Establishing Worker Identity:  
A Study of People in Craft Work

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KEY WORDS
• qualitative method  
• work

Having a work-related identity is central to being an adult in America. Going to work and engaging in prescribed work behaviors in the workplace is the usual or typical way that adults achieve worker identities. The purpose of this study, developed from an ethnography of people who make crafts at home and sell their work at craft fairs, was to examine how worker identity is constructed when individuals do not have the external markers of a socially identified job and workplace. I used participant observation of craft fairs and other craft venues, and interviews of people who do this work, as major sources of data. Results of the analysis of the data related to worker identity demonstrated that these crafters followed basic steps, or rules, to achieve such a worker identity. These rules, some for work at home and some for other social contexts, encompassed complex behaviors learned through the process of doing the work as well as from other crafters. The conclusions of the study are first, that individual and social identity formation as a worker involves complex processes for which rules and guidelines do exist. Second, these rules are often discovered through the process of doing the work. Third, the meaning of work and the individual and social identities of being a worker are individual, and finally, knowledge of worker identity formation is gained through the study of both those who successfully achieve such an identity and those who do not.


Individuals who produce craft products at home and sell them at craft fairs engage in a form of work occupying a place outside, but parallel to, the mainstream American economy. Their work combines self-employment, work in the home, and direct sale of products to consumers through the mechanism of periodic markets, known as craft fairs or shows. This study is concerned with the question of how individuals who are self-employed making and selling crafts construct identities as workers.

For a period of 3 years in the mid-1990s, I studied the prolific craft fairs in a midwestern metropolitan area and the work of people who sold their products in those venues. I was drawn to this research by my interest in the subject of work and the numerous paradoxes attendant to contemporary work in America at the end of the 20th century. One paradox was the prevalent rhetoric in both political and rehabilitation discourse on the value of work in giving individuals self-sufficiency, social status, meaning, and identity, while at the same time aspects of popular culture such as greeting cards, movies, cartoons, and t-shirts represented work as a necessary evil, demeaning to the individual, or “something to do when the fish don’t bite.” Another paradox had to do with the attraction self-employment seemed to hold in the culture of the time—an attraction that favorably contrasted working for oneself with having a boss and punching a time clock, despite the fact that such work was often very difficult. I had questions as well about the prolifer-
ution of craft fairs and other small markets, a seemingly preindustrial form of production and marketing, and the role these markets played in the overall American economy, increasingly described as postindustrial. These paradoxes that led me to this study in the 1990s continue to this day.

In this study, I seek to understand how individuals author themselves as workers when working at home, where the physical, social, cultural, and temporal markers of worker identity are largely absent. Such understanding has relevance to situations where traditional sources of worker identity have been lost or are unavailable because of economic or individual circumstances or both.

Adult Identity and Work

Work, very broadly defined as activity that supports the survival of oneself and one’s family, is a central condition of human life. “Everyone has to live, has to survive, has to earn a livelihood whether it is a situation of poverty or a situation of plenty” (Jumani, 1991, p. 30). Work puts bread on the table and through its practice and ascribed meanings, defines an individual’s daily life and social interactions. In contemporary American society, a sense of being something (at minimum, being a productive person) seems critical to perceptions of belonging and status as well as one’s sense of personal worth. According to Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985), “work continues to be critically important to the self-identity of Americans, closely linked to the demand for self-reliance” (p. 56).

The notion of being self-reliant through having a job is evident in the rhetoric of both politics (e.g., welfare reform policy) and rehabilitation (e.g., psychosocial rehabilitation). Newman, in a study of fast food restaurant workers, describes a young woman who finds a job in a fast food restaurant: “She has a structure, a place, an income, and a source of identity that matters to her. She is a working woman” (1999, p. 26). Likewise, Moen and Wethington (1999) acknowledge the seminal importance of work for adults:

For many adults paid work is a major, if not the principal, source of purposive activity, social relations, independence, identity, and self respect. It is the way that we become integrated and acknowledged as members of the larger community. (p. 10)

Identity as a worker includes a personal construction of the purpose and meaning of work. Potuchek (1997) addressed this in her study of the difference between being employed and identifying oneself or one’s spouse as a breadwinner. She found that a number of individuals defined breadwinning as the obligation to provide for the family, while being employed could be discretionary and enacted for personal fulfillment. In her study of employed individuals, women were more likely than men to eschew the breadwinner identity, and instead label their work as something done either for personal fulfillment or to pay for family “extras.”

As Hocking (2000) reflected, “identity and self are closely interrelated concepts” (p. 149). Hocking defined self as more personal and identity as a more social or interactive construct, a definition consistent with Baumeister’s differentiation between self-concept and identity (1991, 1997). Harré (1998) pointed out that “someone’s ‘identity,’ in much contemporary writing, is not their singularity as a unique person but the group, class or type to which they belong” (p. 6). In this paper, I have collapsed those differences and use the word identity to include both one’s personal sense of being a worker and a socially negotiated and experienced identity recognized by family, friends, fair promoters, other crafters, and customers.

du Gay (1996) stated, “that seemingly most private of domains, the self, is not private after all: The self only emerges in social processes of interaction, communication, and use of language” (p. 29). Worker identity that results from being part of an entity such as a shop floor, trade, work team, or office is both social and personal in nature, and involves membership in an occupational subculture (Trice, 1993). According to du Gay, “throughout the 20th century, the relationship between a person’s sense of who they are—their personal identity—and the work they perform for a living has been a regular, if almost always implicit, concern to nearly all those engaged in theorizing about work organization and behavior” (1996, p. 9).

Feminist research has called attention to the female homemaker, whose work often goes unrecognized as such (Primeau, 1992), and much has been written about women who engage in home-based income-producing work (homework). Homework has traditionally consisted of putting out work, or piecework, such as sewing, assembly, clerical occupations, or electronics assembly (Beach, 1989; Benson, 1989; Boris, 1989, 1994, Christensen, 1989; Dangler, 1989; Fernández-Kelly, & García, 1985, 1989). These particular forms of homework, involving a relationship with an employer or contractor, have some qualities that are similar to self-employed homework, such as the invisibility of the work to outsiders and the potential for intrusion of work into home and family space and occupations (as well as the opposite). Work done at home is largely invisible (Boris, 1994), but always there to be done (Friberg, 1993). According to Jurik (1998), self-employed homeworkers, particularly men, may feel a sense of stigma, suggesting a cultural view that “real work is outside, not inside the house” (p. 26).
Worker Identity and Occupational Science and Therapy

Occupational science and occupational therapy include work implicitly and explicitly as a domain of interest, both as a necessary and meaningful occupation or for work’s salutary effects on the human condition or both. Therapeutic intervention in the work arena typically happens when a person has never developed or has lost a work role because of an illness or disability. Taking on a worker identity is central to the rehabilitation process, and is promoted through clinical expectations that clients will exhibit work-like behaviors, such as being on time, dressing appropriately, and achieving productivity. Only the last of these behaviors is necessary in home-based work, yet individuals seem to establish their identities as workers nonetheless.

How do they do this? Examining how the process of becoming and being a worker takes place absent the most obvious external factors that support such an identity may help us to understand the subtleties of forming an identity as an occupational being. Increased knowledge of the wealth of complex factors that contribute to personal and social identity formation will support effective interventions. Self-employed individuals who make and market crafts at home must be recognized as legitimate craft producers in order to gain entry to venues where they can sell their work.

The Study

This study is rooted in an ethnography describing the organization of the work of crafters and their markets and the meaning of this work to individuals who engaged in it (Dickie, 1996a). Presented here is a focused and deeper analysis and interpretation of the portions of that study concerned with how individuals succeeded in becoming and being craft producers and sellers. In many respects, it represents my attempt to make sense of puzzles that have stayed in my mind over the past 6 years. Why, for example, did Carol restrict her production of whimsical polymer clay figures to only one tiny area of her kitchen when the income from sales of these objects was significant enough to be paying the mortgage on her home? Why was I left with the impression that Sylvia was probably not going to continue for very long with the production of small music boxes wrapped to look like gifts, a postretirement occupation she had recently begun? When several women told me that they didn’t have to work, what did they mean to communicate? What moved me to identify certain individuals as good candidates for interviews after seeing their booths at craft shows?

Data collection for this study took place in many sites with craft production and marketing as the units of study. I engaged in participant observation, document review, and semi-structured and informal interviews in the homes of crafters and drew information from local newspapers, visits to craft supply stores, historical documents, census reports, maps, presentations, informal conversations, a craft network seminar, local newspapers, visits to craft fairs outside the study area, and books and periodicals related to craft marketing.

The proposal for the study and the informed consent process were reviewed and approved by a university human investigation committee. All interviewees, who are referred to by pseudonyms in this paper, gave informed consent to being interviewed. All other participant observation took place in public venues such as craft fairs, stores, and a craft network seminar. I was a shopper or observer at fairs and stores, an “assistant” for a day for one crafter in her booth at a fair, and a paying attendee at the seminar (where my role as a researcher was identified to all participants).

Eighteen individuals were interviewed at length in their homes or studios or both, after being identified through craft fairs, referrals, personal acquaintances, and the craft network seminar. Participants were added until interviews ceased to elicit substantial new material. Six had engaged in work as a crafts-person for less than 4 years, six for 10 to 15 years, and six for over 15 years. Two of the 18 interviewees were men, a ratio of men to women similar to that of the people selling at the majority of craft fairs I attended. All interviewees had sources of household income in addition to their craft work, but nine relied upon craft sale profits to meet a significant portion of their living expenses. For seven others, the craft income was used for what individuals referred to as “special” needs such as children’s education, family vacations, or a child’s wedding. Two people used...
their income from their crafts primarily to support costs of the work itself. Except for two women who lived alone, the participants were married. Three had children living at home.

Participants used a variety of processes and media including metal work, wood, fibers, clay and polymer clay, painting, and assembly of purchased components. Products included painted sweatshirts, mixed country crafts, baskets, ornaments, ceramics, dolls, plaques, jewelry, decorative ironwork, weaving, decorated wreaths, and toys. The majority of the participants made work that was low-priced and sold at craft rather than art fairs, but three individuals did produce crafts that sold in both venues and garnered high prices.

Interviews were semi-structured, loosely following an interview guide (see Appendix), but always beginning with a form of the question, “tell me about your work.” This question was based on Agar’s “Career History Interview” (1986). According to Agar, “if you just let people talk about their world, the reasoning goes, themes will emerge that indicate its perceived texture” (p. 178). Notes (made during and after the interview) included verbatim quotes, description of the home and work settings, any interruptions to the interview, and identification of others in the area during the interview.

Over the course of 3 years I attended approximately 65 craft fairs inside and outside the metropolitan area, but focused on 49 fairs taking place within a single year in a defined and relatively small geographic area. These fairs were held each year from the beginning of March through early December, with the heaviest concentration occurring from September through November. They included summer festivals, school fund-raisers, profit-making shows run by private promoters, and a few church bazaars.

Finding Worker Identity in the Data

Previous analyses of the data resulted in an ethnography of crafters’ work and their interaction with the craft fair system (Dickie, 1996a), a discussion of the spatial, temporal, and social relations of work in the home (Dickie, 1996b), and examination of the work using the concept of household economies (Dickie, 1998). The present study made use of understandings developed in the previous work but also returned to the original data for a deeper analysis, focused on examples of identity and role creation and preservation.

The earlier analysis included multiple readings of all of the data, sorting of the data into broad topics (codes) using a software program, and two analytic schemes grounded in the tasks of producing and selling crafts. The first analytic scheme was based upon Spector’s Task Differentiation approach (1983), in which she analyzed particular activities according to each of the tasks involved, identifying the social unit, the setting, the time (of day and year), and the materials. I adapted this procedure as a task analysis of each craft business, listing location and person(s) involved for each task of the business. This allowed comparison between crafters and helped to establish how the work was integrated into the physical space and social relations of the home.

The second analytic approach was based on the life history of the products that were produced. It grew out of kitchen table discussions with my husband, who had developed the model as a means of explicating the automotive manufacturing process (Dickie & Ward, 1998). I applied the concept of the stages in the life history of an automobile to 10 stages in the life of a craft product, beginning with raw material extraction and ending with disposal or recycling. I then mapped the work of each interviewee according to the stages in which they participated, and identified participation of others in each of these stages. Again, this facilitated comparison between individuals, but it also highlighted the stages in which people were most likely to work alone (basic construction, paint and finish, and trim and final assembly), and those most likely to involve others (component fabrication, distribution, and marketing).

In this investigation of the specific topic of worker identity, I engaged in repeated re-reading of all of the original data and analyses, paying particular attention to anything that seemed to relate to identity as a worker. During each of these readings, I made notes of developing ideas and questions, which were then rewritten and developed into a series of theoretical questions and observations, illustrated with quotes from the data. Finally, analysis was completed during the writing of this paper. During this process, ideas based upon the intermediate analysis were “tried out” to see if they made sense and could be described coherently. At this point, I returned once more to the data to be certain that my findings were supported and to look for negative cases.

Discovering a Set of Rules

The participants in this study had worker identities that were varied and complex. Although everyone was explicit that their work was an income-producing activity, people did not refer to themselves with the word “worker.” They worked, but their identities were linked to what they did. For example, they were a basket maker, doll maker, or jewelry maker, or as many called themselves, “crafter.” Thus, when I refer to a “worker” identity, I am using an etic term to encompass the many ways that individuals conceptualize who they are in relation to the income-producing activities.
in which they engage. I also use the word “crafter” to refer to the people in the study, an emic term that was used by some individuals in reference to themselves and others.

The worker aspect of crafters’ identity was established in many ways, a number of which consisted of following both prescribed and implicit “rules” for small business and craft work. I found versions of these rules in how-to books about craft businesses, in the editorial content of The Crafts Report (a periodical for people who are in the craft business), and in explicit comments of crafters themselves. I also observed implementation of and adherence to these rules at craft fairs and in individuals’ home work areas. There were other ways in which individual crafters seemed to establish and maintain their worker identities, but these rules appeared to be common to all of the participants. I focus on them in this paper with the caveat that they should not be viewed as all-inclusive. The following list of these rules for being a crafter is my synthesis of concepts drawn from all of the data.

**Rules for Work at Home**

- Designate places for work and storage
- Acquire the right equipment and supplies
- Develop and maintain a schedule for daily, weekly, and annual work
- Develop a product line and establish production methods and standards

**Rules for Other Social Contexts of the Craft Business**

- Establish legal identity as a business and keep careful records
- Identify and access the right marketing venues
- Display work effectively and differentiate work (product) from that of others
- Practice crafter cultural norms

Two underlying assumptions grounded my thinking about the relationship of these practices to crafter identity. First, I assumed that individuals had to achieve some self-defined level of success in their craft business in order to have a legitimate identity as a crafter. Many of the rules increased the potential for success in various aspects of the work (e.g., meeting production goals, getting into high-status fairs, selling work, and reaching income goals). Second, by following these rules, individuals enacted the identity of being a worker in their particular craft.

**Designate Places for Work and Storage**

The first of these rules, to designate places for work and storage, applied to the locus of production activities in the home. Places for work ranged from a small, customized desk in Carol’s kitchen to John and Kate’s large pole barn with picture windows looking over a pond and comfortable chairs, a refrigerator, and a large television in one corner. Only one interviewee, Ellen, had no place designated exclusively for her work. She painted sweatshirts at her kitchen counter and stored her supplies and finished work all over the house. When I spoke with her about 1 year after she started her business, she expressed delight over her hugely successful sales. At the same time, she complained about how the work had taken over her home and life, and said that she planned to cut back on the number of fairs the following year. I had the sense that Ellen had not yet separated work from home, as evidenced by the lack of a designated workspace. She complained that her husband wanted to work on the business in the evening when he came home from his job (he did bookkeeping and inventory activities for her). She said she was ready to put the work aside at that time. It seemed as if her recognition of changes the work brought to her home life was driving the decision to cut back.

In contrast, John and Kate restricted their work to the pole barn that was a short walk from their home. Kate said that when she came back into the house she was no longer working. The comfort of the workspace and the amenities of the television and refrigerator supported the long hours they spent at the work of preparing and painting decorative roof slates. In a sense, they brought aspects of home into the work setting, but kept their home free of the work.

Other crafters had a variety of places designated for their work. Jo, who had taken a year-long leave from a part-time job to see if she could succeed with craft work, had established an extensive work and storage area in her basement. She stored some of her sewn products in the family dining room and sometimes worked on small objects at the kitchen table, but the basement space was exclusively for her work. Mary did all of her ceramic mold pouring, glazing, and firing in approximately a third of the basement, which she and her husband had customized so that she could work efficiently and keep track of her inventory. Joan made baskets and taught basketry to others in a spacious remodeled attached garage with a woodworking area at one end where her husband formed wooden handles, bases, and rims for some of her work. Grace had transformed a detached garage into a small factory, decorated like a home with stenciled flowers on the soft green walls and lace curtains, where two paid employees helped her produce polymer clay ornaments for fairs and a growing wholesale business. The resources crafters put into the development of customized and efficient work space seemed to support the value of the work role they enacted there.

**Acquire the Right Equipment and Supplies**

The “right” equipment and supplies were specific to each business. Sometimes equipment was as simple as the rack...
Penny had created to hold the raffia she used to make doll-like figures or the stamps Nadia made to shape the clay she formed into jewelry. Other equipment was more complex and expensive, as, for example, the power hammer for Joe’s iron forming, the computers many people used to manage their record keeping, and the larger electric kiln Mary had recently purchased.

With the right supplies, crafters could work without interruption with ample choices for variety and customization. Carol kept a large assortment of tiny charms in a set of small plastic drawers where she could easily locate the objects she wanted to add to the figures she sculpted. Jo had stacks of fabric that she used to make costumes for concrete goose yard ornaments. Michelle commented that she was able to afford a large inventory of ribbons to finish the wreaths she decorated, an advantage that she said set her work apart from other crafters doing similar things on tighter budgets.

The right equipment and supplies included display equipment for the sales booth and the vehicles used to transport work to fairs. Jo’s husband customized a trailer and storage/display boxes that were always ready to go to an event. She said this meant that she never had to do any preparation for a fair other than making the crafts. John and Kate bought a heavy-duty pick-up truck to haul the trailer with their display equipment and slate inventory.

Develop and Maintain a Schedule for Daily, Weekly, and Annual Work
Schedules for daily, weekly, and annual work were necessary in order to meet deadlines for fair entries, produce sufficient “product” (the term that a number of the interviewees used for the items they produced and sold), and coordinate family and work demands. When I asked individuals to describe a typical day to me they would usually say there was no such thing, and then proceed to tell me about established routines dependent upon the time of the year. January was entry submission time, but otherwise was considered by many to be a vacation from work and a time to catch-up on household projects and reading. In contrast, as the dates of upcoming shows grew closer, crafters established rigorous daily patterns of craft production, fitting in housework and attending to family needs if absolutely essential.

Crafters’ schedules were coordinated with family needs in some cases, but families adapted to the production and fair schedule of the crafters as well. Ellen said that it wasn’t “right,” but her husband made dinner almost every night. Several other women reported that spouses cooked, or at least made their own dinners. Mary said her family expected to take over housework in the fall when she was doing numerous events.

In the end, the importance of having and following a production schedule hinged on the simple fact that crafters could only earn money if they had products to sell. Carol summed this up with the statement, “I make what I make.”

Develop a Product Line and Establish Production Methods and Standards
Several people described doing careful research to decide exactly what product(s) they would make. This research involved determining what sorts of things sold well, what the trends might be, and where there were “holes” that could be profitable. As an example, Ramona initially started selling doll clothes at craft fairs because she was already making them and giving them away. The doll clothes were her focus for about 10 years, but then she grew tired of the work. At that point she embarked on a year-long process of surveying what was being sold at fairs and where there seemed to be a potential need. She noticed that very little was done for Thanksgiving, and developed centerpieces for that holiday, adapting a wood and cloth doll-like figure she had seen in another crafter’s booth to her own design. Ramona then worked out a production schedule and an “assembly line” for painting the wood parts of her figures, sewing their clothes (a remnant of her doll clothes work, but much less precise) and assembling the figures on decorated bases.

Ways of working were not always as systematic as Ramona’s were, although almost everyone had set routines for doing things. Joan described a loose sort of production pattern. At the end of each year, she would store all of the baskets she had not sold. Without looking at what she had on hand, she would start making baskets in January. Her method was to make as many basket bases as she could in one day, all of one particular basket design—whatever she felt like making. Then she would finish all of those baskets and start over with bases for another design and thus build her stock. She did not bring out the stored baskets until she was ready to go to a show.

Carol made multiple copies at one time of the small figures she sculpted of polymer clay. She kept a scale for weighing pieces, written formulae for color blends, and prototype pieces of the figures nearby, and she always checked to see that she was using the same amount of material and making parts the same size. Watching her work, I had the feeling that no motions or materials were wasted.

As I thought about my impression that Sylvia would not make and sell music boxes for very long, I realized that it was her lack of a production routine that gave me this feeling. She had a product, she had all of the materials she needed, she had a dedicated place to work, but she told me that she had not been able to establish and follow a pro-

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duction process that suited her needs. Sometimes she would make one box at a time, other times she would cut stacks of gift wrap or make multiple bows, but nothing felt quite right to her.

**Establish Legal Identity as a Business and Keep Careful Records**

Establishing a legal identity as a business and keeping careful records were both essential to being a business and enacting business-like behavior. The critical step in establishing legal identity was getting a tax identification number. This was used in submitting sales tax receipts and was the required entrée to wholesale stores where crafters had access to goods they could not otherwise buy. With a tax identification number they were a legitimate business in the world of commerce. Getting the tax number was one of the steps many individuals identified when they told me the histories of their businesses. Likewise, Michelle and others spoke of the ideas and bargains they got at the wholesale craft and gift stores (where I was denied admission because I had no tax number).

Once individuals had legal recognition as a business, good record keeping was essential for tax reporting. Records provided a history of supply purchases, production levels, and craft fair receipts that individuals could use in planning for the next year. Record keeping, planning, and paying taxes are all practices of being a business owner and being businesslike. A speaker at the craft seminar emphasized the importance of this aspect of craft work, and several people spoke of their spouses keeping the books. Jo bought a computer for this purpose when she decided to try full-time craft work.

**Identify and Access the “Right” Marketing Venues**

Once individuals determined what they wanted to make and sell, they had to identify the marketing venue that suited their work style, the product they manufactured, and the level of involvement in selling they wished to have. (There were other ways to sell crafts besides craft fairs [e.g., at craft malls, home parties, and through catalogs].) When a person decided to do the fairs, they needed to develop the savvy to get into events where their work would “fit,” yet appear distinct. This took time. Jo said that she first “went from show to show to see what it was like, to see what shows I would want to do, and what kind of crafter I want to be.” Louise commented on the challenge of finding the right venues. “There is a lot to learn. It seems to be easy, but there is a whole process.” Individuals repeatedly identified other crafters as their major source of information about shows and promoters. This source was available after a person was recognized as a legitimate crafter since sharing of information relied upon relationships developed among craft fair exhibitors. There were also local and national directories of fairs.

Almost all fairs claimed to be juried and had an application process. Some fairs were particularly popular for crafters because they drew large attendance and were known to feature high-quality work. Crafters took these factors into consideration, but other things also helped to determine their choices of where to apply. Sometimes they disliked the promoter or some particular aspect of the event. John said that one outdoor show had excellent sales, but the arrangements for setting up booths were so difficult they chose not to go there again. People who made delicate work avoided outdoor fairs—Bad weather and the prevalence of cotton candy and ice cream at those events were hard on their stock. I was told of promoters who accepted too many similar crafters, or didn’t use care in placement of booths. Ellen was solicited to apply to a very popular fair, but refused to do so because the promoters would not let her have as much space as she said she needed. The fit of crafter and fair was one that hinged on both practicalities and preferences, relying on the crafter’s knowledge of self and markets.

Once people determined where they wanted to sell their work they needed to sell themselves to the promoters. This involved careful attention to applications and accompanying photographs. Sometimes crafters needed persistence to overcome rejections, as for example, in the case of Ellen, who was turned down for a show but said she knew she would do well there. Figuring that the photographs of her work that she had submitted did not do it justice, she loaded her car with samples and drove to the location where the promoters were making their selections. They looked at her work and let her into the show. Sometimes individuals were left to wonder why their applications were rejected. Often there was no feedback, and usually there was no appeal. Carol reported that she was rejected for an event after several successful years there, because, she was told, someone said she was not doing her own work. Although this was not true, she had no way of reversing the decision. She said that she was glad I was watching her work, because then “at least somebody” would know that she did it all herself. It seemed to me that Carol felt her very identity as a craft person was being challenged or denied.

**Display Work Effectively and Differentiate Work (Product) From That of Others**

The major way crafters displayed their work were photographs to accompany applications, and booth arrangements and the crafters’ presentations of themselves during the fair. Crafts and crafters were part of a single package in
the end, although the crafts were usually the first line of interest for promoters and customers.

Good photography of crafters’ work was essential for their applications to shows where crafters were unknown to the promoters. The photogenic quality of crafts could affect production decisions. Louise was changing her work from porcelain dolls to porcelain ornaments—A response to her experience with the ornaments selling much better than the dolls. At the time we talked, she was struggling with the decision of whether or not to give up the dolls altogether. She disliked sewing the clothes for them, and they were too expensive for buyers at most of the fairs where she sold, but they photographed very well. She said the ornaments did not photograph well, a factor that might prevent her from getting into fairs if she only had ornament pictures to submit with her applications.

Crafters provided their own display furniture for fairs. Penny laughed about the card tables and umbrella she had used 20 years earlier, and Mary told me how Carol had taught her to raise the legs of her tables in order to put her work at children’s eye level. Displays set the tone for the work being sold, protected fragile or easily stolen items, and work at children’s eye level. Displays set the tone for the work being sold, protecting fragile or easily stolen items, and provided a place for the crafter to be comfortable during the work being sold, protected fragile or easily stolen items, and provided a place for the crafter to be comfortable during the 7 to 10 hours they would be selling. Good displays caught the eye of passerby and drew them closer to the work. Nadia used a bamboo and cloth screen at the back of her booth, decorated according to the season. “I try to make the booth look like a boutique,” she said. Michelle decorated her booth with not-for-sale carousel horses, objects that she said always made people stop and look.

At fairs, I observed the importance of differentiation of one’s work from that of others. At a fair with 80–100 booths, on a weekend with 10 or more similar events within a 15–30 minute drive, standing out from the “crowd” was critical, and difficult. Many similar items would be sold and displays and minor variations had the potential to make one person’s work attractive and interesting, while another’s similar work blended into the background of the fair. Crafters whose work was similar to that of others usually told me that their work was different because of its quality—The materials used and the workmanship going into it. Others spoke of features they added to a basic idea to make it their own. For example, Sylvia added a little card with a poem to the gift-wrapped music boxes, explaining they were not to be unwrapped. She said no one else did this, and claimed that her boxes were also unusual because of the care she took in matching the paper to the particular tune. Although these were subtle differences, Sylvia seemed convinced that they gave her a sales advantage over others.

After attending dozens of craft fairs, I had the impression that the most effective booths were those where the crafter sold a limited line of work—Restricted to one medium, or one overall “look.” Booths with diverse painted wood ornaments, baskets, sewn items, and jewelry looked “busy” and were usually empty of customers. Jo worked in a variety of media, but her displays were carefully organized and everything seemed to go together with a “country crafts” feeling created by the themes and colors she chose. Such unified displays provided an identity for the crafts—They were whimsical painted sweatshirts or dried flowers, or printed baby clothing, for example—And thus the crafter was a painter or flower arranger or silk screener. Such displays were easy to remember and recognize from one event to another. Displays featured the crafter as well as the crafts. Almost everyone I interviewed talked about how important it was that the artist, the person who designed and made the work, be present to sell it. It is this direct sale of work to customers that sets apart the craft fair experience from other modes of selling, moving the entire production and marketing process into the realm of non-alienated work in what one might call a classic Marxist sense (Applebaum, 1992). In this formulation, the artisan has control over the entire process of producing and marketing his or her work—Owning the tools, deciding what to make, and selling it in a face-to-face interaction with the buyer. Without stretching the idea too far, it seems as if the craft fairs permit non-alienated buying as well. Customers may be able to establish some level of a relationship with the person who made the work they are buying. Penny told of relationships with customers that went on for years. John talked of people who were collecting his wife’s work. Carol had repeat customers, and was doing a custom order for one of them during the interview. Joe spoke about conversations with customers he encountered away from fairs.

Practice Crafter Cultural Norms

The concept of crafter cultural norms was not explicit, but emerged in the context of what people said about their own and others’ work and their general statements about what crafters were like. The implicit norms of production work and selling were that the product needed to be made by the identified crafter and done well, and the work was to be taken seriously and carried out in a businesslike manner. Several people complained about shows where people were selling “buy-sell” items (not handmade), and John told me about wood furniture others were selling that was “stapled together.” Crafters who made these complaints said such practices reflected badly on all crafters. Crafter norms seemed to apply to private production work as well as public marketing and in this sense linked crafter identity in the privacy of the home to a crafter subculture that grew out of the social context at craft fairs.
In the private sphere, I observed how businesslike most individuals were in the way they set-up production, kept records, scheduled their work, and met their personal standards. Some individuals told me of failed partnerships when the other person did not follow these norms. In the public sphere, crafters practiced cultural forms that served to mark their membership in the subculture of self-employed crafters. Trice (1993) described cultures as a combination of substance and forms. The substance is the “sets of emotionally charged beliefs, called ideologies” (p. 21). The forms are the outward manifestation of these beliefs. Crafters’ cultural forms included specialized language, repeated stories, and shared meaning. Their stories told of common events that could be likened to rites of passage such as being at an outdoor fair during a bad storm, “pulling all-nighters” before a fair, and doing multiple shows in one weekend. Their language included labeling themselves as “crafters” and the craft as their “product.” They called fairs “shows,” and spoke of “buy-sell” exhibits. They used terms for themselves and their work specific to particular types of crafts (e.g., being a basket maker or a blacksmith). All of these behaviors lent support to the idea that a crafter subculture existed.

Crafters’ stories reinforced their notions of how helpful and giving crafters could be, for example in watching adjacent crafters’ booths so that they could take a break. I was told of ways that some crafters had helped others with family problems. Crafters referred to themselves as a group, saying “crafters are the salt of the earth.” They also told tales of deviance from crafter norms, such as one account of a man who offered to watch a woman’s booth while she went to see her husband in the hospital, but took a 20% commission on everything he sold during her absence. Tales of deviance made it clear that certain behaviors were not acceptable.

Crafters shared stories that served to differentiate them from their customers. For example, many people spoke about how annoyed they were at customers’ comments such as, “Oh, I could make that,” a comment typical of a group, saying “crafters are the salt of the earth.” They also told tales of deviance from crafter norms, such as one account of a man who offered to watch a woman’s booth while she went to see her husband in the hospital, but took a 20% commission on everything he sold during her absence. Tales of deviance made it clear that certain behaviors were not acceptable.

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crafters. Successful selling was tangible and public evidence of this identity. Craft fairs were intermittent loci that supported development of a crafter subculture. Not all work in the home has this sort of opportunity for public recognition of the worker’s identity.

Issues related to having an identity as a worker come to the fore in the practice of occupational therapy with clients who have lost or never achieved work. Even the temporary curtailment of usual work activities can threaten an individual’s sense of being a productive member of society. While this study does not account for all of the many different ways that specific individuals developed and negotiated their identities as legitimate craft producers, it does identify a number of commonalities that I have chosen to call “rules.” I am struck that such rules, even though many of them could be found in books or learned from others, often emerged in the doing of the work. Thus Carol’s small work area in her kitchen was understandable as I watched her work. Everything she needed was close at hand. The space was adequate, and with her specialized tools and ample supplies she was able to work efficiently and comfortably. When I thought about statements she made concerning advantages to working outside the home (e.g., “my work at home is always there”), the fact that she could put her work out of sight was another advantage—One that met her particular needs. Carol had arrived at her work arrangements and processes over 20 years of experience doing the work. The importance of doing to the establishment of practices that fostered worker identity among these crafters, it seems to me, has implications for establishment of worker identity for any individual.

Several women began the interview by telling me that they didn’t have to work. This was consistent with Potuchek’s (1997) distinction between being a breadwinner (which implies the requirement to work) and working for fulfillment or “extras.” Women who told me this appeared to be presenting identities as upper middle class housewives, however, every one of them went on to describe work behaviors and goals that were designed to make money. Several said they were motivated by “greed.” As in Potuchek’s study, the “extras” that women worked to afford were sometimes quite basic, as for example, children’s school expenses. The seeming contradiction of the social presentation of oneself as working for reasons other than breadwinning coupled with behaviors designed to maximize income from the work suggests that work identity is not a simple construct. People who are in a work rehabilitation program may likewise attribute various meanings to work, and interventions likely will be most effective when these meanings are identified and incorporated into the rehabilitation or training processes.

One of the aspects of this study that puzzled me was why I had asked particular individuals to participate in interviews after seeing their work at craft fairs and not asked others. The answer to this question has much to do with identities. The first identity of concern in this process was my own. It was not easy for me to approach people (I questioned my own legitimacy as a researcher), and in fact, craft fairs were about buying and selling, not about conversation. For me, knowing my own style, it was easiest to pick-up people’s business cards and contact them later. Whose cards did I select? The crafters who were most businesslike and most memorable were often the ones that had cards. Thus I tended to contact people who were most likely to have established crafter identities in the venue of the craft fair. This group of individuals included beginners and experts, but all of them stood out as successful in what they were doing. As a group, they had well-constructed displays of products that were different from those of people around them, and made themselves available through handouts or business cards or both listing their future fairs and contact information.

The interviews that resulted from direct contact with crafters at the seminar were with people who had more varying levels of success and self-identity as crafters than people who I selected from craft fairs. Sylvia, whose probable success I doubted, was one of these women, as was Ramona, who told me that the crafter identity was not who she was, and it wasn’t her life. Louise wanted to make enough money with her craft sales to support doing the craft work, but had two other sources of income as well as active interests in many other activities. Trudy was just beginning serious work in crafts and was struggling to establish production and sales routines. I wonder what motivated these particular women to pay to attend the seminar. Was it recognition that they didn’t have their work “together”? Was it a form of research? Was it an effort to become part of the subculture? Harré (1983) noted that people have to know what a social identity looks like in order to acquire its attributes. Was attending the seminar a way of learning what being a crafter looks like?

My initial interviews were skewed toward people with well-established personal and social crafter identities. The last interviews, with people I met at the craft network seminar, included some individuals whose crafter identities seemed more tenuous, even though the act of being interviewed about their work supported these identities. Conversations with these individuals allowed comparison during the analysis. In the end, I am faced with the reality that selecting interviewees only from the craft fairs and the recommendations of other crafters would have given me a study of individuals who had successfully become crafters.
One of those women happened to be the prime mover behind the seminar, and she invited me to attend. It was that serendipity that offered me the opportunity to speak with others who were less successful in establishing their identities as crafters. My understanding of what was necessary for establishment of a worker identity, of the practices I have called rules in this paper, grew out of information shared by all of these individuals, particularly as I compared one to another. In this paper I have alluded to occupational therapy interventions with people who need to develop or resume worker identities. I believe there are some lessons to be learned from this study that have general applicability to work rehabilitation. The first of these is that individual and social identity formation as a worker can be a very complex process, but there may be rules or guidelines for doing so. The second is that those rules are discovered in the process of doing work, rather than (or in addition to) a formal conveyance of knowledge. Third, the meaning of work, and thus one’s identity as a worker, is individual. And last, we have much to learn from those who do not succeed in establishing worker identities, as well as those who do.

Appendix: Interview Guide

1. Tell me about the craft work that you do.
2. How did you get started doing this kind of work?
3. What are the ways that you sell your work?
4. Tell me about a typical day when you are working on your craft.
5. Where do you do your work? How do you handle supplies and inventory?
6. When do you do most of your work—Seasonal, time of day, days of week?
7. What are your other roles? How do you accommodate these responsibilities with your craft work and selling activities?
8. How does this work compare to work you have done outside your home?
9. When do you feel most productive?
10. How do other members of your family feel about your work? What sort of involvement do they take in the work?
11. What kind of craft fairs are there?
12. How do you decide which fairs to enter?
13. How do you decide what you think will sell well?
14. What factors help you set your prices?
15. How much of your work sells directly through fairs? What sort of custom work do you do?
16. Who are the people who buy your work?

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