Supporting Diversity and Expertise Development in the Contemporary Craft Economy

Working paper 2

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About this project

Craft Expertise, or 'Supporting diversity and expertise development in the contemporary craft economy' is an AHRC funded UKRI/RCUK Innovation Fellowship led by Dr Karen Patel of Birmingham City University, in collaboration with Crafts Council UK.

This is a 2-year project which began in March 2019, and it has involved a series of research and public engagement activities which have aimed to raise awareness of inequalities in the contemporary UK craft economy. The project has highlighted the various challenges faced by women of colour in the sector including racism and microaggressions in craft spaces, the challenges presented by social media, and issues with gaining recognition as expert makers. The work has informed Crafts Council's approach to tackling racism and inequality in the craft sector.

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You can read the first working paper for this project here.

Introduction

This working paper is the second from the AHRC funded UKRI/RCUK Innovation Fellowship Craft Expertise, a project which seeks to highlight and address inequalities in the UK craft economy. This paper is intended for a non-academic audience and presents evidence from the second half of the two-year project, including interview material and insights from a collaborative 'STEAM Sprint' workshop series, held online during November and December 2020.

Research on the professional UK craft sector suggests that its workforce is not representative of the diversity of the UK population. Crafts Council's *Market for Craft* report highlights that since 2006, the proportion of professional makers from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds has remained static at just 4% (Page 8). This is despite the increased popularity of craft in recent years, with the value of UK craft sales rising from £883m in 2006 to £3bn in 2019. The rise of television shows such as *The Great British Sewing Bee* and *The Great Pottery Throwdown* indicate the increased interest in craft in the UK.

Evidence presented in the first working paper from this project highlights some of the specific challenges makers of colour face, such as racism and microaggressions in craft spaces, and difficulties getting their expertise adequately recognised. These themes remained prominent throughout the second round of interviews and in the STEAM Sprint workshops, however additional challenges also emerged from the research. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter during 2020 had a significant impact on the craft sector, and as a result there were increased public discussions about racism in craft. It is crucial that these conversations continue, and the evidence presented in this paper is intended to inform such discussions.

The context of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter

The second half of this project took place during an exceptionally challenging time. The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on the lives of everyone around the world. Early on in the pandemic there was the idea that the virus 'doesn't discriminate' and is 'the great equaliser'. However, it soon emerged that the people and communities around the world who were hit hardest by the virus were from more deprived areas, were more likely to be women, and more likely to be black, Asian or from another ethnic minority. Far from a 'great equaliser', in the UK the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing inequalities.

In the creative sector, within which craft sits, reports released during late 2020 and early 2021 highlight the increasing gender inequality in the arts and the likelihood that COVID-19 will increase racial inequality in the arts. These reports highlight the structural conditions which underpin inequalities across the creative sector. In craft, where the majority of makers work as sole traders, many have been unable to access financial support from the UK government, making it particularly difficult to sustain a craft enterprise during this time. For makers who are not white and middle class, the pandemic has presented a further set of challenges to navigate. In the first working paper for this project, I discussed many of the challenges my interviewees face during their craft careers, including racism and microaggressions, feeling like their work is unfairly judged and undervalued, and various issues using social media and online spaces. This working paper builds on these initial findings, and takes into account the unprecedented situation brought about by the global pandemic.

The women I interviewed during the pandemic did not report any great upheaval in their day-to-day lives at the time, apart from the additional anxiety that lockdown and living in a pandemic brought for everyone. The switch to working from home was difficult for some, while many decided to focus more on selling craft online to make money. Others saw it as an opportunity to focus on their practice. What had a real impact on these interviewees was the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in May 2020, when George Floyd was killed

in police custody in Minneapolis, USA. Many organisations attempted to show their support for the movement by posting black squares on social media as part of #BlackOutTuesday. Some organisations, including the Crafts Council, received criticism for doing this, with some makers highlighting that the Crafts Council should do more to foster inclusivity. Since then the Crafts Council have made their commitment to diversity and inclusion more explicit. The increased conversation around diversity and inclusion was certainly encouraging during 2020, however we now need to move forward and start turning these conversations into actions. It is hoped that this working paper is a first step towards making change happen. It includes more findings from the research and interviews, and some initial ideas for action, for craft and creative organisations to take into account. These ideas will serve as a basis for specific policy recommendations which will be released later in 2021.

Methods

Interviews

The interviews carried out were with makers who identified as women and from an ethnically diverse background. The interviewees were from around the UK and at varying career stages. Most of them were either working as a maker professionally or were aspiring to do so. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, and during the COVID-19 pandemic interviews had to be carried out over the phone and later via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I asked interviewees some questions related to general themes around their craft career journeys and their experiences as ethnically diverse women in the sector, but gave interviewees the opportunity to do most of the talking with as little intervention as possible. This is to allow them to speak as much as they would like about their experiences, and provide some space for reflection. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions thematically analysed using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Pseudonyms are used for the interviewees to protect their identity.

Workshops

The online workshops were designed and facilitated in collaboration with STEAMhouse in Birmingham, a maker space facilitated by Birmingham City University. Originally, this was meant to be a one-day workshop at the STEAMhouse premises but because of COVID-19 restrictions, we adapted it to three two-hour online sessions, which took place on a weekly basis during November and December 2020. The sessions were attended by 11 makers from around the UK who have previously been involved in the project, and Julia Bennett from Crafts Council UK and Deirdre Figueiredo from Craftspace. The workshops were held via the STEAMhouse Zoom account and the activities were all hosted on the Miro online collaboration platform. The activities were based on design thinking approaches, to generate ideas and come up with solutions to challenges. The three workshops were organised as follows:

- **Workshop 1 Problem Framing**: In this workshop I presented key findings from the research so far. Participants took part in an empathy exercise and the 'Why Tree' exercise (pictured below) to map the key challenges facing makers of colour in the sector, and think through the root causes.
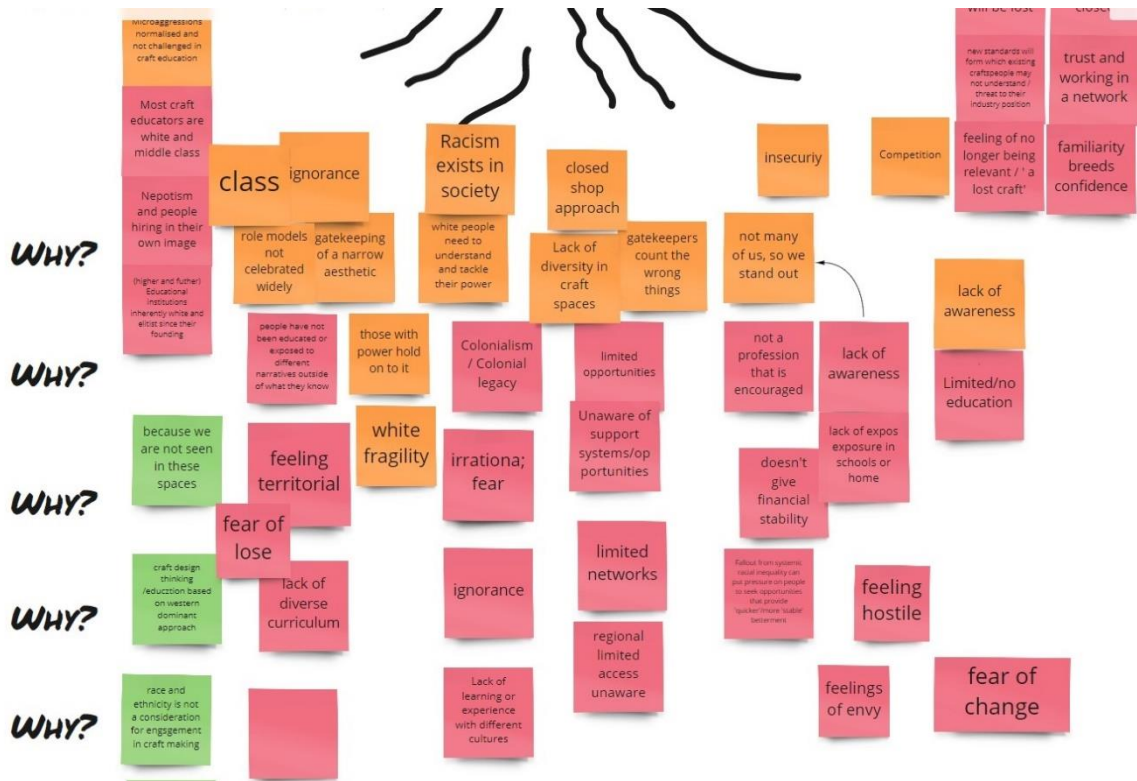

Figure 1 Why tree exercise

- **Workshop 2 Idea Generation**: This workshop focused on rapid idea generation to address the problem statement, which was a compilation of the challenges generated from the previous workshop. Participants were encouraged to think of ideas to address the problem statement.
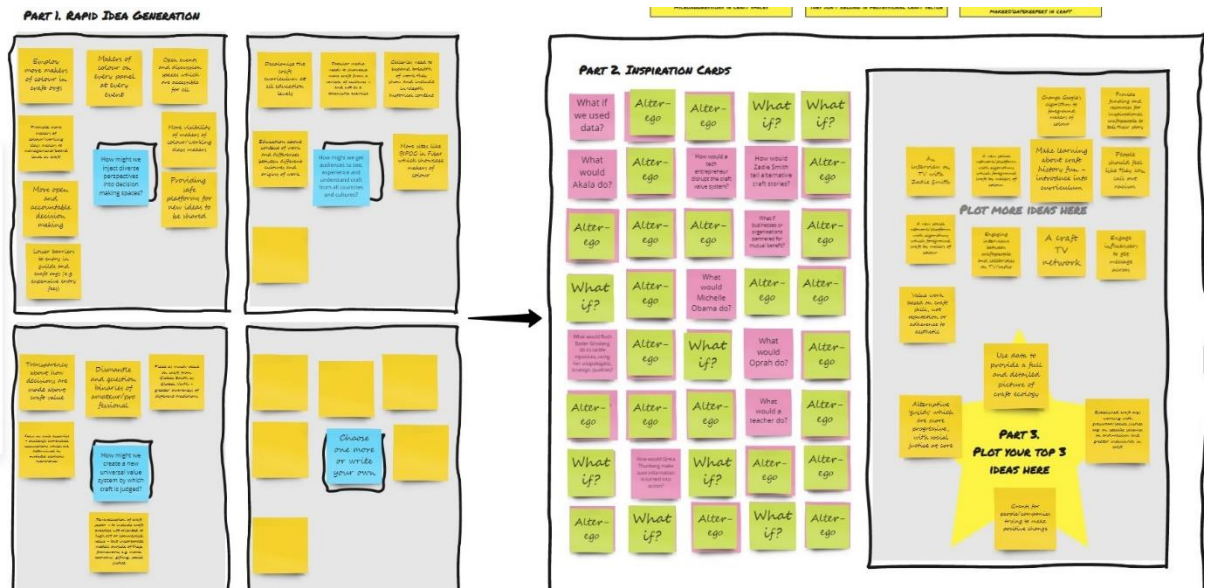
Figure 2 rapid idea generation

- **Workshop 3 Crafting Policy recommendations**: Participants presented their ideas, followed by a discussion about what could be done to turn these ideas into recommendations for policy makers, craft and cultural organisations and other people/organisations in the craft ecology.

You can read a full recap of the workshops on my research blog. I would recommend this approach to idea generation and policy development, but also as an additional research method to generate rich insights. Using Miro I collated and summarised the ideas, discussion points and contributions from the users and analysed these thematically, looking for commonalities and areas for further exploration. For more information about STEAM Sprint workshops visit the STEAMhouse website.

Key findings

The challenges for makers of colour raised in the workshops were similar to the insights from the interviews, however additional concerns around craft education were a strong theme from the workshops. Here are the key findings from both the workshops and interviews.

Perceptions of craft as a career

In many black and minority ethnic households in the UK, craft is not viewed as a serious or viable profession for young people to pursue, which negatively impacts the numbers of young people going on to study design or craft in higher education. This issue is discussed in an initial project on inequalities in craft which I carried out in 2018, "Supporting Diversity in Craft". That project highlighted the significance of cultural background in craft practice, particularly the cultural expectations on young people of colour to pursue a seemingly more 'stable' career in the medical or legal professions. This issue was referenced again in the interviews for the current project. For example, Rebecca, a jeweller in Birmingham of British South Asian heritage, described how her parents are "still waiting for me to get a real job" despite her working as an independent jeweller for 20 years.

Janet is a mixed material maker from London, of mixed race Portuguese heritage. She described how she was under pressure to study science at University:

> I guess, culturally, in my, sort of, background, that's [craft] something that you do as a hobby. If you're going to go to university and you're going to have a job, it has to be a more serious subject […] I guess I had that pressure for a long time and I thought if I'm not doing politics, at least if I'm doing a scientific subject, that's sort of okay. And then I realised, "well, it's not okay for me because I don't enjoy it.

Sheena is also based in London, and is a textile jeweller of British South Asian heritage. Her dad was from an arts background, but she still faced resistance from other members of her family, especially her brother:

> I remember him [my brother] calling me and saying, "We're economic migrants." That was the first time I ever heard that word, the term. He said, "What do you think you're doing?" Basically he's of that mindset that you just get a job, you get a degree to go and work, get a mortgage and I was completely the opposite. Again, I'm getting kick back from my own community. It's very different." […] "I think a lot of people have said, "You get quite a lot of challenge from your family and friends. They don't understand what you're doing." That was a real problem.

Despite resistance from some family members, many of these women continued to pursue a craft career because they found it fulfilling. All of the interviewees mentioned here felt that they had to do something they enjoy, even if it means not always being stable financially. Pamela, a mixed race knitwear designer in London, said that her dad also asks questions about her financial security, despite her being a maker for over 15 years. She said:

> His attitude is, "You really should think about getting a proper job now," so even after all these years of... My dad is never going to change, but however much you'll be selling to such and such or you'll have won this or done this, my dad's attitude is always, "Yes, but you really should be thinking about your pension and, 'How much longer can you continue working like this?

Similar stories emerged in the workshops too, with several of the participants mentioning how their families discouraged them from studying an arts related degree or pursuing a career in making, because of the perception that craft is a hobby, and not a realistic career choice. The perception of craft among some families from ethnically diverse backgrounds is an issue which may feed into the low numbers of young people of colour taking arts and

craft courses at university. For those who do make it on to these courses, there are then a host of challenges and barriers for them which are simply not there for affluent white students.

Barriers in craft education

A prominent theme from the workshops and interviews with younger makers was the prevalence of racism and microaggressions in educational settings. The negative effects of this are further impacted by college and university curricula that teach a white, Eurocentric canon of design and craft. Craft traditions that sit outside this Eurocentric framework are largely neglected, and non-representative teaching staff are not able to support students who want to explore alternative traditions.

Microaggressions are a form of racism that is not immediately obvious to the perpetrator, who may not even realise that what they are doing is racist and offensive. Microaggressions can be subtle – looks, comments and actions which can make someone feel othered. An example of a microaggression in an education setting was described by Leila, a young maker of British West African heritage studying textiles at University:

> I always change my hair, because I just love to change my hairstyle. And I
> think I had braids in once. And we were in a workshop and I was just
> minding my business and I just felt somebody's hand in my hair, feeling
> through my braids, and it was my tutor. And I turned around, I was really
> shocked, I was like- I didn't know what to do. And she was just like, "Oh, I
> love your hair. And I didn't know how to take it, there was nobody in the
> room that I felt like I could turn to and just be like, "Did you see that?"

Leila's comment points to the lack of self-awareness from the tutor, who should know that it is rude to touch a student's hair, and the damaging effect of making Leila feel othered, and like she has no one to turn to in a predominantly white classroom. Leila also commented

that her tutors on the course did not know any black artists, and so she felt they were ill equipped to advise her about her project on West African textiles. She instead was looking to reach out to black textiles tutors at other universities, to try and get some help. The colonial curriculum taught across courses and at universities around the world is a serious issue which needs addressing, not only in craft and the arts.

Arts curricula which are outdated and white was a prominent discussion point in the workshops too, and there was also concern expressed for the cutting of craft subjects at school level, potentially restricting the ability for culturally diverse makers to make it through the education system and even think whether craft is for them. One of the workshop participants, a lecturer in textiles, said that the cultural histories of craft and craft techniques from around the world need to be embedded in courses, so that tutors and students are fully informed and appreciate the origins of craft beyond colonial narratives, and so the courses better serve students from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

The predominantly white craft and arts education system inevitably creates a predominantly white craft sector, within which makers of colour experience racism and unfair treatment.

Racism and cultural value in craft

For both early career and established craftspeople of colour in the UK, experiences of racism, othering, unconscious bias and microaggressions are common. Many have felt their work was devalued because of their ethnicity, gender and/or class, or them being expected to make 'ethnic' crafts. The issues around how craft made by people of colour is devalued is discussed in the [first working paper](#) from this project. The issue of particular importance and a prominent theme here is racism. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement meant that racism became the focal point of discussion in the later interviews, and the experiences relayed by those interviewed revealed the extent of racism throughout the UK craft sector.

Meg, a mixed race textile artist based in Derbyshire, said that when she goes to knitting shows in the UK, she gets looked at like she is "weird". She says she is comforted when she sees other people of colour at the shows, "because we have a right to be there, just like anyone else." Janet, the mixed material designer in London, described her experience at a studio, which regularly allowed makers to do open studios and pop up shops. She won funding for her studio space, and described how an older white maker at the studios said: "I just think that, you know, [here they have] these young people from poor backgrounds come in and then you just get help and then, what? Like, they're not giving you any skills. What are you going to do at the end of the year when you can't afford the rent or anything?" Janet interpreted this comment as the woman saying she had to pay her way into the studio, and that Janet, the "poor young person" was getting help. On this, Janet said:

> I know this person, I know that she lives in a house that was given by her
> parents as an inheritance. There are lots of older white ladies whose
> husbands work in a city. And they just spend their time doing something
> creative and they have a studio and their businesses aren't commercially
> viable. They may be beautiful and creative, but they don't need their
> businesses to pay for their lives. So they do not actually realise that they
> are getting a lot of help, you know, and the little help that I'm getting, it's
> nothing compared to the upper hand they already have.

Janet felt that her position and her right to be in the studios was dismissed by this older white maker, making her feel like an outsider. She described several incidents at the studios of racism and microaggressions, such as other white makers mistaking her for another black maker at the studio:

> Even people that you've had conversations with, lengthy conversations, I see
> them all the time. I know who they are, but then they still confuse me with
> someone else. It was just riddled with that situation, which is partly why I left. I
> don't know if that was the right thing to do, if actually there needs to be more

black people rather than black people leaving because they don't feel like they belong.

I mean, there was even a girl who was American, she's got a really strong American accent. We look nothing alike at all and we were consistently confused. And, obviously, we talked about it. You know, you make friends, you join forces, don't you? Because they're getting the same thing. Like, people are talking to them as if they were me. So they're getting this as well. And I just thought, "How is that possible?" Because there was actually only five of us that you have to remember and yet I, somehow, I'm not superhuman, but I can remember you all.

Such behaviour from the white studio holders made Janet and her colleagues feel othered and unwelcome, to the point where Janet had to leave. At university, Leila talked about how on her course she gets asked a lot of questions about where she is from, and she said "I can understand that some people are genuinely interested, but I think sometimes, the way that it comes across is like you're- I feel like I'm some kind of spectacle or something, sometimes."

Words such as 'othered', 'object' and 'spectacle' came up frequently during the interviews particularly with the Black women, who often referenced how they were made to feel in certain craft spaces where they would be the only person of colour, and feeling like they don't belong. Janet commented that the perception of Black women by older white people is a reason why there has been little progress made in racial equality in craft:

And, you know, black women, it's not just about racism. It's about we're so objectified, as well. You are sometimes seen as this sexual thing rather than a human being. And you're seen as either being angry or being emotional.

But either way, there is something that seems to be very alien about us. So to then have someone that is, say, a white man in his sixties, to employ a black

woman to work so closely with them and make decisions, but then this person is just, like, an object or an alien that they can't relate to.

These experiences indicate that craft spaces are not safe for people of colour, and not enough is being done to foster safe, inclusive spaces. When people of colour do try to address these issues, they are often accused of being angry, as referenced by Janet, and I have witnessed this myself in higher education settings too. This is a form of racism and exercise of power to oppress people of colour, and is an example of a behaviour in a workplace which reproduces whiteness and inequality.

Conclusion

These findings indicate that makers of colour experience challenges throughout the craft journey, at all stages of their careers. The entrenched structures and ways of working in craft reinforce these barriers, and mechanisms to address these challenges are currently non-existent. Furthermore, despite the increased conversation caused by Black Lives Matter, the impact of COVID-19 on organisational resources and capacity to facilitate change, means there is a risk that nothing will be done. In the next section I outline the areas in which change should happen, based on insights from the workshops.

Making a change

> I think until people realise that we're not a thing, we're not this otherness, we are individuals and the things that we need, like, job security and financial security and acceptance, are just the same as anybody else. So we need it now, not in 20 years.

The above quote is from Janet, who was talking about the need for urgent change in craft. The context of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 reinforces this need to urgency, to grasp the current moment and the opportunities it presents. In this section I outline the main themes from the workshops, in which we identified key areas for further action.

1. Reframing the narrative

This means changing the traditional craft 'canon' which is taught in UK further and higher education. It also refers to addressing perceptions of craft's viability as a potential career for young people. Possible actions include critiquing prevailing narratives about craft's origins, highlighting success stories and role models of colour from the sector, and craft organisations embedding social justice objectives into their ethos and planning.

2. Mandating representation and establishing industry codes of conduct

This involves directly addressing racism and microaggressions in craft spaces such as studios, fairs and galleries, and ensuring that decision making in the sector is transparent and inclusive. Possible actions include craft organisations agreeing codes of conduct and clear routes for redress and action to respond to racism and microaggressions.

3. Embedding and supporting craft in education

This means ensuring students have opportunities to pursue craft courses at all levels of education, and that staff are equipped to support them effectively. Possible actions could include craft educators embedding more diverse perspectives and traditions into their curricula, and hiring more staff from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

4. Evidence

More evidence and data needs to be collected to ensure data about the crafts sector accurately represents the breadth of makers of colour and the various models of craft practice which are not currently reflected, including sole traders and social enterprises.

5. Finance and funding

This involves tackling financial barriers, particularly in light of the challenges brought about by the pandemic and the lack of financial support for individual creatives. Possible actions include funders providing grants to craft organisations and social enterprises trying to make positive change, and creating a foundation to support craft.

A full set of policy recommendations are now currently in development, and they will be released in the final project report due later in 2021.

Acknowledgments