuals in the helping profession, including therapists,

teachers, social workers, nurses, and more, representing the pervasive desire to have expressive arts reach an array of populations. PCEAT is just one example of an art therapy training program that could integrate fibre arts into training and practice once research finds support for its use. This integration would likely involve introducing a new course or modality to present the concept of fibre crafts and their use. This change would take time and training for the instructors of the program in fibre crafts if needed, but based on the research discussed, it would be a worthwhile investment if this branch of art is validated to address important mental health concerns.

PCEAT represents only one type of art therapy program to which fibre crafts may be applied. Art therapy schools all over Canada and the world may also be able to incorporate this new medium into their practice if practitioners and trainers see fit. Practitioners do not necessarily need to be highly skilled in the art or craft utilized, but having a basic understanding of the craft and how it can be taught and incorporated into an art therapy program will be essential for its therapeutic use with clients.

Implications for Adolescent Mental Health

On a broader scale, the research and ideas presented here may lead to a culture shift in how practitioners and psychology as a field view adolescent mental health. Based on the presented literature, it is already generally accepted that adolescent self-esteem is an important topic to address for the long-term outcomes of both the individual and, by extension, society. In addition to the personal benefits afforded to individual adolescents and their closely related systems (i.e., parents), there are also larger financial benefits for the health care system that should be accounted for with the greater use of low-cost crafting interventions. According to a recent study of the cost of mental health services in Alberta Canada, expenditures for adolescent

mental health totalled approximately \$175.5 million (Jacobs & Lesage, 2019). This expenditure equates to \$629 per youth aged 12–17 in the population and \$6460 for each youth who accessed public mental health services. The expenditures assessed included Alberta Health Services, public school mental health programs, criminal justice programs, residential treatment programs, and outpatient community services. These estimates do not include private psychologists or services typically paid for by third-party insurers. Clearly, the cost of poor mental health is a high burden that the general population must carry. By attending to a culture shift focused on the importance of mental health and finding easily accessible, inexpensive, and novel ways to promote its healthy development, counselling psychology and related fields may serve a wider demographic and reduce the financial and labour burden on our healthcare system. This burden extends not just to the health care system but also to parents and familial caregivers for those with mental health disorders including depression, often leading to caregivers experiencing their own mental illness (e.g., Bauer et al., 2015; Chai et al., 2018). Utilizing fibre crafts and other similar means of intervention in communities, schools, and homes can create a culture shift towards a healthier society, both psychologically and financially.

One area of focus may be school mental health education. With youth spending up to 40 hours a week at school, this setting could be an important target for mental health education and intervention. It has been shown that greater mental health literacy in school settings leads to greater adolescent well-being (Bjørnsen et al., 2019). Education around wellness and mental health factors, including self-esteem, appear to be a first key step in supporting adolescent well-being. Fibre craft therapy fits well into an educational setting as it would support the learning of the craft in a supportive environment and may be paired with the development of a social community (e.g., knitting clubs). The responsibility of mental health education and these

supports extends beyond school counsellors to include nurses as ideal educators (Bjørnsen et al., 2019), which would require training in mental health signs and interventions. By including fibre crafts and other similar small-scale, skill-based interventions into a school education or in mental health services programming, we may reduce the need for more intensive services and lower costs to support mental health per student.

On the other hand, if simple interventions such as the proposed therapeutic fibre crafting become commonplace and broadly accessible for youth and practitioners, we may see a reduction in the number of youths seeking private services to address comorbid mental health conditions like depression (Masselink et al., 2018). Those private practitioners specializing in youth mental health can utilize the proposed intervention with their clientele if they have the skillset to do so, as recommended in a later section here. Alternatively, we may see a reduction in clients accessing services altogether if craft therapy, a generally more inexpensive intervention, is made readily available to the public. This reduction in business for private services may be a small price to pay for overall adolescent and societal wellness down the line.

Fundamental Next Steps in Research

The information on fibre crafting and art therapy reviewed thus far has demonstrated how fibre craft activities may benefit mental health and self-esteem. To solidify craft as a viable component of art therapy, there are several questions that future research will still need to address. Firstly, research will need to explore fibre crafting with a younger population. In the few studies included in this review that have explored fibre crafts specifically, the study samples consisted of almost exclusively adults. As noted previously, potential reasons for this limitation in the literature may include self-selection bias from the online surveys (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013) or sampling bias from the studies using treatment

populations (Clave-Brule et al., 2009; Duffy, 2007). Alternatively, the demographic distributions noted in the survey studies (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013) in which less than one percent of participants were age 20 and under may represent an actual representative sample of those who knit or crochet. Based on my own experience with various online fibre craft communities (e.g., through social media groups and in-person craft meetups), I believe there are a greater number of younger crafters than these studies suggest. Future research will need to find new ways to reach this younger population to collect both qualitative and quantitative data on the frequency of fibre crafting and its benefits in a younger population.

Secondly, future research will need to explore the empirical benefits of fibre crafting both in general mental health and for self-esteem specifically. A few of the studies noted discussed the participant-reported mental health benefits of fibre crafting, including increased creativity, mindfulness, self-confidence, and self-esteem (e.g., Clave-Brule et al., 2009; Corkhill et al., 2014), but no study thus far has sought to explore self-esteem specifically. Additionally, the studies reviewed here were exclusively qualitative and included participant perceptions of how they believed crafting helped their mental health. The qualitative data reviewed in these studies are valid and enhance understanding of the reported benefits of craft; however, to argue for the inclusion of fibre craft as a viable means to improve self-esteem in adolescents, quantitative, empirically driven data is needed to demonstrate this effect. For example, an ideal study to test this effect would be to use a fibre craft treatment group and a waitlist control group to test the pre- and post-intervention changes to participant self-esteem. Various other mental health-related measures may be included to understand the multiple ways that crafting may impact individual wellness.

To elaborate on this point, a third suggestion for future research is to include studies that seek to understand why craft may be helpful for mental health, self-esteem, or otherwise. The biopsychosocial approach (Engel, 1977) may be a useful framework for such research because it would allow researchers to explore various underlying and potentially interwoven mechanisms from multiple lenses (i.e., biological, psychological, and social). Fitting with the biopsychosocial approach, authors from the cited literature have provided suggestions for why fibre crafting may have the observed benefits: the bilateral movements in knitting engage the brain in a meditative state (Corkhill et al., 2014), the social aspects when used as a group or community activity may provide a sense of belonging and acceptance (Sjöberg & Porko-Hudd, 2019), the act of creating may lead to positive self-evaluations (Clave-Brule et al., 2009; Duffy, 2007), or the “flow” or mindfulness state achieved with crafting may contribute to overall wellness (Adey, 2018). These suggestions were presented considering the findings from these studies, yet no research has demonstrated specifically that these factors are what create the observed benefits of craft. Additionally, the mechanisms of why crafting may create positive changes for individuals are unknown. Perhaps it is the movements utilized in crafting, or the mindfulness state one enters while engrossed in a project, or the feeling of being productive and creative that causes a change in the brain and improves self-esteem on a biological, social, and psychological level. To understand the benefits and how to replicate them, we may look to other similar activities (such as sculpting, painting, woodworking, etc.) that may be better understood already to inform our understanding of crafting.

Mindfulness may be one avenue to explore further in relation to crafting and self-esteem. Outcomes from studies on mindfulness have been mixed. It has been found that greater mindfulness is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Wang & Kong,

2020). Mindfulness also helps buffer against negative reactions to social rejection for those with lower self-esteem (Ford, 2017). Furthermore, parent and child-reported results from an art-based mindfulness group intervention indicate that youth who participated in the intervention had improved emotional recognition, greater focus, and felt better and more confident about themselves compared to a pre-intervention baseline measure (Coholic & Eys, 2016). On the other hand, one meta-analysis found no significant changes in anxiety for youth who completed mindfulness interventions over 18 studies (Ruiz-Íñiguez et al., 2020). While results from this meta-analysis are disheartening at face value, the authors noted that in most of these studies there were a low number of participants and small effect sizes, meaning that future studies may need to include a larger sample size to achieve more accurate results. Future research will have to use larger sample sizes and/or broader research methods to explore the specific factors of mindfulness, self-esteem, and other elements of well-being to achieve a clearer picture of the possible benefits of mindfulness.

Additionally, researchers may wish to incorporate more intensive data collection procedures including various self-report and other-report measures, as in Coholic and Eys' (2016) study that used parent-reports, to capture a range of observable changes for participants, or measure other related factors including depression symptoms, thought rumination, self-confidence, or life satisfaction. Regardless of these lacklustre results, the links between self-esteem and mindfulness and mindfulness and crafting discussed here point to this as one potential mechanism for how crafting may directly impact self-esteem on a psychological level. This link should be explored using quantitative research to support fibre craft as an inclusion to mindfulness-based art therapy practices.

Finally, for craft therapy to be included as a valid and reputable type of art therapy in general, research will need to cover the ways that crafting can be blended with the known and often standardized art therapy approaches. Arts-based treatment programs for youth often include a variety of artistic mediums, and some already include fibre-based projects such as in the expressive art and play therapy group by Perryman et al. (2015), which included a yarn weaving activity. To set up fibre crafts as an art therapy medium, research must explore how fibre crafting would fit into any pre-existing definition or qualifications of “art therapy” as a practice. Karkou and Sanderson (2006) offer a definition of art therapy that describes it as “the creative use of the artistic media as vehicles for non-verbal and/or symbolic communications ... encouraged by a well-defined client-therapist relationship, in order to achieve personal and/or social therapeutic goals appropriate for the individual” (p. 46). Using this broad definition, craft therapies may fit into the realm of art therapy if applied intentionally to meet client needs. How fibre crafts may do this will need to be investigated with further research. Questions to be explored include: do the foundational qualities and conditions of art therapy apply to fibre crafting? Is crafting able to be a freely creative experience when the traditional means of fibre crafting are through patterns or the creation of a planned or purposeful final product? Can the emphasis on process over technique apply to a medium that requires individuals to have a basic knowledge and competence in the techniques used in the craft? Future research will need to consider and explore the bounds of crafting and find ways to push these limitations to forward its inclusion into the art therapy field.

Recommendations for Practice

Thus far, as seen from the literature review, implementing fibre crafting as an intervention to address adolescent mental health may be a viable alternative treatment or additive

to treatment when working with this population. The benefits of craft to enhance social belonging, create a space for mindfulness, and unlock creativity are seen even from the limited literature available on the topic thus far. Based on the presented literature and considering the current limitations with the literature base of fibre crafting as therapy, there are several ways that I believe crafting may be included as a means of treatment for adolescents with low self-esteem. The proposed recommendations for practice will be broken into two sections to demonstrate the versatility and accessibility of the practice of fibre craft. Recommendations for fibre crafts used in art as therapy and art psychotherapy will be described in turn to provide early practitioners with a best-practice guideline to use with adolescent clients.

Art as Therapy

Art as therapy speaks to the notion that the process of creating art is itself a therapeutic endeavour (Malchiodi, 2013). The focus of art as therapy highlights the technique and experimentation of the artistic medium and emphasizes creative problem solving (Hartz & Thick, 2005). Like art education, the practice of mastering skills and creating a finished piece are more commonly the outcomes expected through art as a practice (Malchiodi, 2013). In a therapeutic setting, art as therapy may be a way to work with young people to establish therapeutic rapport, break down barriers to client engagement, and facilitate a new way to approach client problems that traditional talk-therapies may not be able to address. For example, young people new to counselling may not agree with a caregiver-defined presenting concern or may be nervous to talk to a stranger about their problems. By using fibre crafts in an art as therapy capacity, therapists and clients can focus their nervous energy into a mutual activity while building therapeutic rapport and teaching a new life skill. The process of using the art itself as an activity to lower

inhibitions and shift focus away from the individual may help with those clients who are not ready to address their concerns head-on.

Another form of art as therapy may be to use it in conjuncture with other treatment programs or modalities. As discussed previously, knitting has been used as an activity in treatment programs for anorexia nervosa (Clave-Brule et al., 2009) and addiction (Duffy, 2007). Knitting was not the primary means of intervention within these treatment programs yet served as a valuable art as therapy activity for the patients. Patients across both studies reported improved feelings about themselves, distractions from their negative thoughts, and stress reduction. These are just two examples of how fibre crafting may be used as art as therapy along with other more directive therapeutic programming to enhance therapeutic outcomes. Based on these results and those discussed previously, one could argue that there is value in introducing similar fibre craft activities into the adolescent treatment populations of residential care homes, after-school programs, or support groups; the addition of these activities to therapeutic work already being done could enhance outcomes related to self-esteem.

Finally, the third area that fibre crafts may be introduced as art as therapy is on an individual basis in the comfort of one's home or community. Therapeutic crafting does not need to be a formal process and may be picked up by individuals anywhere, any time. Individuals have been using craft as personal therapy for years and have reported wellness benefits both individually and in group settings (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). For therapists working with adolescent clients, the introduction of these hobbies and the recommendation for their use outside of session may enhance therapeutic outcomes. Crafting can provide youth the tools to practice mindfulness, acceptance, and emotional regulation, and facilitate the connection to a likeminded community with shared interests to enhance feelings of

social acceptance. Fibre crafting as an art as therapy tool used in any of these three forms can be an invaluable tool for therapists working with an adolescent population to help them connect in session, assist their therapeutic progress, and develop skills outside of the therapy space.

Art Psychotherapy

While having similar outcomes as art as therapy (Hartz & Thick, 2005), art psychotherapy is the utilization of artistic mediums to promote therapeutic communication and promote and sustain the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual health and wellness of clients (Malchiodi, 2013). As noted, the incorporation of fibre craft into the field of art therapy offers a new medium for therapists and clients to create, explore, express, and process thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the support of a trained therapist. Like most art therapy modalities, this would take a trained art therapist (Malchiodi, 2013) to guide clients in their process. Similar to PCEAT (Rogers et al., 2012), the emphasis would be on the process of creation and the value that clients pull from their experience of creating the art. In the form of art psychotherapy, clients would be led through a fibre craft-based activity with a specific goal or intention. This style of intervention often involves opening activities, psychoeducation on themes or processes to be explored during the activity, and debriefs to discuss learning (Hartz & Thick, 2005). The craft therapy instruction may look like giving clients a pattern to complete, asking them to create their own pattern and work, or allowing for the free use of materials as clients use whatever stitch, colour, texture, or tool that inspires them at that time. The type of fibre craft used may also vary as it includes several types of activities, including knitting, crocheting, cross-stitching, embroidery, macramé, and more. If the focus is to remain on the process and genuine artistic expression over content, the participant may be allowed to choose for themselves which

fibre craft they would like to use. If there is a specific therapeutic goal or process that the therapist wishes to lead the client(s) through, the therapist may decide on the activity.

Fibre craft projects are often more labour-intensive and take more time than other expressive arts like dance, simple painting, or collage, so time must be permitted for clients to develop their ideas and implement their vision. Guidelines for expressive arts recommended by practitioners from one study (Whisenhunt & Kress, 2013) include not interpreting the art too deeply, not focusing on the quality of the art and instead focusing on the process, and being mindful of client expressions of emotions and taking care to support them if they experience a negative reaction to the activity.

Furthermore, following the principles of PCEAT (Rogers et al., 2012), art therapists should seek to provide a safe space for clients to explore and express, provide an environment devoid of external evaluation, and accept clients and their work with unconditional positive regard. Clients will likely place enough of their own judgements on their projects (Wolk et al., 2020), so the therapist should be careful to avoid evaluative statements and judgements over what clients choose to create. Accepting that mistakes happen, acknowledging that their vision may not turn out as planned, and persisting through challenging points are skills that the therapist should work through with clients as they practice and create their expressive art.

The art psychotherapy process described above may be completed as a group or with individual clients. Both means of art psychotherapy have shown positive outcomes on several measures when studied as treatment groups (e.g., Björling et al., 2019; Lindsey et al., 2018) or as individual case studies (e.g., Gambrel et al., 2020). Regardless of the means of application, practitioners should understand or have training in art therapy facilitation and skill in the specific fibre craft of choice to support clients' emotional exploration and personal development.

Practitioners should discuss themes related to self-esteem while completing instruction of the activity, such as those described in the self-esteem programs by Fennell (2006) and Schiraldi (2001, 2016) about unconditional self-worth, acceptance of mistakes, and challenging negative beliefs.

Regardless of the mode of implementation, whether it be art as therapy or art psychotherapy or done individually or in a group, practitioners must be mindful of youth reactions to the craft and be able to process feelings and experiences as they come up for their clients. Self-esteem during adolescence is a vulnerable topic and must be addressed with compassion and unconditional positive regard. If clients are expected to be compassionate towards themselves, their creative journey must be supported, and unconditional positive regard must be afforded to them first and foremost.

Reflexive Self-Statement

In writing on this topic, I have expanded my knowledge of fibre crafting, self-esteem, and art therapy as a practice. I believe that this new insight will help me as a clinician and as a person who is likely to interact with adolescents throughout the rest of my life. I am currently working with adolescents as a counsellor and would like to continue to do so as a large component of my future practice, so this new knowledge has affirmed some aspects of my work and has also changed some of the ways that I will be approaching it.

Firstly, I was very motivated to find research that matched my experience and my supposed knowledge about self-esteem and creative interventions. Some of the interventions that I have relied on in my work, including affirmations, self-compassion, and positive self-talk, do not have the consistent empirical support that I believed they did (e.g., Flynn & Bordieri, 2020). This finding has challenged me to re-evaluate how I approach self-esteem and has caused me to

expand my search for new approaches. In researching interventions for treating low self-esteem in general, cognitive-behaviour approaches emerged as a primary means of treatment in the literature (e.g., Kolubinski et al., 2018). While these approaches make sense in theory and in practice, they did not entirely fit my presentation of the proposed fibre crafting intervention. This disconnect caused a shift in the way I was conceptualizing fibre crafting and is something that I will need to continue to consider as I do more research and utilize this approach in my future practice. As suggested, perhaps a clearer biopsychosocial approach with crafting is needed to explore the full advantages and outcomes of this approach. I feel I have only touched the surface of the possible interventions available for addressing this issue, and I will be continuing to seek new information beyond the completion of this project.

I have also learned that self-esteem is not as straightforward a concept as textbooks and psychology blog posts would have us believe. Based on a general search of self-esteem literature, thousands of recently published articles discuss factors related to, components of, and types of self-esteem. It can become overwhelming to sift through. To counter this, I kept my searches specific to the topics reviewed above and covered only a small fraction of the information available about the concept of self-esteem. This filtered view has left me open to potential gaps in the reviewed literature. Perhaps there are sub-topics of self-esteem that would have been more advantageous to cover in my search, such as attachment or environmental influences. Regardless, covering the full extent of the literature available would have exceeded the scope of this review, so I was intentional in the research that I chose to present to provide a basic overview of self-esteem development and the influences of artistic interventions. As this research focus applies to the clinical practice with self-esteem, there may be other elements of either fibre crafts or self-esteem interventions that I did not cover here and am open to learning about in the future.

I did, however, find that the information available confirmed my experiences and was personally validating and reinforced my assumptions and previous work. Specifically, my assumptions about fibre crafts being helpful for others were validated by the few other studies (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013) that reported similar experiences to my own. Additionally, mindfulness was an aspect that I had presumed was a necessary ingredient to the benefits of crafting but emerged as a more important element than I had initially given credit. In contrast, there are situations in which mindfulness is not a one-size-fits-all intervention, in that those with high self-esteem already do not benefit from mindfulness when faced with social rejection (Ford, 2017). To this end, it will be important to implement the proposed intervention carefully and carry out the research I have recommended above to find the optimal applications and appropriate situations for using fibre crafting as a form of mindfulness to support self-esteem.

The strategies noted in my earlier self-positioning statement (i.e., bracketing out my bias, completing a thorough review of the literature and choosing a representative literature sample, and focusing on my goal of providing a comprehensive overview regardless of my personal agenda) were utilized to ensure I did not twist the literature to confirm my biases. My initial ideas entering the paper required a critical evaluation and shift so that the literature presented was based on available research rather than my opinion. I believe I successfully presented a thorough literature overview that still had my personal stance and experience demonstrated and validated. Based on the presented literature, more research is needed regarding fibre crafts in general and specifically in relation to self-esteem and adolescent populations. However, I believe that the information presented here is an adequate first step in bringing to light a new, creative approach for practitioners to begin to explore with clients.

Conclusion

As thoroughly explored, fibre crafts may be a viable means of treating adolescent self-esteem. The literature on self-esteem demonstrates that having high self-esteem is advantageous in later life (Orth & Robins, 2014) while having low self-esteem often leads to challenges, such as depression (Masselink et al., 2018; Steiger et al., 2014) and poor health (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Self-esteem naturally declines before the adolescent years and remains relatively stable (e.g., Chung et al., 2017), and it is often related to social factors, such as rejection and acceptance (von Soest et al., 2016), and perceived competence in other skill-based domains like academics (Chen-Bouck & Patterson, 2016). Based on these trends, understanding the factors contributing to adolescent self-esteem and the domains related to one's overall self-evaluation is important for practitioners wishing to implement specific interventions with this population.

As a framework for implementing fibre crafts as therapy, we turn to expressive arts research and interventions to support this argument. Expressive arts in therapy cover a wide range of mediums and practices, including dance, music, movement, and visual arts (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). While the specific mechanisms of change using fibre crafts such as knitting, crochet, cross-stitch, macramé, and more have yet to be explored, there are empirically sound elements of expressive arts therapy that overlap and justify the further exploration of this topic.

Fibre crafting as a new branch of expressive arts like the visual and tactile artistic mediums of painting or sculpting may provide a means for adolescents to practice mindfulness and grounding meditation, thereby allowing their bodies to regulate and their minds to relax (Corkhill et al., 2014). It is often in this state of relaxation that we can process thoughts, feelings, and experiences securely and at a baseline state of calm (Guendelman et al., 2017). Those who practice fibre crafts like knitting and crochet note the relaxation and mindfulness benefits in

supporting their emotional health and well-being (Burns & Van Der Meer, 2021; Corkhill et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2013). From the biopsychosocial lens (Engel, 1977), fibre crafting has the capacity to address self-esteem through biological, social, and emotional means, making it a well-rounded treatment addition or alternative for adolescents.

For the field of psychology, the introduction of this form of craft therapy constitutes a novel approach to addressing a particularly salient youth mental health concern. Once further research is done to support the argument presented here, the field of counselling and art therapy specifically can begin to incorporate fibre crafts as a designated therapeutic practice. Whether done individually, in a social group, or in a therapeutic setting, there are several options for using fibre crafts to support an adolescent population. If used as art as therapy in sessions, adolescents may connect with helping professionals more comfortably and with a smaller power differential. If used outside of session, it may serve as a beneficial adjunct to the therapeutic process in which youth build skills on their own and work through emotions and experiences in their own time. If used as art psychotherapy, clinicians can incorporate fibre craft into known expressive arts curricula and programs to support adolescents more intentionally. Clinical training programs, like PCEAT (Person-Centered Expressive Arts, n.d.), will need to be updated with the latest information to support the use of fibre crafts but may fit in well with the several other artistic mediums already used in this practice.

The possibilities for learning opportunities and uses of fibre crafts are broad, making this new form of therapeutic art a worthwhile medium to explore. Changes to the current state of art therapy will take time and research, but they may create a shift in the ways that adolescent mental health is addressed. The significance of having easy-access, inexpensive interventions to reach a wide range of the adolescent population is paramount. Supporting adolescent mental

health on a public scale is expensive (Jacobs & Lesage, 2019), and costs for individuals may exceed the means for some disadvantaged youth. Crafting, on the other hand, is low-cost (yarn, thread, and starter supplies can be bought cheaply at second-hand stores), easy to learn, and portable, making it an ideal hobby for most teens on the go and those lacking the financial means to receive ongoing professional support. Mental health and wellness should be available to all. By having a variety of interventions to address the essential development of adolescent self-esteem, we work towards creating a healthier, more psychologically well society.

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