

Supporting Diversity and Expertise Development in the Contemporary Craft Economy

Working paper 1

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Dr Karen Patel



**BIRMINGHAM CITY
University**



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About this project

Craft Expertise, or 'Supporting diversity and expertise development in the contemporary craft economy' is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded UKRI/RCUK Innovation Fellowship led by Dr Karen Patel of Birmingham City University, in collaboration with Crafts Council UK. This is a two-year project which began in March 2019, and involves research and public engagement activities which seek to address the following objectives:

1. To develop a theoretical account of craft expertise which will challenge how craft expertise is framed in the contemporary digital and cultural economy, particularly in relation to gender and race.
2. To produce recommendations for policy relating to Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) cultural workers in the digital and creative economy, and issues around inequalities in the wider sector.
3. To enhance understanding of the specificity of craft expertise as mediated on social media platforms.

The project involves interviews, ethnography, podcasts, workshops, academic publications and a conference. The work builds on a previous AHRC funded project, '**supporting diversity in craft through digital technology skills development**' which concluded in December 2018.

For more information about the Craft Expertise project email Karen Patel at Karen.patel@bcu.ac.uk.

Introduction

This working paper presents initial findings from research carried out for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project 'Supporting diversity and expertise development in the contemporary craft economy' or 'Craft Expertise'. The paper is intended for a non-academic audience and presents work in progress from the project, primarily quotes and evidence from the interviews. This evidence would be of interest to those working in craft or craft education, and craft and cultural organisations.

The Craft Expertise project is in collaboration with Crafts Council UK and involves research and public engagement activities which seek to support greater diversity in the UK craft economy. It builds on an initial one-year project, 'Supporting diversity in craft through digital technology skills development' which concluded in December 2018 and involved interviews and workshops with women working in craft¹ who are from a Black or Minority Ethnic (BAME) background. The initial project (Patel, 2019) explored the experiences of these women makers in the contemporary craft economy, which according to Crafts Council UK figures (Spilsbury, 2018) has an underrepresentation of BAME makers working in the sector. Furthermore, of those working full-time in craft occupations, the majority are white men, whereas part-time and self-employed makers are mostly women.

The figures by Crafts Council UK point to inequalities within the contemporary craft workforce which are evident in the wider creative sector (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018). The report for the initial project by Patel (2019) provides initial insights into the experiences of BAME women in craft, highlighting the importance of cultural background and family influence in these women's decision making when pursuing craft as a career; the challenges of using social media including a lack of confidence, risk of feeling exposed online and skills needs; and opportunities of social media use for BAME women makers, such as sharing and knowledge exchange, creating a sense of community and supporting greater visibility of their

¹ By craft, we mean creative practice which is grounded in the material creation of objects by hand. For example, textiles, ceramics, jewellery and woodwork.

craft work online. Indeed, it is argued that online spaces help to reproduce a mostly white and middle-class picture of contemporary craft (Luckman, 2015).

The Craft Expertise project seeks to explore and problematize existing preconceptions about what craft expertise is, and which types of craft, and makers, are valued in the contemporary craft economy. It aims to highlight the specific challenges women makers of colour face in the sector and work towards addressing inequalities through practical interventions and policy recommendations.

The findings in this working paper stem from 15 interviews with BAME women from around the UK who are working towards a craft career. In comparison to the previous project, these interviews focused much more on their experiences as women of colour within craft – in studios, at craft fairs, and online. The initial findings so far suggest that there are some barriers for people in minority groups to become professional makers which are social (including instances of racism and othering), cultural and economic. For those who are not from a relatively privileged background or with the necessary networks and educational level, it is particularly difficult to make a career and be adequately recognised in the sector. If, as Richard Sennett (2010) says, ‘anyone can be a craftsman’, more needs to be done to make craft spaces more inclusive.

Method

So far, I have carried out 15 interviews with makers primarily from London and Birmingham, and one in Newcastle. They are all women from a BAME background, 12 of them are in the craft industry, either working on their practice full-time or working towards that. The majority of the professional makers do other jobs alongside their practice, mostly teaching, administrative or community arts work. Only two of the professional women are working on their practice full-time. The three non-professional makers are from Craftspace Birmingham's Women's Maker Movement project – which invites migrants with little or no arts education to take part in jewellery making classes in Birmingham. All of these women aim to start a business in craft using the skills they learned. Of the twelve professionals, two are early career (within 5 years of graduating from higher/further education) five are mid-career, five are established (been working in craft for more than ten years).

The interviews were carried out either face to face or over the phone, recorded and transcribed. All participants provided informed consent, they will be anonymised in this paper and pseudonyms used in place of their real names. The transcripts were thematically analysed using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Three major themes emerged from the analysis which will be discussed in this paper:

- How women makers of colour are othered in craft, highlighting the closed nature of the craft industry, as well as incidents of racism and unconscious bias.
- Recognition and value of craft, including how the women's work is devalued because of their ethnicity and/or gender, or them being expected to make 'ethnic' crafts.
- Social media and how their experiences in the craft sector generally feed into a reticence to promote themselves online. At the same time, there is a 'like it or lump it' attitude from some who will not let the threat of racism or ill treatment online stop them from building an online presence and communicating their expertise.

The next three sections discuss these findings in greater depth.

Othering in craft

The first and most prominent theme from the interviews was the prevalence of othering in craft. Almost all of the participants working professionally in the sector commented on incidents of racism and microaggressions within the craft community and during craft education. Some also commented on the closed nature of the craft sector, whereby if you are not from a relatively privileged background, it can be difficult to engage with the relevant networks and get noticed.

The closed nature of craft

For example, Sam grew up in London and is from an East Asian background. She says:

I think **I'm still an outsider** because I'm just doing everything myself and trying to get into this scene. I think it's one of those things that's a little bit hard to get in, but once you get in, you are recognised, and then you get all these opportunities thrown at you.

If you are exposed to all these social events, and social fairs, and societies because of your upbringing, and where you're from, then **it's easier to get recognised** and step foot into it than someone who's just coming from a background that's completely different and new to this whole craft and art world.

Even though she grew up in London, Sam feels like she doesn't have the background and networks to break in to craft, hence feeling like an outsider. The idea of feeling like they don't belong, or like an outsider, was referenced in most of the interviews.

Some of the more established makers said that the closed nature of craft is a class and education issue. Karan, of a South Asian heritage and based in a studio in London, said that younger makers and students don't socialise with their local communities. She says: "**They carry on socialising in their college group, which is white.** Then they come here [to the

studios in London] and they carry on socialising with this group, which is white, and so nothing moves on from that”.

Heena, a jeweller in Birmingham and also of South Asian heritage says: “I think that you move in different circles if you come from a different class, and that also creates opportunities. You exude a certain confidence as well if you come from a certain background”. As a result of the seemingly closed nature of craft, some of these women have, at times, not felt confident networking or applying for opportunities because of not feeling quite like they fit in. This means that the craft industry is not a place where they feel they belong.

Jasmine and Olivia are both black women, and both spoke about not feeling like they belong in certain craft spaces. For example, Olivia said, on when she attends craft fairs, “If you don’t see anyone that looks like you, you think, ‘Actually, **maybe it’s not for me**’”. Jasmine said:

I went to look around at what they had and the studio spaces and the people that were there, and I was like, ‘**I don’t belong here, I don’t belong here**’.

I find, a lot of the time, I’m usually the only black person in a room, which **can be exhausting**.

Why is it exhausting? Because of unconscious bias and racism which almost all of the women interviewed had experienced at one point or another during their careers.

Racism and unconscious bias

Heena, described her experience with a trade supplier:

In the past I went to a goldplaters to get some samples done [...] I was pleasant enough, said I’d bring the samples, then when I brought the samples he was really, really rude to me. I’ve had friends who’ve had a similar experience but **I definitely got that feeling off him that it was partly because I was Asian**.

It's always a feeling, you can't pinpoint it, I couldn't say you said something racist to me, but it's a definite feeling because I see when other people get to see that person, **they might be rude but they wouldn't do it in the same way.**

Heena discussed several instances where she felt she was being treated rudely or dismissed. She felt this was not only because of her ethnicity (though she suspected this was at least part of the reason) but also because of her gender and working-class background.

Sofia in Newcastle described her experience of racist abuse at a craft market:

Well there's actually a market here called Tynemouth Market, and one of the first times that I went there, I started going last year, and I actually got my stall right next to this racist man. I was a bit upset, but my sister in law came over, and then she was kind of like standing in between us, because she could tell how affected I was getting.

Because he was just coming over, in my personal space, because I think he realised it affected me more. Then he just started saying, '**Oh, yeah, we don't want brown people here**'. It was so in my face, it was horrible.

Unfortunately, apparently, **that is kind of like the norm at some markets,** and it's a bit strange.

Sofia said that at the market no one offered to help her, because the man who was doing it was "being quite jovial about it" and trying to laugh it off. The fact that she says it is the norm at these markets is a worrying sign, and demonstrates that the situation in some areas of the UK can be worse than in larger cities such as Birmingham and London. That does not mean that women makers of colour in such cities do not face difficulty. Behaviours from others which are harder to pinpoint – microaggressions – were commonly experienced among the participants.

Microaggressions

Examples of microaggressions include comments or looks, which aren't overtly racist, but which make the recipient very aware that they were being judged primarily because of their ethnicity. For example Tina, who is of South Asian heritage, describes her experiences when she holds open studios events in London:

At Open Studios, you have all your work out on display and it's for sale. You can see that this is a workshop. And people have said to me- And usually it's been people of a certain age and of a certain demographic. **And they'll say, "Is this all made here, in the UK?" Or, "Do you make this yourself?" Or, "Is it made here or is it made abroad?"** Now, that's quite loaded, isn't it?

Even though she is a British woman and her work is British made, that is not taken as a given by some people and her work is being judged by her skin colour and her heritage.

Microaggressions can make spaces unwelcoming for these women. These issues are not of course isolated to craft, they are in evidence across the creative industries where those in relatively powerful positions tend to be white, male and from a privileged background (Banks, 2017; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor, 2018).

Recognition and value in craft

I argue that unconscious biases and microaggressions feed into perceptions about the value of crafts made by these women. For example, Heena says:

If some of my exhibition work is concept led and obviously reflects my culture sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, it's not seen as up there with other contemporary makers [...] **My work that relates to my culture doesn't sell.**

Karan said similar, highlighting how her ethnicity directly feeds into expectations about the type of work she is seemingly 'supposed' to do:

I think the crafts is going to be even harder [to break into] because craft is associated as something uniquely British or it's a British craft. So I can't be seen to be doing a British craft because I'm not British. **On the one hand, I'm not allowed to do what's British, but on the same extent I'm not allowed to do what's culturally mine either.** So it's kind of a lose-lose situation. (Laughter).

There's some evidence too of the expertise of some makers being dismissed because they are from a BAME background. Again Karan, describes how her successes have been played down by others in the studios where she works:

I think that also jobs are so precious in this field that people, they may not articulate it, but they're really competitive and really quite aggressive. I got loads of jibes also when I got here [to the studios] about being funded. **Someone actually did say to my face, "Oh, you're here to tick a box",** as though I couldn't actually draw or paint, and that also I didn't come from a culture that draws or paints.

Karan said that such attitudes – being told she is there to 'tick a box' - are because of the Eurocentricity of higher education. Because of this, she feels her work isn't recognised or valued on its own merits, instead any success she has is judged on her ethnicity.

Diversity schemes to increase the numbers of BAME people in the arts and craft can work to an extent in terms of greater representation of diverse creatives. However, they can't solve the underlying problems about how makers from BAME backgrounds, and their work, are perceived.

While social media has made it easier for seemingly 'anyone' to make a career out of craft, the online space is just as difficult to navigate for these women.

The role of social media

A lot of the participants interviewed were hesitant about putting pictures of themselves online when telling the story about their work. I would argue this is both a gendered and racialised issue. In other work I've done about women artists (Patel, 2020) and women entrepreneurs (Naudin and Patel, 2019) it tends to be the case that women are more hesitant to self-promote online. Many of the women interviewed for this also mentioned their ethnicity as a reason. For example, Tina:

I would probably post more- Because I have noticed, the times when I have posted a picture of me, they've actually been really popular, because people want to see the face behind the brand. But **I still feel conscious of the fact that I'm not white, I don't fit into a certain mould** or whatever, perhaps. And I need to kind of break that down and not worry about that and just it's me, **it's who I am. You like it or you don't like it.**

Tina feels conscious of the fact that she's not white, which feeds into her hesitation to put pictures of herself online even though she's only had positive experiences so far. However, the idea of "you like it or you don't like it" was mentioned by a few of the participants.

For example, Thea feels she is getting better at putting herself out there:

I'm getting better at that. I'm comfortable to be open about myself. I wasn't with pictures, but I'm getting more comfortable with that now, and I had to consider the options as far as do I show that I'm a black maker or not? To be honest, I came down to the fact of, **"If their decision is going to be swayed by whether I'm black or not, then I don't want them buying my stuff.**

This is an important attitude but not everyone has the confidence to do it, and it is not necessarily to do with race. For example, Olivia struggles with drawing a line between the personal and professional on social media:

If you go down to my earlier feeds [on social media], there are absolutely no photos of me at all just because I didn't want to speak about myself. I just wanted to speak about the work. As time has gone on and being here and looking at how other people brand themselves and represent themselves, the story is important and people knowing about your background and what your inspirations are and influences.

If I have any reservations at all, it's probably because I don't like to expose myself. That's not a racial thing or anything, that's just who I am as a person. I don't really want to tell anyone about me. I'm not in the habit of speaking about myself. About my business? Great. About me? No. I'm learning now there is a crossover. It's not all of it but there's a little crossover so this is the bit that I need to mention more. You can only do it to a point where you're comfortable.

The idea of feeling exposed online is also discussed in my previous report (Patel, 2019) where many of the women makers did not want to reveal too much about themselves or their personal life online. Yet in the craft sector the story behind the final product is particularly important, and there is a skill in finding a balance the maker is comfortable with.

Conclusion

These initial findings suggest that for women makers of colour in the UK craft sector, the pathway to a professional career in craft is especially difficult, and this is because of existing structures and entrenched assumptions about craft expertise which are gendered, classed and racialised.

The quotes from interviewees in this paper demonstrate that racist incidents still happen in studios and at craft fairs in the UK. More common, however, are microaggressions.

Microaggressions include looks, comments and preconceptions about the makers and their work which mean that sometimes they are being judged because of their gender, class and/or ethnic origin, and not their work. Microaggressions can make the craft industry unwelcoming for people who are not white and middle class. There needs to be much more awareness of these problems.

There is also an issue with perceptions of traditional and global crafts which stem from the UK education system. Craft education seems to centre on predominantly Western, white, high-end forms of craft which feed into perceptions of the craft expertise of diverse makers.

Finally, on social media some of the women are hesitant to put themselves out there and not only because of their skin colour, though it is a factor, but because it's not what they feel comfortable doing and their confidence level. There is a sense that if people will discriminate because of the colour of their skin, then those aren't the type of customers they want anyway. This is an important attitude to have but not everyone has such confidence.

While diversity schemes may help to address the representation of diverse makers in the UK craft sector, much more needs to be done to make the craft sector more inclusive. There needs to be a collective effort to challenge behaviours and call out racism in the sector.

Practical steps, such as an inclusivity charter for craft markets and studios, could highlight these problems explicitly and facilitate positive change.

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