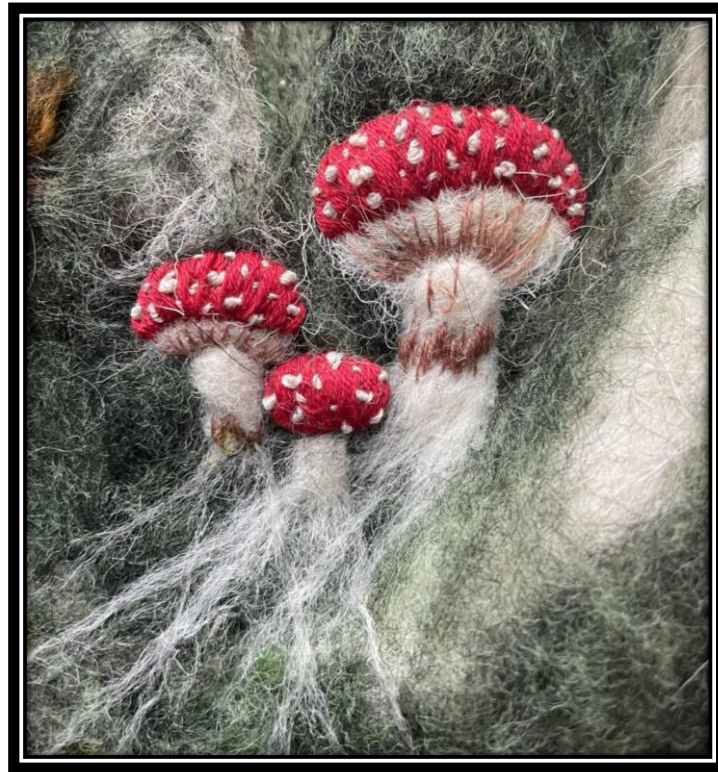


Telling Stories through Collaborative Crafting



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DECLARATION I certify that this work has not been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently being submitted for any degree other than that of Doctor of Philosophy being studied at the University of Kent. I also declare that this work is the result of my own investigations except where otherwise identified by references, and that I have not plagiarised the work of others.

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Abstract

In a society driven by the performance of an ideal self, the pressure of continuous self-surveillance leaves little space to simply be. The pervasive pursuit of 'normal' has been associated with neurodivergent individuals receiving late diagnoses and, in some cases, experiencing crisis. I used creative methods and an autoethnographic PhD quilt, a textile-based research tool, to investigate engagement with craft and its relationship with mental health. Specifically, I examine how the attention economy fragments the cognitive resources of neurodivergent individuals. Their sensory and attentional profiles, such as hyperfocus, are often pathologised within rigid institutional structures. These structures act as an 'iron cage', intensified by shifting expectations.

Data were collected through qualitative interviews, creative workshops, crafted artefacts and collaborative quilt blocks produced over a two-year period. Twenty-two participants described why they engage in craft and how it relates to their lived experiences of emotional distress and challenges with mental health. This was supported by the 'Ethics of the Veil', a practice of material negotiation that protects sensitive narratives within the academic institution and prevents further harm. The application of Soja's (1996) 'Thirdspace' spatial theory combined with Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) understanding of flow states informs my conceptualisation and unique contribution of 'Flow-Thirdspace'. In the thesis, I develop this new concept of Flow-Thirdspace as a socio-spatial site. It creates space to exist alongside challenges and is produced when neurodivergent attention aligns with the rhythmic act of making. It represents a space where we stop becoming and start being.

The findings indicate that craft supports coping with the pervasive pressures of modern liberal society, specifically the exhausting paradox of being never enough but always too much. Through engagement with craft, participants reconstruct narratives previously shaped by pathologisation, offering an alternative to Frank's (1995) 'restitution narrative' of medical recovery. This enables individuals to reclaim their sovereignty through making, offering respite from performance or expectation.

Although the research was undertaken with adults, the practical implications of providing creative tools for navigating mental health challenges could be developed into a resource for addressing the current mental health crisis among children. By prioritising process over product, individuals can access a Flow-Thirdspace where their innate attention styles form the foundation for an unflattened life and a means of coping in Han's (2015a) 'Burnout Society'.

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This thesis and Flow-Thirdspace are dedicated to my daughter Josie.

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

-Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (1971)

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In memory of Jack and Sherlock.

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Glossary

'Burnout Society': A sociological concept describing a culture of relentless achievement and self-exploitation; this environment flattens human experience into measurable productivity observed by the philosopher Byung Chul Han, (2015a).

Confidence Culture: Based on the work of Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill (2022), this term critiques the neoliberal imperative that demands women solve systemic issues (like inequality and sexism) through internal, individualised self-improvement, resilience, and positive thinking. In this thesis, it describes the exhausting pressure to perform an idealised, 'optimised' self.

Craft /craftivism: I use both 'craft' and 'craftivism' in this thesis. 'Craftivism' specifically refers to the use of craft practices as a form of activism, resistance, or social commentary which is relevant to challenging normative pressures. However, the term 'craft' will be used more broadly to include making undertaken for personal well-being, identity exploration, or community building, without necessarily an explicit political goal. Recognising this distinction is important, as not all participants identified their making primarily as resistance, even though it may function that way implicitly.

Epistemic / Hermeneutical Injustice: Based on the work of Miranda Fricker (2007), this describes the systemic silencing and invalidation of an individual's lived experience, particularly when those in power (e.g., medical institutions, the academy) dismiss their knowledge or lack the conceptual resources to understand their unflattened reality.

Ethics of the Veil: An original methodological practice developed in this research, referring to the material negotiation and physical 'veiling' of sensitive participant data (e.g., using lace or coded stitching). It protects

the participant's privacy and narrative sovereignty from the institutional gaze while still allowing their unflattened stories to exist within the academy.

'Flatlands': A metaphorical description of a restrictive society where multi-layered identities are reduced to simple one-dimensional labels and metrics, based on the novella by Abbott (1884/2008).

Flow-Thirdspace: An original concept defining a socio-spatial site of resistance which is produced when innate attention styles combine with the act of making to facilitate a return to being. It is based on a combination of Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow states and Soja's (1996) Thirdspace. Thirdspace was defined by Soja (1996) as part of a triad. In this thesis Firstspace relates to the physical, material reality of a space or object and Secondspace is the conceived, conceptual frameworks or authoritative labels imposed upon an individual or space.

'iron cage': A structural reality of modern life defined by rationalised bureaucracy and a focus on efficiency; it leaves no space for autonomous individuality (Weber, 1904–1905/2001).

Komorebi: A Japanese concept describing sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees. Used metaphorically in the conclusion of this thesis to represent fleeting moments of hope, unflattened existence, and the authentic 'being' found within the Flow-Thirdspace

Liquid Modernity: Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) concept describing the unstable, precarious, and constantly shifting nature of contemporary society. He describes how it is the environment that creates 'liquid fear' and fuels the pressures of the 'Burnout Society'.

McDonaldization: This is a sociological term created by George Ritzer (1993/2013) which applies core principles of fast-food restaurants like McDonald's to society. The approach is based on efficiency, predictability,

calculability, and control, designed for convenience which ultimately erodes autonomy.

McMindfulness: A critique coined by Ronald Purser (2019) describing the neoliberal co-option of mindfulness and well-being practices. It refers to interventions designed to make individuals quietly compliant and productive, ignoring the systemic causes of their burnout.

Monotropism: An attention style characteristic of many autistic individuals involving an intense, deep, and sustained focus on a single interest or task, which frequently overlaps with ADHD profiles. In this thesis, it is framed as a cognitive strength that facilitates access to the Flow-Thirdspace.

Narrative Sovereignty: The reclamation of power over one's own history. It is defined by a refusal to be a silent object of study and the right to decide how a story is told (King, 2003).

Neurodivergent: is used to describe common areas where differences manifest for example attention regulation, sensory processing, executive function, and social communication. It is primarily used to illustrate why navigating normative expectations within the 'Burnout Society' context can be particularly challenging, leading to the mental health issues discussed.

Neurodiversity Paradigm: describes the shift from medical/deficit models to a social/diversity model, whilst recognising neurological variations.

'One-Dimensional': Derived from Herbert Marcuse's (1964) critique of advanced industrial society, *One-Dimensional Man*, this concept describes a culture that suppresses critical thought, individuality, and opposition through the imposition of consumerism and technological rationality. Within this thesis, it is used to describe how complex, lived neurodivergent experiences are 'flattened' into simplistic medicalised labels or the performative productivity. It is the state of conformity that the multidimensional practice of craft actively resists.

The Great Refusal: A concept by Herbert Marcuse (1964/2013) describing the rejection of the oppressive, consumerist "false needs" imposed by capitalist society. Within this thesis, it is used to frame the slow, non-productive, and deeply personal act of crafting as a profound, political act of saying "no" to the demands of the 'Burnout Society'.

Saturated Self: Kenneth Gergen's (1991) term for an identity overwhelmed and fragmented by the relentless demands, roles, and expectations of postmodern life.

Textured Resistance: The act of using material practice to re-introduce depth and complexity into a flattened world; it is the refusal to be simplified.

Wander lines (lignes d'erre): Originating from the work of Fernand Deligny (1980/2015), this term describes the non-linear, embodied, and spatial pathways/movements of neurodivergent individuals. It is used metaphorically to represent the physical act of stitching and the resistance to rigid, normative trajectories.

Chapter 1

Show and Tell No. 1 *Forever Becoming*



Figure 1 *Forever Becoming* Quilt Block

My thesis starts with the first of nine biographical interludes woven through the theoretical aspects. These are each part of the PhD Quilt, a multi-layered textile piece that functions as both method and object. Central to this project is the *Forever Becoming* Quilt Block (Figure 1), which remains, like the identities it explores, a work in progress. The phrase

'forever becoming' directly echoes Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) notion that identity is no longer a stable endpoint but a continuous, unfinished process. Stitched at the top of the block is the foundational principle for this study: 'Instead of asking what's wrong, we need to ask what happened.' This statement represents a deliberate shift away from pathologising deficit models. It signals my commitment to understanding neurodivergent experience within a social and political context, framing adaptive strategies as signs of persistence, instead of dysfunction.

The crumbling brick wall is stitched with gold thread, with missing sections representational of our failing sense of community and shared responsibility. In our modern world, we are often told that our struggles are 'personal troubles', a term used by the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959). Mills (1959) argued that we must use our 'sociological imagination' to see that these are actually 'public issues' caused by how society is organised. The wall is covered in meaningless labels to show how diagnostic categories fail to capture the real depth of our lives. This also echoes Bauman's (2000) idea that in a 'liquid' world, these fixed categories and institutions can no longer provide the stability they once promised.

At the centre of the block is a fabric patch of United States Senator Bernie Sanders. I chose the iconic image of him from the 2021 presidential inauguration because his handmade mittens and practical coat represent a refusal to join the expensive branding and spectacle of elite politics. To me, Bernie symbolises the wisdom of resisting the pressures of Han's (2015a) 'achievement society.' Behind him are the silhouettes of people carrying banners in solidarity, which were inspired by the work of Ed Hall. Hall is a renowned UK artist who makes hand-sewn banners for the trade union and labour movements. I have replicated his style to show that the neurodivergent struggle is part of a larger fight for social justice. Finally, I

have included found and gifted objects. The eye pendant, which I found in the garden and the 'Domestic is not a female word' badge accompanied the *Never Enough Quilt Block* back from St Andrews University after being displayed with the other Domestic Dusters in an exhibition. These personal objects have meaning to me, and act as citations and records of the research process.

The quilt block reframes neurodivergent experience by moving away from the concept of brokenness to a response to broken systems. The mini-protest banners critique pressures individuals experience, resulting from a social world characterised by fluidity, uncertainty, and the expectation of constant self-renewal. We wonder who we are, whether we are important and if we do deserve better. This is my starting point for the thesis, a questioning of the essence of who we have become in a 'Burnout Society'.

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Beyond Boundaries: Narrative Threads of Crisis

A 'midlife crisis' often involves adventurous new hobbies or a dramatic image change. For me, this manifested as identity disintegration. In 2017, the process of diagnostic assessments and the introduction of Ritalin for ADHD acted as a chemical trigger, releasing suppressed memories of a violent rape I experienced in 1986 at the age of 15, only two months before the death of my grandmother. Subsequently, the sudden death of my father and the loss of a baby followed by four major operations and chemotherapy to repair damage to my uterus, left me with significant embodied trauma. The overwhelming grief for who I thought I once was, left me trapped in a repetitive cinematic loop of trauma where I was unable to eat, sleep, work, or leave my house. My only perceived relief was the visualisation of my own death as I felt crushed by the belief that these personal failings were mine alone. This disintegration was compounded by the devastating realisation that my own history was repeating itself with my daughter. The weight of her trauma, mirroring my own, made me feel like an utter disaster as a mother and an individual. I was consumed by a sense of inadequacy and self-blame, as I watched her navigate the same dark paths I had walked decades earlier.

I was unable to recognise any positive contributions I had made and felt that my perceived failures had directly contributed to her challenges. Trapped in this downward cycle, I underwent a series of psychiatric assessments. It felt like I was locked inside Weber's (1904-1905/2001) 'iron cage' of modern bureaucracy. Ritalin was the first line of treatment for ADHD so that became the treatment pathway I was put on. It was an excruciatingly painful and dehumanising experience which led to my

diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and my care under the mental health crisis team.

Taylor (2022) critiques mental health services, psychiatry and the medical model for reducing individual experiences of distress and difficulties, to a category in a statistical manual, a gendered perspective which obscures the story of what has happened behind observed behaviours. I was offered psychoeducation based on cognitive behaviour therapy. It was very quickly established that a different approach was going to be required. I urgently needed to find my own ways to cope so I could be the mother my daughter deserved. This did not involve filling out weekly questionnaires filled with what I felt were irrelevant and inane questions.

Following my decision to report the historic assault to the police, I was referred to rape crisis support services. In contrast to the medical assessments I had undergone, this support was affirming and supportive. It focused on my own perspective and provided the safety required for the police investigation to proceed. While the psychiatric system focused on what was wrong with me, the rape crisis service focused on what had happened to me. The acceptance and validation helped in my formulation of a 'Plan C'. I constructed this alternative through craftivism, which offered an essential refuge for the scrutiny of my experiences that followed.

I picked up my sketchbook to design a new Susie. By upcycling a faded old dress, I transformed the fabric into my original, embodied Flow-Thirdspace. The act of upcycling was a methodological practice which enabled me to explore identity reconstruction through the materials. To understand the role of craft as resistance, it is helpful to define the concept of Thirdspace and how this intersects with Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow states. The

theoretical term, Thirdspace, is derived from the work of Soja (1996) and describes a lived and experiential space that moves beyond simple binaries. In the context of my research, 'Firstspace' relates to the material and physical reality, such as the distress of my physical body and the actual fabric in my hands. 'Secondspace' refers to how the world is conceived or represented, such as the diagnostic labels and medical checklists used by professionals to define an individual. Thirdspace is the lived reality of both.

Flow states (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) are described as moments when one is totally absorbed in an activity to such an extent that external factors such as time and self-concept disappear. Flow provides the experiential conditions such as absorption, suspension of self-judgment, and temporal distortion which make Flow-Thirdspace accessible. It is an alternative; a creative space where the physical and theoretical worlds meet and are transformed through the act of making. It allows a person to exist outside of the medicalised categories of the system. I argue that craft facilitates access to flow states, which in turn lead to Flow-Thirdspace, providing a site where individuals can reject the labels given to them and instead stitch together their own authentic stories. In Flow-Thirdspace, it is possible to find the agency to reconstruct an identity that is no longer defined by what is 'wrong' with us, but by what we choose to create. In this sense, Flow-Thirdspace is a subtle but deliberate refusal of medicalised narratives.

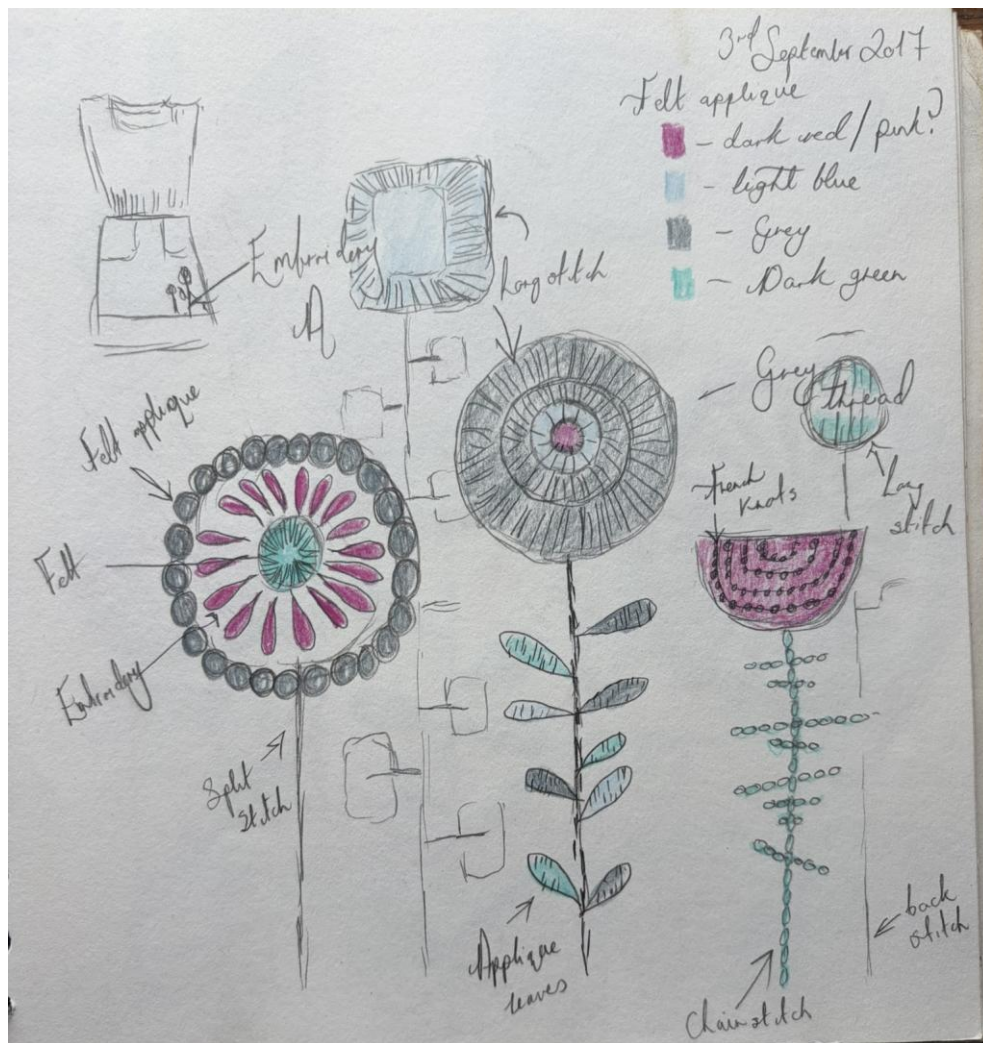


Figure 2 Dress No. 1 Sketch, 3 September 2017

Figure 2 illustrates how I used applique and various embroidery stitches to express the multiple layers and dimensions of my story. The flowers represent the seasons of change and my shifting identities. The slow stitching allowed for a space of reflection and resistance to rework my past traumas. This was the start of narrative sovereignty (King, 2003); the slow realisation that I own my history. Narrative sovereignty is the power to decide how a story is told and who gets to tell it. It is the refusal to be a silent object of medical or institutional study. I used the needle and thread to reclaim my story as textured, unique and my own.

1.1.2 Broader Context & The Academic Problem

My experiences of navigating crisis and under-resourced support services are echoed in the accounts of other late-diagnosed adults. Forney (2012) uses illustrations and shifting panel structures in a graphic novel format to externalise her internal experience and encourage her readers to feel her emotional turmoil. Similarly, Williams (2009) uses storytelling to express the disconnect between her inner world and the harsh reality of her environment. Like Williams, Quinn (2018) found alarming disparities between her lived experience and external systems. Her experiences of institutional failures to accommodate neurodivergent needs highlight the importance of recognising alternative modes of expression, exposing systemic issues with support.



Figure 3 Close up of embroidered Sawdust Heart Self-Portrait, Susie Bass, 2018

Now in 2026, I find myself preparing to submit my PhD thesis. I have focused on the gap in the literature relating to invalidation of lived experience and finding alternative methods for supporting neurodivergent individuals in distress. In those dark moments of 2017/2018, I found it difficult to see myself without the fracturing of my identities and so I stitched a self-portrait (Figure 3). Sawdust hearts were originally given to First World War Soldiers as a form of therapy for shellshock. My heart was stitched for the Sawdust Heart Project Exhibition by Untangled Threads to celebrate the centenary of Armistice Day. In the stitching I found a sense of purpose and meaning which gave me direction, a thread to hold on to. It is this hope that I wish to share with others.

1.2 Background: Beyond Binaries

In the context of my thesis, spatiality refers to how space influences theories, actions and interactions in physical dimensions, and also in the way in which space is itself socially constructed (Soja, 1996). Spatiality is significant here and in how our environment shapes and is shaped by behaviours, identities and social structures. Soja's (1996) Thirdspace is presented as a means for rethinking spatiality outside of rigid binaries by emphasising how material structures and conceptual frameworks interact. To influence contemporary society, this spatial lens aligns with Mills's (1959) emphasis on the interplay between biography, history, and social structures. Mills's (1959) sociological imagination builds on this multidimensional conceptualisation of the issue of lived experience by arguing that sociology requires more engagement and flexibility. Broader concerns about methodological approaches remain pertinent to date, especially the problem of abstracting findings from context and the limitations of empiricism. The continued dominance of statistical

techniques remains a point of tension when trying to ask significant theoretical questions about contemporary society. It is here in trying to unravel the complexities of why the research is relevant, that thinking beyond binaries and outside of boundaries has been critical for this project.

1.2.1 The Wider Context: Well-being, Creativity, and Societal Pressures

The Importance of Well-being

Mental health is one aspect of contemporary society that has gained recognition due to awareness campaigns increasing understanding and decreasing stigma associated with seeking support (Yzer & Siegel, 2025). However, there are pervasive issues in the promotion of mental well-being including: socioeconomic determinants, stigmatisation and discrimination, underdeveloped systems, workplace challenges, adverse life events and insufficient focus on prevention (WHO, 2021). Post Covid-19, the increase in people experiencing mental distress has placed significant strain on support services (Gagné, et al., 2022). This has been further complicated by social media, which offers both benefits, in facilitating social interaction and access to peer support networks but also risks of experiencing hostile interactions and increasing negative symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Naslund et al., 2020).

Mental well-being is essential for the function of society due to its link with economic productivity and social cohesion (Occhipinti et al., 2023). Mental health support can prevent crisis from escalating which can lead to increased risk for individuals and communities as well as further strain on healthcare systems (Riches et al., 2021). The psychological benefits of well-

being include emotional regulation, essential for navigating the ups and downs of everyday life, self-identity and personal growth (Park et al., 2023). Well-being enables interpersonal relationships to flourish and improves cognitive function which relates to concentration, problem solving and creativity (Kiernan et al., 2020).

Mental health is a core component of well-being which can fluctuate depending on life events including trauma, societal pressures, and biological predispositions. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022a) defines mental health as: 'a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community' (WHO, 2022a, para. 2). Furthermore, they describe well-being as 'a positive state experienced by individuals and societies'; they confirm that it is 'a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions' (WHO, 2022a, para. 3). In the context of this research subjective well-being encompasses eudaimonic concepts like meaning/purpose and psychological flourishing which can vary according to social, economic and environmental conditions. For some individuals, such as neurodivergent people, research has shown that well-being can be compromised (Pellicano, Dinsmore & Charman, 2014) and they have been reported as experiencing more complex and unique issues with mental health (Kroll et al., 2025).

Engaging Activities, Flow, and Well-being

Understanding how well-being can be actively enhanced is therefore essential. According to Positive Psychology, as outlined by Seligman & Csíkszentmihályi (2000), psychological well-being can be achieved through deep engagement in activities. The general principle that meaningful

engagement in activities contributes to well-being is not new. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx, 1844/1959), Marx explored the concept of 'alienation' (Entfremdung) as a result of capitalist structures. Marx described alienation as occurring when individuals are separated from the products of their labour and from the process of making itself. When work becomes a repetitive, externalised task, the individual loses their inherent drive for creative, self-directed activity. Although Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) concept of flow often focuses on internal psychological processes; I suggest that flow could be sociologically repositioned as a way of reclaiming the labour that has alienated the individual. Flow; characterised by deep concentration, a loss of self-consciousness, and a sense of control, is the opposite of the 'iron cage'. By engaging in activities like craft, which offer total absorption and a balance between challenge and skill, the individual can shift from feeling alienated to feeling connected. Rather than being a simple 'hobby,' this state of being provides a greater sense of competence and eudaimonic well-being (Tse, Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2021) by allowing the maker to enter a Flow-Thirdspace which is not controlled by the same rationalised demands of the 'Burnout Society'.

The Role of Creative Practices

Building on individual psychological benefits like flow, craft, particularly textile work, occupies a significant space at the intersection of embodied engagement and feminist discourse. As both a creative and often political act, it has shaped histories of resistance, care, and community. Throughout history, textile craft has enabled the unspoken or unspeakable to be translated into a tactile medium. Craft has a long-standing role in storytelling, documenting daily lives and connecting communities, serving as a non-verbal form of communication across cultures (Gauntlett, 2011). The textile work of women, indigenous people and other marginalised groups is

often used as a medium to resist dominant narratives (Buszek, 2011). A strong connection between textiles and feminist discourse developed alongside feminist perspectives (Skelly, 2017), rejecting stereotypical norms and assumptions. Popular culture and representations of females were ridiculed by the emerging re-evaluation of domesticity and women's work through books such as *The Subversive Stitch* (Parker, 1984).

Major reviews like the WHO's (2019a) Report confirm extensive global evidence for the positive impact of the arts with over 3000 studies supporting prevention of illness and promotion of health (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Subsequently The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport commissioned an evidence summary of the research highlighting its importance for social outcomes, youth development and the prevention of ill health (Fancourt et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Crafts Council found textile crafts to have the highest rates of participation in research into the arts (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017) and a survey of 4000 knitters, reported that 88% found knitting reduced their levels of stress (Corkhill et al., 2013). This provides strong evidence of how the arts can enhance well-being in adults and support social cohesion. More recently there was a significant increase in research into the promotion of well-being through craft during the Covid-19 Pandemic (Bradbury et al., 2021; Abdel Hadi et al., 2021; Kouhia, 2023). There is limited understanding of how craft, while potentially beneficial, is shaped by a complex contemporary environment. Despite growing interest in craft, research has yet to address neurodivergent crafters' meaning-making within a neoliberal context, especially how attentional profiles relate to flow states.

Contemporary Societal Pressures in a Burnout Society

Despite an increased understanding of the relevance of creativity during the pandemic, modern societal pressures are pervasive and there are increasing concerns over rising mental health issues (Baker & Kirk-Wade, 2024). Han's (2015a) concept of 'Burnout Society' characterised by achievement culture, hyper-productivity, and relentless pressure to perform provides a critical backdrop for challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals who are already navigating normative expectations and sensory difference (MacLennan, 2022; Raymaker et al., 2020). It is impossible to establish the boundary between normal everyday ups and downs and factors contributing to increased levels of distress. A key component to navigating the normative expectations inherent in achievement cultures and the 'Burnout Society' is the fundamental, yet often contested, concept of 'normality' itself.

What is Normal?



Figure 4 Personal sketch of how it feels trying to access support services in a mental health crisis, 2021.

I first learnt that ticking a box to state that you often felt suicidal was not considered normal, in 2017. It felt normal to me because that was how I had felt for as long as I can remember. It was a shock to learn that other people, generally, did not feel that way. The concept of normality has been extensively examined, beginning with Foucault's (1961/2003) influential archaeology of madness, which traces the evolution of cultural and societal perspectives from the 1600s to the late 19th century.

More recently, Chapman (2023) has supported a call for a paradigm shift, advocating for the recognition and valuation of neurodivergence as a distinct and meaningful difference. However, this shift is complicated by the counter-arguments presented by Timimi (2025), who warns that these labels can reinforce a medicalised 'trap' that pathologises human variation and obscures the systemic causes of distress. This tension exposes a fundamental dilemma for neurodivergent identity: if Chapman (2023) suggests we should 'celebrate the label' and Timimi (2025) cautions that 'the label is a trap,' my argument for craft as a Flow-Thirdspace emerges as a potential solution which allows both. It provides a site where an individual can exist beyond the binary of the label, neither reduced to a medical category nor flattened by the demands of neuro-normativity. In this space, the unflattened self can be constructed through material practice, allowing for a way of being defined by the maker's own creative agency rather than an externally imposed diagnostic set of criteria.

We need space outside these rigid categories. Chapman (2023) expressed concerns over how normality is constructed and enforced by capitalist societies and Davis (1995) argued that the social construct emerged alongside industrialisation. Each dispute the concept of normal. However, the number of people reporting mental health challenges and requesting support from services has increased dramatically (Baker & Kirk-Wade, 2024) providing evidence that there is clearly a significant issue that needs to be addressed.

Goffman (1961, 1963) exposed the mechanisms of 'institutionalisation' and 'stigma'; his work provides a direct critique of how society flattens emotional distress to maintain social control. His work reflects long-standing debates and criticisms regarding the cause of mental health challenges and the best options for support. The social construction of

normality is deeply embedded in institutional and everyday practices, therefore dictating who belongs and who is excluded. Those whose experiences remain unspoken or unheard, which is often the case for neurodivergent individuals, are subsequently rendered invisible. The pressure to perform normality, exacerbated by social media's perpetuation of achievement, leads to internalised erasure of authentic expression. Finding a meaningful outlet to visualise those experiences through creative and therapeutic activities like crafting, disrupts the alienating constraints and boundaries of normality by offering a Flow-Thirdspace as an opportunity for expression, resistance and meaning-making.

Understanding Neurodiversity: Language

Within an academic context, the use and significance of language is a key factor in accurately explaining concepts and the expression of complex ideas. Respectful terminology is fundamental to ethical research, and prioritizing individuals' chosen language remains key. However, the neurodiversity paradigm presents unresolved challenges, as does the commonly used term 'neurodivergent'. Equally unhelpful is the notion of a spectrum when imagining spatial alternatives like Flow-Thirdspace.

There are legitimate concerns over shifting too far away from the medical models and placing disablement solely within the social dimension. Therefore, the lived experience of the individual remains my priority, aside from political and ideological framing. As I currently stand, I have chosen to use the term 'neurodivergent' out of convenience for shared understanding rather than out of choice, but I do not believe that it best describes my own experience. My commitment is to research alternatives beyond binaries, a Plan C and the promotion of Flow-Thirdspace. Key terms and theoretical concepts used throughout this thesis are defined in the

Glossary located at the start of this thesis. These definitions provide the conceptual baseline for the 'unflattened' analysis that follows.

The Late-Diagnosed Experience

Later diagnosis has been linked to increased issues with mental health, specifically anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Stagg & Belcher, 2019) often occurring due to historic factors such as the diagnostic criteria's bias towards male presentations (Bargiela et al., 2016; Mandy & Lai, 2017; Hull, et al., 2017). Differences in symptomology are further complicated by 'compensatory camouflaging' (Lai et al., 2019), missed diagnosis or being misdiagnosed with other psychiatric conditions such as bipolar, depression or borderline personality disorder (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011). Understanding identity from a neurodivergent perspective therefore is an important post-diagnosis aspect. Often people need to reframe their lives and providing appropriate spaces that facilitate acceptance can support this (Botha & Frost, 2020). The chance to develop positive family and personal relationships were also found to be important to well-being (Milton & Sims, 2016).

Baig (2024) suggests there is a gap in research relating to what support is available and what is helpful, with few studies looking at the lived experiences of autistic individuals citing exhaustion related to trying to reconceptualise identity (Leedham et al., 2020). Many people simply disappear through the gaps in the current system and do not receive support until they reach crisis point. This is compounded by high rates of co-occurring conditions, particularly anxiety (Hollocks et al., 2019) ADHD (Katzman et al., 2017) and PTSD (Spinoven et al., 2014), factors which remain poorly understood. As a result, many individuals experience barriers to accessing support (Camm-Crosbie et al., 2019). The intersection between anxiety, autism and mental health has also been associated with

increased suicidality (Cassidy et al., 2018). Reflecting on the complex process of adjustment following my own diagnosis, craft facilitated direction for my scattered thoughts, providing me with a strategy for coping with anxiety and accessing flow states.

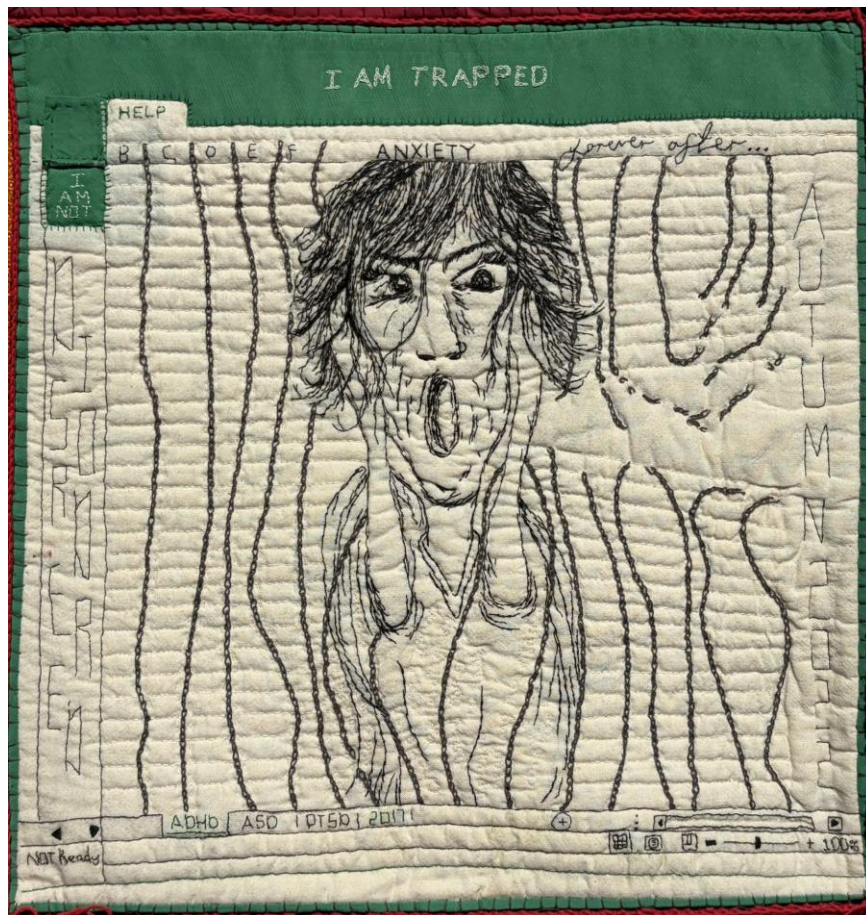


Figure 5 Excel Scream Quilt Block, Autumn 2022

Edvard Munch's *The Scream* inspired the *Excel Scream Quilt Block* (Figure 5) which is filled with personal meaning. Stitched into the title of my Excel spreadsheet are the words 'I AM TRAPPED' a concept that is reinforced by the chain stitch prison bars, reminiscent of Weber's (1904-1905/2001) 'iron cage'. Not only is this a metaphor for diagnostic entrapment, but it also has something to say about the institutional systems that claim to offer support while enforcing containment. 'ADHD, ASD, PTSD, 2017' represent the sheets as a timeline of labels and a chronology of identity formation

and medicalisation. 2017 was the turning point that led to this PhD. I stitched 'NOT Ready' in a small box as resistance against labelling and the perception of being 'DISORDERED'. There is also a flap with a question mark that can be lifted to reveal further dissent. Below the arms of the figure, in the body of the jacket, I have stitched the DSM references for the diagnoses and some unhelpful comments that were said about me at the time. Inspired by Agnes Ritcher's jacket, I have also included 'I fall headlong into disaster' as a tribute to her and anyone else who has been defined by psychiatric labels or the 'notes' section of an Excel spreadsheet.

Following my own diagnoses, I had gone through a really difficult time where I struggled to regulate my emotions or control my thoughts, I learnt to perform a silent socially acceptable internal scream. It helped me release the anger I felt, and this self-portrait captures that raw, embodied, and untranslatable feeling. This block is not quiet, it screams, but in a nice, well behaved, domesticated format. It is my historical distress immortalised in a quilt block. As with Parker's Quilt Block (Section 4.2), naming anger as a valid emotion is an act of resistance. We are allowed to be angry. Anger is not a mental illness; it is an expression of injustice. I am not just showing the stuff that gets likes and comments. I am sharing the side of life that is usually invisible due to stigma and fear of exclusion. My Excel Scream cannot be 'accidentally' deleted or unheard. Its silence represents a penetrating and haunting recognition of the impact of labelling. We live in a liquid world where nothing is solid; jobs are precarious and identities are in constant flux. *The Burnout Society* (Han, 2015a) demands that we are solid and productive. *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman, 2000) ensures that nothing stays still. We are caught in the middle. The 'Excel Scream' is the sound of that tension.

1.2.2 Crafting: Flow, Embodied Potential, and the Research Gap

Craft can be defined as a functional object or artefact that is conceived and brought into existence by the hands of humans (Zwilling, 2019). It involves more than the act of creation. The initial creative thought is combined with sustained concentration, mastery of embodied skills, and knowledge, each of which align with Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow states. It facilitates immersive engagement and balancing the challenge of creating an object from raw materials with skill development. The process and intrinsic reward are experienced whilst the creation takes shape. Holdsworth's (2021) crochet project exploring the social connections and therapeutic benefits provides evidence of the connection between flow states and craft. She linked the advantages to 'immersion in the activities or the possibility of flow' (Holdsworth, 2021:161).

The literature explicitly connecting crafting activities with their potential for achieving flow states is extensive. The nature of craft as an embodied experience inherently involves immersion through repetition, mindful attention and connection between thought and physical activity and the ongoing creative process of problem solving (Niedderer & Townsend, 2011). Craft incorporates the key components of flow identified by Csíkszentmihályi (2000) in that there are clear goals, immediate feedback and a sense of control in the creative process. It exists at the edge of the balance between challenge and skill where the maker refines their craft through the process of active engagement.

Attention is therefore a key component of craft, especially the concept of hyperfocus, where attention is exclusively devoted to one task. Craft allows for productive immersion in an activity that flow facilitates. The ability to exclude distractions and improve mental clarity was noted by Pöllänen

(2013), who extended this work to explore benefits for well-being, including a sense of purpose and stress reduction (Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2020). Craft could therefore provide respite from the overwhelming information and fragmentation of attention for neurodivergent adults.

Specific crafts like knitting exemplify therapeutic elements. Corkhill et al. (2013) presented the therapeutic benefits of knitting as a solitary or group-based activity, using the results of an online survey capturing the views of 3514 knitters. Similarly, Lampitt Adey (2018) noted the value of knitting in relation to flow states through deep involvement in the creative process: planning the project, selecting materials and mastering techniques. Knitting groups offer solitary occupation as well as development of crafting communities for which Potter (2017) provides historical significance in relation to positive effects and the impact of social inclusion on well-being. Crafts have been found to reflect personal expression and cultural traditions allowing social connections to be made both online and in real life (Mayne, 2020). Most recently, the benefits of knitting have been explored in relation to identity within the autistic community (Long, 2024), but there is a gap in understanding the well-being and narrative reconstructions of late-diagnosed neurodivergent crafters.

The opportunity for total absorption, escape from demands and distractions that fracture attention causing distress and anxiety, is relevant in a world that rarely allows individuals to achieve a state of flow. This concept has been associated with a monotropic interest, a theory of autistic attention which celebrates the ability to focus exclusively on one subject excluding all distractions (Murray, Lesser & Wenn, 2005). As discussed in section 1.1.1, craft helped me to exclude intrusive thoughts and feelings of inadequacy at times of emotional distress and in response to overwhelming environments. Supporting theories suggest that flow states can assist in providing coping mechanisms for dealing with sensory

overload and the associated elevated levels of stress and anxiety (McDonnell & Milton, 2014). Craft therefore could support well-being for this population through stress reduction and sensory regulation. Furthermore, it allows for narrative reconstruction through non-verbal expression and the building of self-efficacy from producing an artefact of meaning.

1.2.3 Rationale and personal context

A defining moment in my PhD journey occurred on a warm day in the middle of June 2018. It was less than a year after receiving a diagnosis for ADHD and autism the previous summer. I found myself sitting at a table in a corporate office whilst someone with significantly more power than I will ever have, stood in front of me reading a prepared statement. With each erosion of who I thought I was during this period, more of my world crumbled. On this occasion I directed my focus toward the gentle fluttering of a birch tree's leaves outside the window. I knew that an emotional response would be futile. I noticed her hands trembling as she read an unrecognisable account of who I was. I had been cast as an unreliable narrator of my own life. I concentrated on harmonising the rhythm of my breath with the gentle ripple of the light through the leaves to prevent the internal scream of injustice from exploding out of every pore.



Figure 6 How are you? Quilt Block, February 2022

My story is not linear so I must go back to the previous year to provide the context which led to the development of ‘visual mindfulness’ and grounding in nature as a coping strategy. In August 2017, I was referred to the mental health crisis team due to an acute reaction to Ritalin which resulted in a reality I felt unable to live with. Each day the team would visit me at home and ask the same unanswerable question: ‘how are you?’ The resulting quilt block (Figure 6) is inspired by a sketched diary entry dated 13th August 2017 where I planned my response. No matter who you are, there are always plenty of people who are more than happy to impose subjective judgements on who they think you should be. When it involves diagnostic labels, you encounter those who suddenly consider themselves experts, despite a lack of lived experience. “Don’t let it define you,” people tell you, although it is difficult to see how this is supposed to help. Like

others, in a similar position to me, it was challenges with my mental health that led me to seek support, a process that originally left my soul lost at sea. And once I had succumbed to depths of desperation required to access mental health services with conditions defined by the toils of emotional regulation and social communication, my engagement with support services was judged on my ability to answer the question: 'How are you?'

The path I followed to get to the PhD was precarious, not only because of my sometimes-insurmountable emotions but also due to the attitudes and assumptions prevalent in an 'achievement society' (Han, 2015a). My emotional turmoil (immortalised in the block as a 'can of trauma') and struggles were hidden; my psychological wounds were not visible. When I was first diagnosed with ADHD in 2017, I hoped for acceptance, but the horizon quickly filled with the dark clouds seen in Figure 6. These clouds represent the specific pressures I was navigating: 'Anxiety, Ableism, Injustice, Inequality, and Invalidation'. At the time, any doubt over where blame should fall was replaced by the certainty that I was at fault. My self-portrait reflects a small aspect of who I was at the start of my PhD. It represented the injustice I believed defined me, but in creating my PhD quilt, I created space to respond to those feelings. I discovered that there was far more complexity behind my emotional distress; my personal problems were public issues. *How are you? Quilt Block* captured the start of my PhD journey, where my intention was to use autoethnography to tell stories of the re-silenced. Faced with the expectation to 'bounce back', I reclaimed a quiet space for reflection and defied erasure.

I shifted away from a narrative of tragedy, to one of shape, colour, depth, tone, texture and stitch. I knew I was not a checklist of deficits, a problem to be solved, or a disease to be cured. I was aware of my differences but also to the striking similarities with other crafty folk, in the power we hold

to weave threads of beauty, identity and strength to influence change. In crafting this block, I was reminded of Cvetkovich's (2012), *Depression: A Public Feeling*. She frames depression as an affective response to personal distress, but also to the social and political structures that shape our emotional lives, especially under the weight of neoliberalism and diagnostic culture.

1.2.4 Introducing Craftivism: Resistance, Voice, and Identity

Craftivism developed as an anti-capitalist form of resistance against mass production and consumerism, moving gendered domestic activities such as knitting into public spaces (Rippin & Vachhani, 2018). It provides a means for directing attention towards meaningful political causes and away from feelings of resignation and powerlessness, through 'gentle protest' (Corbett, 2017). McGovern (2019) views craftivism as the transformation of feminine hobbies into a tool of resistance against mass-produced products such as fast fashion, with Baumgardner & Richards (2000: 283) describing knitting as an 'everyday act of defiance'. A key component of craftivism is the deliberate, slow, mindful nature of making which prioritises process and critical engagement over product. This is in stark contrast to capitalist consumer culture and Marx's (1884/1959) alienation. Furthermore, the embodied practice has been used to teach feminist praxis and critique of unsustainable practices (Boon & Pentney, 2017). A focus on sustainability and connecting with each part of the process of making is a way of seeing clothing and its production, differently. Alternative perspectives and creative thinking have been suggested as a strength of neurodivergent individuals; therefore, craftivism provides a tangible means of expression and act as a tool for identity assertion, illustrated by Foster's (2021) use of applied affirmations on T-shirts and activist fashion (Medhurst, 2023).

Craft includes a wide range of creative practices, while craftivism specifically connects craft to activism. However, the intention of the maker is critical here in making the distinction. Some people craft for personal expression, tradition, or its therapeutic nature rather than activism. Others may take part in craftivism to create conversation rather than as direct protest. I use both terms throughout my thesis to reflect this diversity, acknowledging that craft is not always political but can still be a powerful tool for change.

This overview demonstrates how navigating complex societal pressures to perform and conform within a 'Burnout Society' presents significant challenges to well-being, especially when compounded by the exclusionary nature of historical and socially constructed norms. For late-diagnosed neurodivergent individuals struggling with identity reconstruction and the consequences of masking, the inadequacy of current support systems can lead to isolation and desperation. The limitations of standard verbal frameworks (Secondspace) highlight the gaps and reinforce the importance of exploring alternative methods. By this, I mean that formal tools like diagnostic checklists and structured talking therapies rely on linear language to represent complex internal states. I defined these as Secondspace because they are conceptual models created by professionals to categorise experience, rather than the experience itself. These frameworks are limited because words alone often fail to capture the non-linear, sensory, and three-dimensional reality of being neurodivergent. This creates a gap where lived experience is flattened into a medical category, which justifies the need for a material method like crafting to show what cannot be easily said. The embodied sustainable practice of crafting, with its capacity for self-regulation and intersection with flow states, potentially provides a means of resistance and self-expression. This is the foundation of my argument for creating Flow-Thirdspace for this population. Therefore, understanding how engagement in creative activities functions as a site for meaning-making and identity work is valuable. It is a crucial

step in providing alternative pathways of support and acts as a justification for exploring the motivations of neurodivergent adults for crafting.

1.3 Narrowing the Focus

1.3.1 Connecting the Concepts & Identifying the Problem/Gap

The link between attention and flow is a foundational aspect of this thesis. The literature currently defines flow states as essentially based on sustained, focused attention which leads to the complete absorption in a meaningful activity (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Whilst there may be valuable similarities between neurodivergent attention patterns such as hyperfocus and the intense concentration of flow states, the lived-experience details of how attention profiles interact with craft remain unclear. The relevance of deep focus is related to its contrast with the fractured and fragmented attention, characteristic of contemporary perspectives on the 'attention economy' (Franck, 2019; Williams, 2018; Hari, 2022). Understanding whether characteristics such as hyperfocus and distractibility present unique barriers within this context, is essential for recognising the potential strengths of neurodivergent individuals and developing appropriate support based on this knowledge.

As already discussed, the link between flow and well-being in the general population is an established one, as evidenced by increased research on the role the arts play in improving health and well-being (Fancourt et al., 2020). Crafting provides the conditions for flow allowing for purpose, balance between skill and challenge whilst providing tangible results and feedback. It offers a multisensory experience due to the visual and tactile nature of materials which could be both engaging and grounding for

sensory-seeking neurodivergent individuals. Additionally, craftivism adds layers of purpose, agency and potential for community connection through a shared interest in crafting and political engagement in social movements.

The significance of craft/craftivism extends further than the potential to facilitate flow and self-regulation by holding personal significance which directly informs the context of this research. At a time of crisis, it was instrumental in rebuilding my life. The process involved unravelling my historical struggles and physical factors (Firstspace) that led to me seeking neurodivergent diagnoses (Secondspace) and the emotional distress caused by pathologisation and the discreditation of my identity. Flow-Thirdspace allowed me to reclaim a sense of control and self in a situation where I faced hermeneutic and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Through craftivism I was able to use my experiences to apply for a PhD and turn the situation into something that was meaningful for me, helping others reconstruct and stitch back together their narrative identities. The motivational factors and well-being outcomes for neurodivergent individuals engaging in craft and craftivism, particularly regarding identity expression, remain largely unexplored, especially using methods that centre their lived experiences and participatory practices. Embracing my insider perspective enables me to approach the topic with the sensitivity required to uncover hidden layers.

1.3.2 The research gap

While the links between flow and attention are increasingly recognised in broader contexts (Fancourt et al., 2020), a significant gap persists concerning the specific lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals engaging with craft. Primarily, understanding remains limited regarding how neurodivergent attentional profiles interact with flow states through

craft. In turn, the underlying motivations for crafting within this population and its role in identity work within the context of craftivism remain underexplored. Compounding these gaps, a methodological limitation exists, where traditional approaches can exclude experiences that are difficult to articulate. Therefore, this research is designed to directly investigate embodied flow states through neurodivergent engagement with craft. By addressing this gap, my thesis contributes the original spatial and sociological concept of 'Flow-Thirdspace'. This is presented as an alternative to individualised, medicalised notions of coping and reframes crafting as a critical, embodied praxis that mitigates experiences of burnout and supports autonomy.

1.4 Research Overview

1.4.1 Research Aim

My PhD research explores the intersection of neurodivergent attention profiles with flow states through craft. Using primarily qualitative and creative methods, including autoethnography and textile-based approaches, I seek to uncover how flow states contribute to therapeutic benefits for this group. The research explores the ways in which engagement in craft practice could enhance their overall well-being. By centring these experiences, I aim to investigate how the role of attention could inform more inclusive and affirming support practices.

To achieve this overarching goal, I have three specific aims:

Aim 1: To explore how the embodied experience of attention and flow in crafting influences the construction of identity.

Aim 2: To examine the role of craftivism, within Flow-Thirdspace, as a tool for resistance against societal and gendered pressures.

Aim 3: To identify how the attentional, embodied and temporal mechanisms of flow support well-being, emotional regulation, and coping in moments of distress.

1.4.2 Research Question

The central research question guiding this inquiry is:

How does the shared, collaborative process of crafting and quilting allow neurodivergent adults to tell their stories and survive the pressures of a 'Burnout Society'?

To address this central question, I investigate three sub-questions: RQ1 (Why do we make things? - Identity & Motivation), RQ2 (How does it feel to make? - Attention & Flow), and RQ3 (What changes when we craft? - Coping & Connection).

1.4.3 Scope of the Study

This study was based in the UK, but online participation made it possible to include international participants. The participants were predominately assigned female at birth and focused primarily on textile craft although other creative contributions were included in the data presented by participants. Snowball sampling through online crafting communities naturally led to this specific demographic and focus on textiles.

1.4.4 Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework takes the form of a web of interconnecting theories to mirror the multidimensional unflattened nature of lived experience. The problem is a socio-spatial issue framed through the societal lens of Han's (2015a) *The Burnout Society* where Marcuse's (1964) *One-Dimensional Man* has been flattened into the achievement subject. Abbott's (1884/2008) *Flatland* is used as a metaphor for the medical model and the social pressures to conform. As a potential solution, I use existing theories to construct my unique contribution. By synthesising Soja's (1996) spatial theory of Thirdspace (moving beyond the binaries of Firstspace and Secondspace) with Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) psychological concept of flow, I build the possibility of Flow-Thirdspace as a refuge. This extends Soja's (1996) Thirdspace by using flow states, accessible through craft praxis as an entry point to embodied experiences. Flow-Thirdspace is a lived experience space framed by neurodivergent and identity theory. It is a space that is defined by a layered subterranean 'Arachnean' network of Deligny's (1980/2015) 'wander lines' where monotropic attention is a valid mode of being rather than a deficit. The resulting theory offers time and space to counter the exhaustion theorised by Goffman's (1959) perspective on masking and the consequences of stigma (1963).

1.4.5 Significance and Contribution:

My research makes original contributions to knowledge across three areas: theoretical, methodological, and practical.

Theoretical Contribution: The Conceptualisation of Flow-Thirdspace

The most significant contribution of my thesis is the conceptualisation of 'Flow-Thirdspace.' I define this as a socio-spatial site produced through the immersive and embodied act of making. By synthesising Soja's spatial theory with Csíkszentmihályi's psychological concept of flow, I reframe 'optimal experience' as a sociological framework. I shift flow's psychological state into a spatial act of resistance against the 'Burnout Society' (Han, 2015a). Furthermore, by introducing the 'Birch Grove' model, I shift the theoretical focus from medicalised 'recovery' to a praxis of 'navigation' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2013), demonstrating how neurodivergent individuals construct meaning alongside distress.

Methodological Contribution: Material Negotiation and the 'Ethics of the Veil'

I position the PhD Quilt as an output and an active analytical instrument. By employing material coding and developing an original framework called the 'Ethics of the Veil,' I demonstrate how creative methods can support dynamic consent. Material coding is the use of specific fabrics that already carried emotional weight and meaning from my own experiences. This approach allows sensitive, trauma-informed stories to exist within the academy, protecting the participant's right to opacity without erasing their voice. It offers a new way to conduct participatory sense-making that safely subverts the institutional gaze.

My research provides alternative creative pathways for autonomy. I use the construction of narrative sovereignty (King, 2003) to show how neurodivergent adults navigate the 'lifequakes' of late diagnosis and crisis. By framing craft as a 'toolbox for living,' my findings offer insights relevant to broader well-being initiatives, such as social prescribing. More importantly, by centring neurodivergent narratives of competence and agency, my research contributes to a more humane societal understanding of neurodiversity as a valid way of being-in-the-world, not a deficit to be fixed.

1.5 Methodology Overview

The development of the methodological approach was a key component in how my research was conducted and its significance in the context of creative research methods. To investigate the research aims and questions, I chose to employ a qualitative methodology fundamentally grounded in creative, participatory, and autoethnographic principles. My approach was a way of building on more traditional research methods by recognising the complexities of lived experience, particularly for late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults navigating mental health challenges, to capture richer, more nuanced understandings often missed by purely verbal approaches (Kara, 2020).

The methodological framework used four primary creative components designed to reduce power imbalances and capture the non-verbal dimensions of participants' lives. Online Craft Workshops provided accessible, communal spaces for shared making and reflection. Themed

Craft Kits provided participants with material prompts to elicit responses regarding their identities and experiences. Individual contributions were then integrated into a collaborative PhD Quilt. This functioned as a collective textile narrative and a visual tool for analysis, reflecting the 'patchwork' nature of lived experience (Cole and Knowles, 2008). To complement this, I used autoethnographic stitching as a reflexive practice for documenting my research journey through the creation of material field notes. Together, these integrated practices allowed for the production of a Flow-Thirdspace, providing the material and conceptual foundation for an 'unflattened' exploration of neurodivergent identity.

This deliberate integration of diverse creative practices aimed to reduce power imbalances by positioning participants as experts in their own experience (Oakley, 2016). This included providing a sense of agency and control, offering multiple modes of engagement, and generating data that reflected the depth and often non-verbal dimensions of their use of craft. The inclusion of biographical interludes was also a methodological choice. It aligns with my aim of 'showing rather than telling' (Bass, 2023) by allowing the materiality of the quilt to speak alongside the text. This approach is justified by the need for methodological transparency. It acknowledges that in research concerning neurodivergence and trauma, my own positionality is a significant piece of data. These narrated interludes ensure that the 'ugly truths' (Ahmed, 2021) of our lives are not flattened into theoretical concepts but remain grounded in the material reality of the quilt.

Participants were late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults (primarily identifying with ADHD and/or Autism), aged over 18, with lived experience of mental health challenges, who actively engage in craft or craftivism. Recruitment followed convenience and snowball sampling approaches,

beginning in online crafting communities and extending through participants' own networks. The diverse dataset which is composed of interview transcripts, workshop discussions and reflections, text messages, photographs, physical creative outputs, and field notes, were analysed primarily using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), adapted to synthesise insights from verbal, visual, and material data. NVivo software was used for organisation.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout, guided by the principle of 'do no harm'. This involved obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant well-being, maintaining confidentiality, prioritising accessibility, and using a collaborative and participant-centred ethos. A key consideration was navigating complexities around anonymity which required ongoing reflective discussion with participants, supervisors and the University of Kent's ethics committee. Integral to navigating these ethical dimensions and was my established insider positionality as a late-diagnosed autistic ADHD researcher and experienced crafter. My positionality informed the research design from the start, fostering empathy, guiding the choice of creative methods, and potentially facilitating deeper rapport and trust with participants sharing similar lived experiences (Berger, 1972/2008). However, my insider status required consistent reflexive practice, which included detailed field notes, autoethnographic stitching (as mentioned above), and critical dialogue during supervision to reduce risk of bias. All of these safeguards were employed throughout to examine my assumptions, potential biases, emotional responses, and the complex dynamics of researching within my own community, ensuring methodological rigor alongside relational connection.

1.6 Positionality: Standing on the Edge



Figure 7 Standing on the edge of the platform, 1 August 2017

Figure 7 captures a defining moment in my personal and academic journey. It shows me, waiting on the platform for the train to take me to get my autism diagnosis, just two weeks after receiving one for ADHD. This moment represents a precipice; my whole life unravelled after that day. The destabilisation that followed was profound; however, craft provided a form of Flow-Thirdspace where I was able to stitch back meaning and reconstruct the shattered fragments of my past experiences. While my role as a specialist tutor in Further Education provided a visceral insider perspective on academic precarity, it also situated me within a specific socio-economic context. I acknowledge that my ability to engage in this research, and my own use of craft as a site of resistance, was supported by a degree of professional stability and access to a dedicated workspace. My 'temporal capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) allowed me the luxury of a 'Great

Refusal' (Marcuse, 1964/2013). I therefore recognise that for many neurodivergent individuals, the time and space required to inhabit a Flow-Thirdspace remains an inaccessible privilege.

During my PhD, this process continued as I interviewed participants and learnt more about my experience through hearing about theirs. Craft was the common thread knitting us together. It provided a boundary and a lifeboat, preventing many of us from drowning in uncertainty. Some of the people I interviewed, I knew before I started my PhD because they were part of my wider crafting network and had encouraged me to pursue this research. Others shared their stories with me because of my insider status as our shared practice fostered a connection that made meaningful exchange possible. The emotion work required to hold these stories was intense. As such, I recognise that, at times, I approached my doctoral journey through the very lens of compulsive productivity I set out to critique. I fell into the trap of believing that to justify craft as a valid subject for research, I had to perform an extraordinary level of academic labour. In my drive to acquire new skills and master the theoretical landscape, I became the embodiment of Han's (2015a) 'achievement-subject.' It was only through the physical collapse of my body and the subsequent fracturing of my foot (discussed in Chapter 5) that I was forced to confront the limits of this self-exploitation.

My insider position came with both benefits and limitations. While my interconnection within the crafting community allowed for richer, more nuanced engagement, it also required reflexivity. The familiarity of shared experiences risked reinforcing assumptions rather than critically analysing the data. At the same time, my positionality shaped the trust and openness in our conversations, enabling discussions that may not have been possible

if I had not shared my neurodivergent diagnoses. In navigating these complexities, this is how my PhD quilt developed as an unexpected Flow-Thirdspace, a place of reflection, discussion, and emotional grounding. It facilitated conversations with participants about the analytic process, offering a tactile and symbolic medium through which we could explore meaning than words alone cannot express. At times, the quilt became an extension of participant voice, capturing emotions and holding hidden stories. In one interview, a participant cried when presented with the *Power Quilt Block* (Figure 8), overwhelmed by how it articulated what they had been unable to express in words. This reaction confirmed the quilt's role as a reflective tool alongside its value as a medium of meaning-making, shaping both the analytic process and the emotional landscape of the research. Simultaneously, it provided me with a source of comfort, a material anchor to process the distressing narratives I encountered. The quilt, much like the research itself, held layers of engagement, negotiation, and emotion work, reflecting the dynamic interplay between researcher and participant in the co-construction of knowledge.

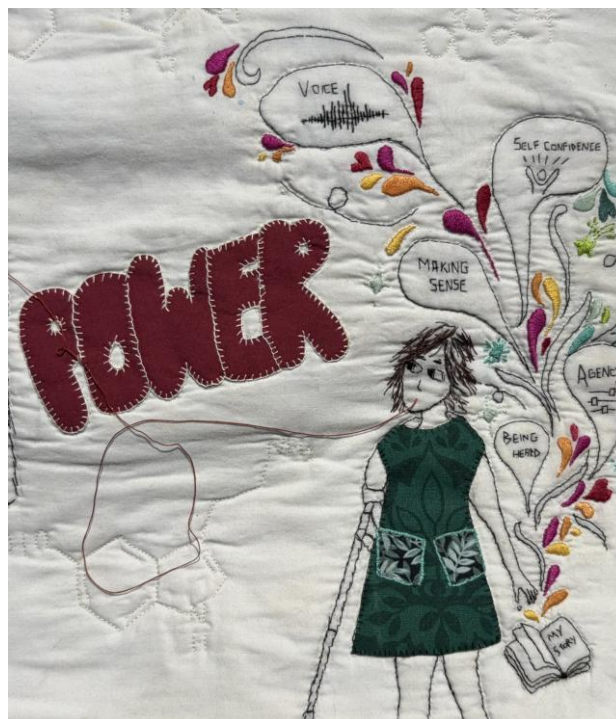


Figure 8 Power Quilt Block Detail

Figure 8 shows the detail of the unstitched mouth from the *Power Quilt Block* which like many of the other quilt blocks, invites interpretation by offering an unresolved narrative space where power, voice, and resistance interact. I chose to leave the mouth unfinished, allowing audiences to imagine stitching their own response, extending this moment of participatory meaning-making.

The influence of power structures in society and how it influences what constitutes 'Truth' is a fundamental element of my research approach. Figure 9, *The Truth Quilt Block* is my attempt to make visible how subjective the truth is and how it is so slowly evaporating and impossible to pin down. The truth is constantly shifting and moving further away from reality. This is a collaborative block where I asked people to pinpoint their truth in relation to an increasingly dissolving truth. This is represented by French knots that are getting further away from each other and therefore absolute objective truth. The stitched truth is reflecting the disappearance of truth. In a post-truth society, fake news is persuasive. The truth is not just liquid; it has evaporated and is now a gas. It is still there, but it cannot be held. Each knot holds a personal truth. Most people hovered over the blocked before inserting the push pin into the fabric as if trying to sense a truth that could not be proven. This idea links to Haraway's (1988) theory of how all knowledge is partial and rooted in where we stand. I am not here to tell one story. My work holds many truths, stitched by many hands, each one valid and each one influenced by power structures. My role is not to look for answers, because answers feel even more elusive than the truth. It is about capturing atmosphere and how truth feels when it is disappearing, but we can still grab a molecule.

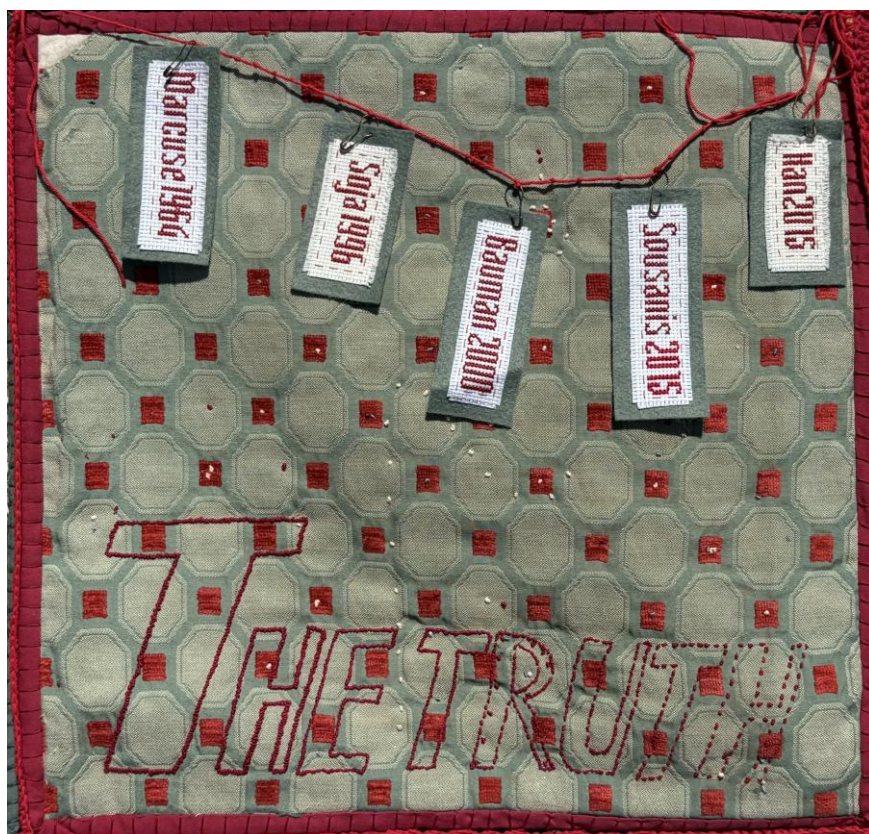


Figure 9 The Truth Quilt Block

1.7 Thesis Structure: Roadmap

My thesis is organised into eight chapters starting with this introductory chapter. There are nine Show and Tell ‘patches’ stitched between the chapters which constitute a patchwork ethnography (Günel, et al., 2020). I have structured these as narrated biographical interludes. These interludes are designed to act as bridges between the theoretical arguments of the formal chapters and the material reality of lived experience. By setting up the thesis in this way, I justify the weaving of auto/biographical narratives into the academic structure, ensuring the reader encounters the unflattened stories of the participants as an integral part of the research journey. These narrated biographical interludes contain participant reflections and visual documentation of the artefacts created in response

to the three core prompts: 'Who are you?', 'Mini Protest Banner' and 'You Should...'. Each Show and Tell patch connects to the chapter's focus, providing a visual example of the theoretical concepts discussed.

Show and Tell No. 1 Forever Becoming

Positioned as the opening interlude, my first patch is the *Forever Becoming Quilt Block*. This multi-layered piece illustrates the foundational principle of the study: 'Instead of asking what's wrong, we need to ask what happened.' By using Bauman's (2000) notion that identity is a continuous, unfinished process, the biographical interlude signals a deliberate move away from pathologising deficit models. Through material metaphors, such as a crumbling brick wall and silhouettes of solidarity, I capture the erosion of institutional stability and reframe neurodivergent experience as a response to broken systems. It is a theoretical and material anchor for the research, established within the context of Han's (2015) *The Burnout Society*.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 justifies the research by arguing that linear, word-based narratives fail to capture the complexity of identity disruptions. I introduce how Soja's (1996) concept of Thirdspace intersects with Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow states to explain how craft functions as a site of resistance against pathologising support structures and the medical model. This is followed by Show and Tell No. 2: *Solidarity*, which positions the start of research in the socio-political context of the 2022 UK industrial strikes. This interlude materialises the reality of burnout and academic precarity that forms the backdrop of my PhD journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework for this study by examining neurodiversity and identity within the context of a 'Burnout Society'. It also includes an intentional autoethnographic interjection. By placing my own lived experience in the middle of the theoretical landscape, I ground the abstract concepts of 'medicalisation' and 'stigma' in the material reality of how the PhD quilt first came into being. I synthesise Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) concept of flow with Soja's (1996) Thirdspace to argue that deep attentional states are essential mechanisms for resistance and self-integration. The chapter also traces the historical roots of craftivism as a tool for social change among marginalised groups. This is followed by Show and Tell No. 3: *Ceasefire*, which provides a visceral example of reactionary craftivism in response to ongoing global conflict.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 presents a qualitative methodology that combines unstructured interviews with creative, participatory methods. I argue that the PhD quilt is an active methodological tool for the collection and analysis of data from 22 participants. By grounding the research in social constructivism and narrative inquiry, I justify the use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to capture the unflattened complexity of lived experience. This leads to Show and Tell No. 4: *Don't Chase Answers*, which uses Horkheimer & Adorno's (1947/2002) critique of the culture industry to resist the 'McDonaldization' of identity.

Chapter 4: Who are you? - Identity and Motivation

Chapter 4 establishes the 'Flatlands' of modern life as a starting point for the analysis of how participants construct unflattened selves. Using the 'Identity Pizza' metaphor to explore responses to the prompt 'Who are you?', I argue that the motivation to craft is a radical act of resistance against societal pressures. The chapter ends with a case study of the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Show rejection to demonstrate our crafting community's ability to generate its own validation. This leads to Show and Tell No. 5: *The Flags are Drowning*, which moves identity from the individual to the collective and bridges the gap to the internal landscape focus of Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Attention, Flow, and Flow-Thirdspace

Chapter 5 examines how participant voices emerge through the sensory, non-verbal act of making. I apply this through an autoethnographic account of my own physical 'fracture' following a significant injury in 2024, arguing that making is a radical process of re-embodiment. This act provides a 'line of flight' from isolation and a means to stitch a coherent self back into existence. The chapter concludes with how craft allows for the re-integration of the 'saturated self' (Gergen, 1991) against the disembodied existence in the 'Flatlands.' This leads to Show and Tell No. 6: *Settle*, which establishes the 'Ethics of the Veil' as a primary methodological contribution to research ethics.

Chapter 6: The 'So What?': Unflattening Well-being and Coping

Chapter 6 answers the 'so what?' of my research by analysing how craft functions as a practical tool for survival. I argue that the act of making allows individuals to navigate Weber's (1904-1905/2001) 'iron cage' of modern life, where human meaning is often trapped by rigid rules and a focus on productivity and efficiency. This is evidenced through emotional regulation (Violet), purposeful making (Rana), and the building of self-esteem (Onyx). By framing craft as a cognitive scaffold (Ash) and an antidote to burnout (Indigo), I demonstrate how people mend social bonds (Aster) within a broken system. This leads to Show and Tell No. 7: *The Ivory Tower*, which visualises the metrics and institutional pressures of this 'iron cage' within academia.

Chapter 7: Transformation and Agency

Chapter 7 examines transformation as a self-directed process of narrative reconstruction. I move from a personal autoethnographic account of loss to a case study of collective solidarity, using the *Daisies, I Know Better Than You* and *Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Blocks* to show how individuals reclaim narrative sovereignty. The analysis proves that neurodivergent crafters can move past a silenced medical identity to become active authors of their own lives. This is followed by Show and Tell No. 8: *Goat Expectations*, which depicts the decision to leave the academic 'sausage factory' behind. This block represents the rejection of a system built on unhealthy overwork in favour of genuine connection and emotional repair.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In Chapter 8 I use the Japanese concept of *Komorebi* (sunlight filtering through the trees) to weave together the theories from Soja's (1996) *Thirdspace*, Han's (2015) *The Burnout Society*, with Heidegger's (1927) 'Dasein' into a cohesive 'Birch Grove' model. I argue that the true conclusion of this thesis is not written on the page but is materialised within the PhD Quilt itself. Show and Tell No. 9: *Let the Moss Grow Quilt Block* represents my final 'Great Refusal' (Marcuse, 1964/2013), a definitive rejection of the exhaustion of 'forever becoming' and relentless competition. It invites you, the reader, to step away from the pressures of consumption and achievement, revealing the crafted Flow-Thirdspace as a place where we can simply allow the moss to grow under our feet.

In this chapter I have established the context of the 'Burnout Society', with specific reference to the flattening effects of medicalised neurodivergent labels which can contribute to the distress experienced by late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults. I have introduced my central concept of the Flow-Thirdspace which is constructed through engagement with hands-on embodied activities like craft, providing a potential site of resistance and narrative sovereignty. Therefore, with the research questions, methodology overview, and positionality now established, the foundation for the thesis is set.

As discussed, the transitional interludes are an integral part of the thesis structure and provide stepping stones between the theoretical elements. Before stepping into the dense theoretical landscape of the Literature Review, the reader will first encounter Show and Tell No. 2 *Solidarity* which materialises the reality of burnout and academic precarity that forms the backdrop of the literature review. Then in Chapter 2 I critically navigate the

‘existing literature surrounding neurodiversity, mental health, and the historical use of craft as resistance.

Show and Tell No. 2. *Solidarity*



Figure 10 Solidarity Quilt Block, August 2022

As discussed in the introductory chapter, Show and Tell biographical interludes will appear between chapters throughout the thesis to showcase significant themes through quilt blocks from the PhD quilt. The second interlude is the *Solidarity Quilt Block* is relevant here because of the social and personal context it provides. Positioned between analyses of hope, purpose, and the themes of burnout in academia, it illustrates my motivation for returning to study by capturing a pivotal moment in the second year of my part-time PhD journey. It reflects the tension of balancing my professional role as a specialist tutor in Further Education with the intense theoretical and material demands of doctoral research. *Solidarity Quilt Block* shows the reality of conducting research in a 'hostile

environment' where current professional precarity meets the long-term 'wear and tear' of my own narrative. This block was produced during the UK's wave of rail and university strikes in August 2022 which was marked by widespread unrest and debates about precarity in academia. Solidarity is represented through the stitched phrases, my use of iconic material fragments (Piccadilly Line moquette, a snapped shoelace), and visual references (Mick Lynch with his arms folded). My intention was to create a dialogue between Marcuse's (1964/2013) *One-Dimensional Man*, Han's (2015) *The Burnout Society*, Bauman's (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Sousanis' (2015) *Unflattening* and Soja's (1996) *Thirdspace*, with additional references from Heidegger's (1927/1962) philosophical writings as a bridge to the more in-depth discussion in the literature review. The *Solidarity Quilt Block* visualises the theoretical landscape for Chapter 2, where I will critically examine the frameworks that contribute to the 'Burnout Society', and I outline the academic problems I seek to address.

The union activity awakened the ghosts of my father's death in 1993 and my own years of commuting on the London Underground whilst trying to find my place in society. Following the decimation of the British Aerospace Industry, he was awarded an honorary degree for his work in trade union negotiations and advocacy for workers' rights. Inspired by this history, I returned in search of a different way of defining mental health challenges and understanding people's historical and social context. One that challenges traditional hierarchical ways of producing knowledge and centres lived experience as an essential component of sociological research. The inclusion of the Piccadilly Line seat fabric reflects material encounters with the daily environment. It represents a piece of London made personal through my historical daily commutes.

Following the death of my father just months after completing my undergraduate studies in 1993, my career path was derailed as I struggled to manage the grief and loss. I lived at the northern end of the Piccadilly

Line and my sister towards the west. Our lives were lived out in the space between Arnos Grove and Northfields, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s until she moved to Australia in 2008. The design of the fabric evokes repetitive journeys, enforced proximity, and a shared, anonymous solidarity on the Tube. It captures the moments I encountered much older men than my dad had been and questioned why some lives are cut short. It was their grey hair more than anything else that brought a sting of tears to my eyes, as he would never grow old. The reuse of fabrics imbued with meaning and family connection are used throughout my PhD quilt, for example the worn bed sheet from *How are you? Quilt Block* (Section 1.1.1) and Show and Tell No.8 *Goat Expectations* was inherited from my sister when she immigrated and became threadbare in the sleepless nights that followed the ups and downs of my own struggles with physical and emotional distress.

The snapped trainer shoelace is stitched into the block to symbolise the strength and resistance I experienced when frayed to crisis point. Bukowski's (1972) poem *The Shoelace* argues that it is rarely a significant one-off catastrophe that drives us to the breaking point, but accumulations of 'small tragedies' like a broken shoelace. In my own narrative, the shoelace marks the literal and symbolic rupture at the end of a difficult period and the overuse of a coping strategy (running) which eventually led to a fracturing discussed in Section 5.3.2. Running was just one coping strategy I used to process stress and survive a landscape of uncertainty. However, that eventually and inevitably perished under the attempts to improve my capacity to cope rather than question the pressures imposed by the system.

Personal experiences of reaching breaking points informed the methodological 'showing rather than telling' in my research. My reflections on metaphor and coping, especially through craft and art, are stitched and woven into the PhD quilt. My approach is aligned with Wittgenstein's

(1921/1922) view that some profound aspects of human experience cannot be said but can only be shown. The act of sewing in an ordinary shoelace, refashions my frustrations and the wear and tear of life into an act of transformation, a way of coping with the neoliberal demands for constant, performative 'resilience.'

The folded arms of Mick Lynch (General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union), symbolises a stance of principled, stoic, defiance that is repeated in the PhD quilt for example in the image of Bernie Sanders, (U.S. Senator for Vermont) *Forever Becoming Quilt Block* (Figure 1), and the doctor in the *Power Quilt Block* (Figure 8). By incorporating Lynch's image, my *Solidarity Quilt Block* creates a dialogue between the resistance required of both activists and ordinary workers in reclamation of agency and persistence in collective struggle.

Theoretical Dialogues

I have included key theoretical ideas into the *Solidarity Quilt Block* as a visual introduction to the ideological patchwork that underpins my argument that the perceived, conceived and lived experiences of individuals intersect in the stories we tell about ourselves. The PhD Quilt is a way of illustrating the identities we claim as a way of making sense of who we are in the world.



Figure 11 Cross stitch references

The *Solidarity Quilt Block* represents a material dialogue between the internal pressures of the 'achievement society' and the external instability of 'liquid modernity.' In my role as a specialist tutor in Further Education and PhD candidate, I have witnessed this 'hyperactivity' first-hand, where individuals become both the agent and the target of their own exploitation. Marcuse (1964/2013) might argue that the system imposes a 'false need' for individualised resilience. In this context, we are pressured to use our creative 'flow' to 'fix' ourselves so that we can remain productive within a hostile environment. The 'fracturing' discussed in Chapter 5 marked the moment I could no longer cope with the system's demand for constant, performative endurance and instead turned to the quilt to find a way of commenting on this structural violence. While liquid modernity moves towards isolation and self-blame, the image of Mick Lynch offers the possibility for collective resistance. Just as my father negotiated for the dignity of the aerospace workers, this block suggests that we can find stability by creating shared public spaces where we can reclaim agency.

The Spatial Landscape: Unflattening the Thirdspace

I have taken inspiration from Nick Sousanis' (2015) graphic novel doctoral thesis, *Unflattening*, to argue that words are not enough to adequately represent the complexity of experience. He suggests that the flatness of perspective, imposed by rigid systems and the prioritisation of efficiency, diminishes our capacity to see further than singular viewpoints. The act of combining text, textile, image, and found objects in the *Solidarity* block is my attempt to unflattened perspectives. Sousanis (2015) takes a multidimensional approach to reason and perception. He invites the reader/maker to notice the 'strings' which he defines as the threads that bind, guide, and limit perception, to use this knowledge to create new possibilities. The strings and threads in my PhD quilt feature materials and symbols such as ordinary fabrics, shoelaces and iconic images intended to disrupt linear narrative and facilitate a multilayered reading.

Fundamental to the golden thread which is woven through both the quilt and my thesis is Soja's (1996) Thirdspace spatial theory. Thirdspace offers a framework for understanding the blocks as material objects in space representing a convergence of material, imagined, and lived worlds. For example, 'Firstspace' (the physicality of fabric, thread, object) and 'Secondspace' (the mental or conceptual framing such as strikes, slogans, protest), come together in a 'Thirdspace' (the lived, experiential blend of both). Layering spatiality resists flattening by building on the descriptive to create an imagined space where each element co-exists.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The interdisciplinary nature of this research, which includes storytelling, sociology of mental health, and craft as a form of resistance, has led to me taking a layered approach to the literature review. First, I will focus on the theoretical and conceptual framework, examining key concepts related to identity, mental health, and the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals. I will provide an overview of the importance of exploring the pressures on neurodivergent individuals in a society driven by performance, productivity and social comparison which exemplifies concepts from Han's (2015a) *The Burnout Society*. The historical influences of cultural, medical, and institutional perspectives of mental health and neurodivergence are discussed to explain the potential for marginalisation and internalised stigma. This includes historical and environmental influences on how identity is subsequently performed and negotiated (Goffman, 1963; Butler, 1990).

Just as Soja's (1996) theory of 'Thirdspace' argues that traditional approaches tend to sideline 'spatiality,' while overemphasising the importance of 'historicality and sociality', an entirely theoretical approach to my research also risks overlooking the crucial role of physical and imagined spaces in shaping the experiences of neurodivergent individuals and the practice of craftivism. It is within such spaces, as tangible craft-based structures, that people have the potential to find Flow-Thirdspaces as a means to navigate a 'Burnout Society' and direct how their experiences are told. The physical act of quilting (a sewing based craft which traditionally incorporates a patchwork of pre-used fabrics designed

to connect generations and communities) involves working with layers, including the comforting wadding (a thick layer of fibres) at the heart of the quilt. This layer is invisible but nonetheless symbolic of the protection that the quilt provides, sandwiched between the quilt top (the decorative patterned front) and backing to make a whole.

It is through this analogy that crafting can help in exploring the layers of an individual's history and sociality, and most importantly spatiality. Soja (1996) sought to reclaim the significance of spatiality and disrupt the binaries of dualism defined by divisions between physical space/ mental space or objective reality/ subjective perception. With this resistance in mind, I will explore how the real and imagined spaces created by craft, from the intimate personal practice to the public protest become integral to understanding how neurodivergent individuals find agency, create community, and drive social change through craftivism.

Space is often absent from the conceptualisations of identity; however, space is key to providing a sight for resistance. Spatiality is described by Soja (1996) as essential for the construction of all social theory, in that nothing can exist without a space to exist in. It is within the development of Soja's (1996) Thirdspace that I suggest that neurodivergent individuals find the resources to navigate relentless social expectations and reflect on the impacts of stigma, labelling and the pressures to conform. The bridge between the theoretical and the practical aspects of this review will be addressed in the second section which introduces the concept of flow as a connecting dimension.

Finally, through a historical and interdisciplinary lens, I argue that craftivism serves as a powerful tool for marginalised individuals, particularly those experiencing mental health challenges and neurodivergence, to resist oppressive societal narratives, construct

empowering identities, and reclaim agency over their own lived experiences. Building upon this argument, I will explore the historical context including craft as resistance, identity construction, and the underlying mechanisms of lived experience storytelling as they relate to mental health. Craft and storytelling have been used across cultures and generations to convey the lived experiences of marginalised or 'othered' groups who are frequently excluded from mainstream narratives in a multiplicity of ways.

2.1.1 Background

Contemporary society has been shaped by austerity, economic precarity and the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Han (2015a) claims that despite these external systemic factors, the focus is turned inwards on individuals to continuously push for self-optimisation and be increasingly productive, leading to a 'Burnout Society' which is characterised by anxiety and chronic stress. This is exacerbated by the increasing popularity of social media and 'influencer' culture, reinforcing performative identity and the commodification of everyday life (Yan, 2025). Neurodivergent individuals are potentially more likely to experience symptoms of burnout due to additional challenges with sensory overload (MacLennan, 2022), social interactions (Beck et al., 2024) and navigating normative expectations (Raymaker, 2020).

Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation remains relevant in this context, especially in the careful curation of online personas which often mask everyday struggles or commodify mental health. This is compounded by the exploitative nature of the attention economy which fragments focus and overstimulates individuals (Wu, 2017). Societal pressures could disproportionately affect neurodivergent individuals who are already

experiencing differences in information and sensory processing. These differences can broadly be described as neurodiversity by employing the social model of disability to reframe neurodivergence as a difference that becomes disabling due to societal barriers (Singer, 1999) and not a disorder requiring correction. My review of the literature aims to examine whether craftivism can offer an authentic and sustainable pathway to self-acceptance and empowerment for neurodivergent individuals whilst avoiding the pitfalls of self-optimisation and navigating systemic barriers.

2.1.2 Research Context

My motivation is to better understand the influence of gendered and societal pressures have on the lived experiences of neurodivergent people, specifically how individuals use craft as a form of resistance. Through my own engagement in craft, I have observed its potential to foster agency and selfhood through flow states (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). These led to this inquiry into the ways that embodied craft practices facilitate a Flow-Thirdspace. By investigating how these processes influence identity, agency, and well-being, I challenge the medicalised pathologisation of difference and seek to understand craft as layered existence. This involves investigating how specific aspects of making provide a 'toolbox for living' to support emotional regulation and enable a political awakening in response to systemic injustice.

2.1.3 Aim and Scope

By analysing the intersection between literature on identity theory, mental health, neurodivergent lived experience, labelling, flow states, storytelling and crafting, I present the potential craft/craftivism has to challenge

dominant narratives around mental health and societal expectations. I also justify researching the motivations of neurodivergent adults to engage in craft as an act of resistance against the 'Burnout Society'.

2.1.4 Structure of the Review

To explore these themes, my review is organised into three sections. First, the Contextual Landscape examines the intersection of neurodiversity, mental health, and the 'Burnout Society'. This establishes the social environment in which the participants are situated. Secondly, the Theoretical Bridge synthesises concepts of flow and spatiality to provide the framework for understanding craft as resistance. Finally, Crafting Resistance explores the historical and contemporary practices that inform the use of the PhD Quilt as a methodological tool. Finally, I identify of the research gap regarding the unflattened lives of neurodivergent crafters.

2.2 The Contextual Landscape: Burnout, Neurodiversity and Identity



Figure 12 Inadequate Personality Disorder Quilt Block, May 2022

Over the years the conceptualisation of autism has changed which has influenced how it has been classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 2013). Through engagement in the history of madness literature, the medicalisation of distress and use of medical labels, appear to have been assigned to women to oppress and silence them.

However, there are plenty of examples where stitching and craft have been used as a form of resistance. Lorina Bulwer's acerbic subversion of the traditional Victorian sampler, commented on her protestation at her

situation as an inmate of the Female Lunatic Ward of the Great Yarmouth Union Workhouse in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Agnes Richter, also confined to a Victorian German asylum, used her time to cover her institutional uniform jacket in a stitched autobiography.

In reading Hornstein's (2017) *Agnes' Jacket: A psychologist's search for the meanings of madness*, I came across the work of Elaine Bennett as part of a psychiatric survivor led initiative. Similar to Bulwer and Richter, Bennett used text on clothing to challenge psychiatric authority with her t-shirts functioning as stitched resistance against diagnostic erasure. Bennett had received several psychiatric diagnoses but did not feel that they helped her to understand her difficulties or improve her life, especially personality disorders. She designed t-shirts with categories of personality disorders printed across the front and criteria for each disorder printed on posters on the wall. With each revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), diagnostic categories have changed, some have been removed and some have been added. Bennett's subversion and reclaiming of labels inspired my *Inadequate Personality Disorder Quilt Block* (Figure 12). Inadequate personality disorder is characterised in the DSM II (1968) by weak and inefficient social, emotional, intellectual, or physical responses. This diagnosis was only featured in the DSM II. It was removed in 1980, and its vague criteria reflects a moralising tone that pathologises deviation from normative productivity and societal expectations, traits often shaped by gendered expectations.

The making of this block coincided with the 2022 defamation trial between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, which was live streamed on YouTube, making it one of the most publicised legal battles in recent history (Law & Crime Network, 2022). In the trial the diagnostic terms, borderline personality disorder and histrionic personality disorder were ascribed to Heard to discredit her accounts of abuse and post-traumatic stress. This

raised concerns about the weaponising of psychiatric disorders in court but also reflected gendered discrimination against women whose counternarratives questioned patriarchal power and stigmatising attitudes. The left-over fabric with a vibrant 60s print and the technique of reverse applique to indicate how no matter how we mask the challenges we face, someone else's perspective will always cut through with an agenda to discredit and belittle those differences. *Inadequate Personality Quilt Block* is a critique of a discarded diagnosis and invalidation of lived experiences.

With the increasing prevalence of mental distress discussed above, in this section I will provide a critical examination of the contextual landscape and identify relevant theoretical frameworks which I will use in the analysis of the data. Despite campaigns to raise awareness of the prevalence and impact of mental health alongside implementation of anti-discriminatory legislation like the Equality Act (2010), mental health remains stigmatised. Corrigan et al.'s (2012) 'double-edged sword' metaphor describes how individuals not only face the challenges of symptoms and adversity relating to their conditions but also contend with internalised stigma. Although increased understanding has been helpful in accessing support (Torales et al., 2023), structural inequalities perpetuated by late capitalism (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and the focus on productivity have contributed to a 'Burnout Society' (Han, 2015a). Moreover, the rise of the attention economy (Wu, 2017), the pervasive influence of social media and pressure to perform idealised identities online (Turkle, 2017), presents further challenges for neurodivergent individuals who are already struggling with the societal pressures to conform (Hennekam, et al., 2024).

2.2.1 Defining Neurodiversity and The Power of Diagnosis

This section opens with some key factors relating to terminology that will be relevant to this review. Mental health and neurodivergence have historically been influenced by cultural, medical and institutional perspectives (Foucault, 2003). Terms like 'madness' once used to justify exclusion and confinement, have been reclaimed as symbols of resistance against psychiatry (Scull, 2011). Goffman's (1963) work on the impact of stigma critically examines how society frames and treats people facing emotional distress, highlighting how mental health labels function as a form of social control. The neurodiversity framework redefines conditions like autism and ADHD as natural variations, a perspective which views societal barriers as the basis for the challenges individuals face. These barriers could be physical, such as overstimulating environments or attitudinal in the form of prejudice and stereotypes or systemic, for example inflexible workplace policies and emphasis on productivity. The neurodiversity movement (Singer, 1999; Botha et al, 2024), promotes acceptance over pathologisation, rejecting perspectives which look to 'cure' neurodivergence. However, critics highlight concerns, including prioritisation of certain narratives over others (Russell, 2021) and romanticising neurodivergence as well as limited engagement with intersectionality (Yergeau, 2018). These critiques reveal tensions between empowerment and medicalisation, a theme that is prevalent throughout discussions on mental health, gender, and institutional power.

It is not just terminology that is contentious in discussions about mental health, the theories and perspectives are also conflicting within disciplines, specifically neuroscience, pharmacology, epidemiology, social structures and media representations. Additionally, there are disagreements about the foundations and causes of mental distress (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Mental disorders are currently defined in the UK, by two diagnostic

manuals: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition DSM-V (APA, 2022) and International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision ICD-11 (WHO, 2019b). Both systems use terminology which situates issues within the individual, with implications of suffering, disease or disorder. There appears to be no consistency in how mental health is defined across disciplines, however theories are influenced by cultural norms, beliefs and values as well as the distribution of power, wealth and resources.

As already discussed, there has been a significant rise in mental health conditions with The World Health Organisation Report: *Transforming Mental Health for All*, stating that there are almost a billion people around the world who have a diagnosable condition (WHO, 2022b:5). Some believe that the rise in popularity of psychological and biological explanations for human experiences, the introduction of psychiatric medication and the influence of large pharmaceutical companies have skewed the focus towards deficits within the individual (Conrad, 1992; Francis, 2013; Davies, 2022). There are also those who question the function of diagnosis and emphasise the importance of understanding people in the context of their social settings supported by discourse on the sociology of mental health (Rose, 2018; Morrall, 2020). No matter how these concepts are defined, there is consensus on the impact they can have on the daily lives of those experiencing mental distress and the unique factors that need consideration for each individual. As neurodivergent conditions and mental health conditions can inevitably intersect, overlap and co-occur, understanding the complexities of the challenges experienced is essential.

Foucault (1961/2003) illustrated how power structures historically determined who was institutionalised, a dynamic still seen in modern psychiatric care through the bureaucratic diagnosis pathways and challenges experienced by individuals accessing support. The power to

define how an individual perceives themselves can easily be overshadowed by the need to access support. Subsequently a conflict ensues between being 'your authentic self' as opposed to evidencing the level of perceived helplessness required for support. Johnson et al.'s (2021) criticism of current mental health support service models, questions the rationale that for an individual to receive support, in the form of crisis intervention, they invariably need to be actively wanting to end their life. This is clearly an essential time for surveillance and prevention but without support in the gap between no support and desperation, there is very little opportunity to evaluate what may have got the individual to that point, the context of their situation and the environmental circumstances. Quinn (2018) explains that at the point of crisis, an individual no longer has the power to determine what help they need because they are unable to articulate or advocate for what is required.

Although it is essential for medical intervention to work within guidelines and have clear support pathways, this can result in people slipping through the gaps or being placed on extensive waiting lists (Aggett, 2022). Limited access to timely mental health support exacerbates distress, with long waiting lists forcing individuals to seek alternative coping strategies (Punton, et al., 2022). The crisis of waiting times has escalated significantly. According to NHS Digital (2026), in December 2025 there were 254,108 patients with an open referral for 'suspected autism' (para. 4), a doubling of the waiting list since 2022. Autistic adults report systemic barriers and feelings of isolation in navigating services (Brede et al., 2022). One further argument against framing difference through the lens of medical deficits is that the language and terminology can in themselves become disabling or result in people not believing that they will be taken seriously (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).



Figure 13 Power Quilt Block, illustrating the tension between medicalised and lived experience

2.2.2 Burnout Society and the Attention Economy

Wu (2017) believes that the attention economy has transformed human attention into a commodified resource, with social media platforms and content creators competing to maximise engagement. This competition has profound implications for mental health (Alter, 2017), incentivising sensationalised, anxiety-inducing content (Vosoughi et al., 2018) and fostering a culture of relentless social comparison (Tandon et al., 2024). Individuals are continuously exposed to idealised versions of others' lives,

leading to feelings of inadequacy, lower self-esteem, and increased anxiety (Vogel, et al., 2014; Jabeen et al., 2023).

For neurodivergent individuals, these pressures are especially acute. Many may already struggle with masking, characterised by the cognitive and emotional effort required to suppress natural behaviours and conform to societal expectations (Miller et al., 2021). The performance of socially constructed normality has additionally been linked to burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020), depression (Benatov et al., 2025), and suicidality (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Social media further complicates this by promoting performed authenticity and the expectation to present an acceptable version of oneself whilst also claiming to expose the 'real' you (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This paradox creates additional stress for neurodivergent individuals, who may feel pressure to curate a persona that aligns with social norms while suppressing traits that deviate from them. Moreover, the sensory and cognitive overload associated with digital platforms can be overwhelming (Irvine et al., 2024). Additional layers of contributing factors only add to the overwhelming amount of information individuals are exposed to. The fast-paced nature of social media, with its constant notifications and fragmented content, exacerbates difficulties in emotional regulation and increases anxiety (Akhmedova, 2024). Sensory overstimulation has been linked to meltdowns, shutdowns, and heightened distress (Bogdashina, 2016). Algorithms designed to maximise engagement can trap users in echo chambers that reinforce distressing narratives, increasing vulnerability to negative thought spirals (Ward et al., 2018).

Additionally, doomscrolling (the compulsive consumption of content) has been identified as particularly problematic for neurodivergent individuals, who may struggle to disengage from negative information (Rajeswari & Meenakshi, 2023). The risk of online exploitation is also heightened within

the neurodivergent community, as certain cognitive and social differences can make individuals more susceptible to manipulation and harmful interactions (Wijekoon et al., 2024). While social media can offer spaces for community-building and self-expression, it also amplifies many of the challenges neurodivergent individuals already face. This tangled web of the attention economy, identity performance, and the pressure to conform to social norms contributes to significant mental health issues, reinforcing the need for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of mental well-being.

In contemporary society, with its relentless demands on attention and constant stimulation, achieving a state of focused immersion is becoming increasingly difficult. Flow states, defined as moments when an individual's attention is spotlighted onto one activity, leading to complete absorption and the exclusion of distractions (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), are often presented as a desirable alternative to the fragmented attention and chronic stress of modern life. Csíkszentmihályi (1990) defines flow as a state of consciousness achieved when an individual's skills are optimally challenged by the task, but without inducing anxiety. It is commonly experienced through sustained effort and persistence, rather than instant gratification, requiring mastery and time. Engagement is therefore associated with intrinsic motivation, in contrast to the external validation and fleeting rewards offered by social media and the attention economy. Engaging in craft, can be seen as a way of reclaiming and directing one's own attention, resisting the constant bombardment of external stimuli.

Heidegger's *Mindfulness* (1938/2006) introduces the concept of 'being' as a state that is neither static nor fixed, but rather a dynamic process of existing outside of everyday distractions. Similarly, Han's (2023) call for deeper and more meaningful engagement as opposed to superficial

productivity aligns with both Heidegger's (1938/2006) concept of being fully present and Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) total immersion. All three perspectives make the connection between the quality and focus of attention and a deeper sense of understanding, authenticity and meaning. In essence, the ability to harness and maintain attention contributes to a meaningful life, whether through immersive activities (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), contemplation (Han, 2023) or existential awareness (Heidegger, 1938/2006). However, it is essential to acknowledge the concerns relating to these perspectives. Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party has led to suggestions that this undermines the credibility of his work due to a disconnect between his philosophical ideals and his political actions. The pursuit of flow can contribute to an increased sense of well-being (Lynch & Troy, 2021), but just as Heidegger's ideals are complicated by his real-world actions, flow has been corrupted by societal pressures and commodification (Purser, 2019).

The concept of spotlighting attention resonates with the experiences of many neurodivergent individuals, for whom similar states of intense focus, sometimes described as hyperfocus (Dwyer et al., 2024) or understood through theories like monotropism (Murray, Lesser & Lawson, 2005), can be both a source of strength and a potential challenge. However, it is important to acknowledge that neurodivergent individuals often navigate a complex landscape of additional attention challenges, including hypervigilance associated with trauma or threat (Richards et al., 2014), sensory processing sensitivity (Panagiotidi et al., 2018), and differences in executive function (Mareva et al., 2024). These challenges can be further compounded by emotional factors such as rejection sensitivity (Gao et al., 2017) and alexithymia (Kinnaird et al., 2019), making it even more difficult to regulate emotions and engage in activities that promote well-being. The constant pressure to succeed, as well as conform to perceived norms and

societal expectations can exacerbate these challenges, contributing to burnout and mental distress.

The pressures associated with the 'Burnout Society' can be particularly detrimental, potentially limiting access to experiences of flow. Han (2015a) outlines how drive for constant productivity, social comparison, and extrinsic motivation fostered by social validation directly competes with the intrinsic motivation associated with flow states. This competition is further intensified by the attention economy, in which Franck (2019) argues that attention has become a scarce and commodified resource, continually being captured and fragmented. Concerns over the deliberate hijacking of cognitive and emotional resources are mirrored by Williams (2018) and Hari (2022), resulting in the erosion of attention and what Hari (2022) describes as 'stolen focus'. These societal pressures could have a distinct influence on neurodivergent individuals, who may be particularly vulnerable to the demands of the attention economy and the pressures of the 'Burnout Society'.

2.2.3 Constructing Identity in a Flattened World

Understanding how personal experiences and wider social conditions shape neurodiversity and mental health provides the foundation for examining how identity is formed, especially in a society increasingly driven by performance and comparison. The relentless pressure to perform idealised versions of ourselves, as explored within the attention economy, inevitably leads to social comparison and feelings of inferiority, a concept central to Adlerian psychology. Adler (1956) believed that social interest, the importance of social belonging and acceptance is closely linked to emotional well-being. Therefore, suggesting that feelings of inferiority underlie the pursuit of perfection in response to perceived shortcomings, is

particularly relevant in the context of neurodivergence. For neurodivergent individuals, navigating social spaces shaped by what Bourdieu (1986) describes as 'social capital', especially when intensified by comparison, can create feelings of inadequacy and pressure to mask to be accepted. They may face barriers in building and accessing social capital due to social stigma, communication differences, or difficulties navigating social norms. A lack of social capital can exacerbate feelings of isolation and inferiority, further fuelling the pursuit of perfection as a means of gaining social acceptance and access to resources. Therefore, the following section will consider some of the complexities of identity formation, and how the act of social comparison interacts with lived experiences and contributes to the ongoing challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals.

Some of the key theories of identity suggest that it is constructed and performed in social contexts (Lawler, 2015). Developing the understanding of how social labels can influence the perception of who we are, Becker's (1963) work on deviance, Goffman's (1959) theories on the performance of identity and Goffman's (1963) influence of stigma, all contribute to an argument that we act out different versions of ourselves dependent on the social dynamics of the situation. Further developments in the form of narrative identity build on these foundations. Ricœur (1984) suggests that these performed versions of self, which are informed by social expectations and influenced by societal roles and labels, actively shape our understanding of ourselves. In addition, Bruner (1991) highlights how narratives continuously change in response to social interactions and life experiences. It is through this process of performing and reperforming different roles within social relationships that a sense of self is developed, a process described as 'performativity' by Butler (1990). Therefore, building on Goffman (1959), Butler (1990) suggests that we are not necessarily who we 'are' but more accurately we become defined by what we 'do'. These negotiated actions, behaviours and performance, which according to Butler

(1990), conceptualise identity as a dynamic and ever-evolving process, echo Heidegger's (1927/1962) earlier concept of 'being' as inherently situated in our changing responses to environment and relationships. Just as Heidegger (1927/1962) described 'being' as a dynamic process of existing, Butler's (1990) view of identity, highlights the fluid and performative nature of selfhood.

Subsequently, several prominent academics have contributed to the belief that identities are increasingly constructed and performed online, leading to new forms of self-expression and community building (Castells, 1996; Gauntlett, 2008; Turkle, 2011; Bauman, 2000). Furthermore, Kaplan (2024) argues for the reconceptualisation of identity performance theory considering the rising influence of social media, with Stahl & Literat (2023) providing evidence of how young people are actively shaping collective identities through social media. This supports Han's (2015a) concern that technology creates new pressures for everyone to conform to certain ideals and to curate a consistent online persona. Han's (2015a) concept of a 'society of performance' explains how individuals are driven to constantly optimise and present an idealised self. For neurodivergent individuals, these processes can be complicated by the complexities of digital spaces, presenting unique challenges to self-acceptance and understanding who they are (Cage et al., 2018).

If identity is shaped through the social world, then individuals must navigate the expectations and norms around them to understand who they are. Therefore, I now argue that while social theories of identity offer valuable insights into the development of the self, the pervasive pressures of social expectations and the performance of normative identities in contemporary society can present additional challenges. This pressure to conform to both societal norms and the idealised self could subsequently

overshadow marked differences and the unique personal expression of neurodivergent individuals. It could also explain anxieties about being misunderstood, misrepresented, rejected, ridiculed, and excluded. Tensions between social expectations and individuality therefore could present intensified risks and vulnerabilities for neurodivergent people.

Mead (1934/2015) understood the development of the self through social interactions and the subsequent internalisation of attitudes and perspectives of others. This provides a foundation for analysing how anxieties about the perceptions of others and a desire to conform to social expectations to avoid ostracisation influences the performance of identities (Goffman 1959). The performative element presents additional challenges for neurodivergent people, as they may need to suppress differences in communication styles or behaviours stereotypically associated with neurodivergence, to fit in. Additionally neurodivergent people are defined by labels which pathologise these nuanced differences in social communication, such as averted eye gaze, bluntness in tone and reported difficulties interpreting social cues (Kanfischer, et al., 2017). Subsequently, the efforts involved in managing these differences require engagement with Hochschild's (1983) framework. It is necessary to explicitly distinguish between emotion work and emotional labour. Emotion work refers to the private, unpaid management of feelings to navigate social expectations and personal relationships (such as masking within family dynamics). In contrast, emotional labour refers to the commercialised, public management of feelings performed for a wage within employment. The significance of this distinction within the 'Burnout Society' is that the boundary between the two has entirely collapsed; neurodivergent individuals face the exhausting demand to perform emotional labour at work, while simultaneously performing relentless emotion work in their private lives simply to survive in a world based on social norms. Hochschild's (1983) research found that this emotional

labour can result in alienation from one's feelings, inauthenticity, and ultimately, emotional exhaustion and burnout. Therefore, in understanding the identity and mental health of neurodivergent individuals, it is essential to consider the complex interplay of personal narratives, social identities, and societal labels.

Ricœur (1984) and Bruner (1991) both offered a framework for understanding how narratives, in the form of stories we tell about ourselves, help to make meaning out of experiences. Ricœur's (1984) narrative identity emphasises the integration of past experiences in forming a coherent self. This is essential for understanding the potential disruptions in the narratives of neurodivergence, where individuals may feel different or defined as 'not normal'. Building on this, Bruner (1991) adds a cognitive layer by reflecting how the responses of others shape who we believe we are, what we consider to be the preferred behaviours and how deviations from these expectations could be internalised as 'doing everything wrong' (S. Bass, journal entry, 2017). In addition, individuals also define themselves in relation to social groups. Here any differences and potential conflicting expectations dependent on their roles are further obstacles requiring negotiation. Tajfel & Turner (1979) proposed that social identities are shaped by the dynamics of intergroup relations, the desire for positive social identity and ultimately the innate need to be accepted further complicating the concept of negotiating expectations.

Becker's (1963) exploration of the consequences of labels like deviance, Goffman's (1959) focus on performing social roles as well as his work on stigma (1963) further elaborate on how societal labels can lead to social exclusion and negative self-perception. Part of the navigation of self involves choosing which dominant social expectations to align with and adapting how we behave within social interactions. Goffman (1959)

described this process as impression management. Alternatively, living outside of these perceptions of 'normal' as described by Becker (1963) provides opportunities for challenging these 'norms.' However, this concept of categorising certain social behaviours as more normative than others, risks creating artificial boundaries and further excluding those who fall outside of these definitions (Butler, 1990). One example of Butler's (1990) critiques is positioning heterosexuality as a 'natural' standard, which creates power imbalances where other sexual orientations are marginalised. Similarly, although the term 'neurodivergent' can be a valuable tool for self-identification and advocacy, the implied construction of a 'neurotypical' counterpart could inadvertently reinforce exclusion and pathologise differences.

The previous sections have demonstrated how, for neurodivergent individuals, identity construction can be a fraught and complex process, especially in the modern 'panopticon' of the digital age, which both enables and limits identity construction (Logan, 2020). Neurodivergent people may face challenges related to self-acceptance (Cage et al., 2018), disclosure (Santuzzi & Keating, 2022), and navigating societal expectations (Hull et al., 2017). This is further complicated by demands for emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) which involves the management of emotional expressions to fit in and conform to societal expectations. Goffman (1959) argued that the performances of self are fundamental to all social interaction, claiming that the 'mask' does not necessarily conceal an authentic self underneath. However, there are contradictory theories that neurodivergent individuals face the additional pressures of masking neurodivergent traits (Lai et al., 2017). Huang et al. (2023) suggest that many autistic adults expressed feelings that they have spent their 'whole lives striving to be normal'. Whereas Mylett (2022) found that adults with ADHD have expressed similar sentiments of wishing to 'just be myself'. Therefore, to build on these theoretical frameworks and understand the

relevance of my research, it is essential to understand how individuals with lived experiences navigate these pressures in the construction of their own narrative of self.

2.2.4 Attention and Identity

For neurodivergent individuals, the possibility of experiencing hyperfocus and flow states could be particularly affirming, in providing a sense of competence and mastery that may be lacking in other areas of their lives. This is supported by Rapaport et al., (2024) who suggest that hyperfocus, defined by the ability to harness and direct attention for extended periods of time, can be considered a strength for neurodivergent individuals. Furthermore, the ability to direct intense focus and concentration towards a chosen activity often resulting in a tangible accomplishment or a deepened understanding, can challenge negative self-perceptions and foster a stronger sense of self-worth as conceptualised by Heasman et al. (2024) as autistic flow theory. Both Rapaport et al., (2024) and Heasman et al., (2024) offer an alternative perspective by viewing neurological differences as natural variations rather than deficits. This can be especially important for individuals who have internalised negative messages about their abilities or who have struggled to meet societal expectations. Whilst individuals with ADHD may experience challenges in procrastination (Salotto, 2021) and some autistic individuals describe inertia (Buckle et al., 2021), the experience of flow states could offer a pathway towards deep engagement and skill mastery. Therefore, interest-based engagement appears to have an important role to play in understanding neurodivergent attention styles.

Although to date there is limited research in this area, Sedgwick et al., (2019) summarised hyperfocus as a positive form of cognitive ability which supports previous research findings that direction of attention is viewed as one of the positive aspects by those with an ADHD diagnosis (Holthe & Langvik, 2017; Lesch, 2018). A shift towards researching the positive dimensions of neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD (Schippers et al., 2022; Nordby, et al., 2023) has subsequently led to increased understanding of the link between attention differences and self-esteem. For instance, Nordby et al., (2023) found that positive aspects of ADHD such as hyperfocus, creativity and resilience, can contribute to a better understanding and acceptance of self. Furthermore, the ability to sustain attention on tasks and achieve meaningful goals can help neurodivergent individuals re-write negative narratives about their abilities and redefine their identities based on their strengths and accomplishments.

Interest-based engagement, in activities aligned with values and passions, is central to theories describing neurodivergent attention, particularly monotropism. Murray et al., (2005) initially conceptualised atypicalities in attention allocation through monotropism. Lawson (2025), a key figure in further developing monotropism, understands this focused attention as a cognitive strength of autistic people. An interest-based approach has been explored in education by (Wood, 2019) and within the wider academic discourse. For example, Botha et al., (2022) discuss the relevance of shared interest in relation to social connection and community and how this enables neurodivergent individuals to cultivate a stronger sense of self and a more authentic identity. More specifically related to craft, a deep alignment with personal values has been explored by Sheehan (2024) and Long (2024) who both evidenced its role in creating a connection with the self and fostering intrinsic motivation. This contrasts with the anxiety and inauthenticity associated with masking (Cook et al., 2024) and superficial

engagement and fractured attention often found on social media platforms discussed by Hayes (2025).

The distinction between deep and shallow engagement is particularly relevant in the context of societal expectations and the attention economy, where social media platforms often prioritise fleeting rewards and external validation over genuine connection and meaningful accomplishment. Engagement with meaningful activities contrasts with the fast-paced and stressful achievement society described by Han (2015a), where the pressure to constantly presents success leads to superficial engagement and alienation from core values. Pursuing interests and engaging with them on a deep level helps develop a sense of identity aligned with personal values. By resisting the lure of superficial engagement and cultivating the ability to focus deeply on activities that align with their values, neurodivergent individuals could potentially reclaim agency over their attention and construct identities based on their authentic selves, rather than conforming to external pressures or societal expectations. However, it is also important to acknowledge that hyperfocus can present challenges if it becomes rigid or interferes with other important daily activities and responsibilities which is currently criterion for diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Furthermore, the 'wellness' and 'happiness' industries can exploit flow states, encouraging compliance at the cost of critical thinking (Purser, 2019) and potentially leading to self-exploitation and burnout (Han, 2015a). Therefore, it is necessary to approach the pursuit of flow with a critical awareness of its potential downsides and to prioritise a balanced and holistic approach to well-being.

These sociological and medical frameworks illustrate how the neurodivergent experience is often one of being pulled apart, fractured by the demands of performance and flattened by the weight of the

achievement society. However, if the dominant narrative is one of disintegration, the counter-narrative must be one of re-integration. Having established the forces that tear at the fabric of identity, the following section turns to the theoretical tools available for mending it. I propose that the intersection of flow states and Thirdspace provides the necessary conditions for stitching a coherent self back together.



Before the next section, I pause to offer a personal reflection. While it is unconventional to include autoethnographic narrative within a literature

review, this choice is a deliberate employment of Sousanis' (2015) unflattering. To discuss the theory of stigma (Goffman, 1963) and biopower (Foucault, 1990) without acknowledging one of the 'lifequakes' (Feiler, 2020) that prompted this research would be to replicate the detached academic distance I am trying to resist. Therefore, the following section outlines how the PhD quilt was made, providing the grounding needed for the theoretical analysis that follows. I was unable to imagine what the PhD was going to be like before I started, and I had not come across any of the social media accounts warning of the downside of studying.

I entered the programme as a naive idealistic optimist. I did not realise how many of my own demons I was going to have to face in the first year. There were many times that I sat at my desk crying into my stitches not believing I would be able to do it. I did not even know what autoethnography was when I started in May 2021. Nothing is ever what it seems and that is most certainly true for academia.

Just like I was completely unaware of what it was going to be like, being a parent. I do not believe the advice "get plenty of rest" and me sitting on the settee for a few days at 9 months pregnant was adequate preparation. The whole idea for the PhD quilt and this block about mothering (Figure 14) started with a school shirt. My son presented it to me on a dark November evening in 2021 and said, "There was a small hole and it just sort of ripped." I looked at the shirt, the jargon laden article I was trying to understand and my life and stitched the word "inadequate" on to the fabric. It felt like a fair assessment of how I felt about my relational identity as a mother.

As I persevered with the reading, it became apparent that there have been many feminist activists and academics whose work had enabled me to return to education and for that I am grateful. I learnt the use of craft has

been devalued throughout history and dismissed as 'women's work'. I saw myself reflected in how the voices of women and people who fall outside of patriarchal societal norms have been silenced. Throughout my research I have encountered the stories of people who have experienced discrimination and oppression. It is with a very heavy heart and a large degree of sadness, that I am not surprised by this, and I know that I am not alone in feeling this way. I know this because these stitched words in the *Mothering Quilt Block* are not only mine.

I discovered that the concept of blame has many associations with mothering. This blame seems to come from all directions, from society, our children, and especially ourselves. I had internalised the idea that if women are not holding down a job, presenting an 'Insta-worthy' home, cutting carrots into stars and putting our children above all else, we are failing. It was a relief to discover that it was not my failings but the unrealistic expectations causing my anxieties. However, I soon discovered that should I ever dare to suggest that there are inequalities or try to speak out about gendered violence, even if I am referring to my own experiences, invariably the situation is manipulated to place me at fault. Sometimes the only option is to stitch up the narrative and reclaim power.

Arlie Hochschild's (2003) *Second Shift*, was enlightening. Finally, I had a term to represent the invisible work of having to remember all of those additional details of family life. 'Mental Load' captured my spiralling thoughts about the washing needs hanging, there is no toothpaste, the school trip and the constant picking up after everyone else. It helped to contextualise the unpaid labour that overwhelmed me. In reviewing the mothering literature to provide context for a feminist approach to my research, it became apparent to me why I had struggled significantly since I became a mother. The expectations of society and the pressure of intensive mothering culture were too much for me. For years I had thought that I was inadequate because I was unable to cope with this 'mental load'.

I did not question the second shift I was working in the home, bringing up children and trying to keep on top of everything.

I suffered emotional turmoil, believing that my lack of togetherness was an inherent personality fault instead of a social construct. Thanks to Rich's (1976) critique of matrophobia which describes the fear or rejection of becoming like one's mother, I shed the idea that this shadow belonged to me alone. I now understand it as a social construct shaped by patriarchal narratives that devalue maternal labour and emotional complexity. The block shown in Figure 14 was the first one I finished in January 2022. It represents my processing and understanding my starting point in viewing my personal issues as societal problems and I can tell you now, that changed my life. In reflecting on this block, once again, Cvetkovich's (2012) framing of depression as a public feeling, helped me to see that my emotional turmoil was not a private failing, but a response to the cultural scripts of intensive mothering and academic precarity.

2.3 Theoretical Bridge: From Fracture to Flow

The potential for craft activities to facilitate flow states was explored by Lampitt Adey (2018), who evidenced key elements outlined by Csíkszentmihályi (1990), notably focused attention and choosing engaging yet manageable activity. The repetitive and rhythmic nature of knitting was highlighted as a predictable and engaging sensory activity that promotes focused attention (Hektner & Csíkszentmihályi, 1996). The capacity for deep, focused engagement resonates with neurodivergent attentional styles such as monotropism (Murray et al., 2005) or hyperfocus. Craft provides an opportunity for channelling intense concentration whilst the

tangible nature of the work offers a sense of accomplishment and mastery which contributes to self-esteem (Lampitt Adey, 2018).

The role of craft in facilitating sensory regulation and predictability is significant because it provides a structured environment which optimises intrinsic motivation. Self-directed engagement offers an alternative to the fragmented attention and external validation associated with the attention economy (Wu, 2017). This is an essential element of my argument that Flow-Thirdspace represents a lived, experiential dimension distinct from the conceived spaces of societal expectation. Within the flow of crafting, individuals find respite and resistance against the performance pressures of the 'Burnout Society'. While the concepts of flow and Thirdspace offer a theoretical framework for dissent, they remain abstract states until they are enacted through specific practices. The neurodivergent experience, often defined by sensory difference and embodied struggle, requires a concrete way to access these states. Therefore, I now turn to craft as the material anchor for my theoretical bridge. The following section examines the historical and practical evolution of textile work, demonstrating how the rhythmic, tactile nature of making transforms the psychological potential of flow into a physical reality.

2.4 Crafting Resistance: History and Practice

The following sections provide examples of how craftivism has the potential to offer materials, tools, and means for collective action and social change. In addition, creative methods in social research can provide the necessary platform, a Flow-Thirdspace for lived experience narratives to resist neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation for production and consumption. It is therefore through the lens of Soja's (1996) spatial

dimension of Thirdspace that I will explore the potential of craft to offer a transformative space for neurodivergent people to renegotiate ever shifting identity, challenge power structures and contribute to social change.

Although Greer (2014) is widely cited in the literature to have coined the term craftivism by combining the concepts of craft with ideologies of activism, the idea of using textiles as a form of rebellion existed prior to this point and will be explored further in section 2.4.3. Additionally, there are varied interpretations of how craftivism relates to the diverse creative practices associated with it. Fitzpatrick (2018) describes how motivations for craftivism can be linked to anger and a sense of injustice, a sentiment shared by Downey in her 2017 needlework made for the Women's March, however, Corbett (2017) advocates for a gentle approach to engage change makers in conversations.

2.4.1 Historical Context

To understand craft as a tool for resistance, it is valuable to provide an overview of the gendered aspects of craft. Historically, craft in the form of textile work has involved distinct divisions in class (Hunter, 2019). A key distinction lies in how textiles were viewed as labour for some and as leisure for others thus demonstrating how the social construction of craft is defined by socio-economic status as well as gendered expectations. Tensions between necessity, subversion and the construction of femininity through making are key to the positioning of craft in the literature as both women's work and a weapon of resistance (Parker 1984).

In addition to craft's role in labour and domestic life, it has been used in collective resistance and activism. Throughout history, as visual

communication, banners demonstrated membership to an organisation, allegiance to a specific cause, or protests against inequality (Rall & Costello, 2010). The tradition of using textiles for activism extends further than trade union banners into social justice movements, although this aspect is often excluded from mainstream historical documentation of events (Flood & Grindon, 2014). One example, The Suffrage Movement, is synonymous with protest banners which illustrates the employment of craft in collective protest (Sawer, 2007). Building on this argument, Tickner (1987) suggests that banners were more than decorative objects, viewing them as carefully crafted tools of persuasion. Tickner (1987) claims they were designed to communicate the Suffragettes' demands for political equality, challenge the prevailing societal norms, disrupt dominant narratives, mobilise public support, and pressure the government to grant women the right to vote.

While suffrage banners remain a well-documented example, how craft as resistance has also been used by subsequent feminist and labour movements is less well known. Margaret Harrison's 1977 *Homeworkers*, political mixed media piece, clearly demonstrates the positioning of women as low paid and unpaid workers within the home. The gendering of textile work reflects broader domestic activities involving tasks that are labour-intensive, poorly paid / unpaid, mostly carried out by those who lack employment rights. This demonstrates how socio-economic and cultural factors perpetuate gender disparities in both the home and textile industry (Berg et al., 2021), reinforcing the views that textile work and the workers are of less value.

Projects like the *Nike Blanket Petition* (Mazza, 2008) address the ongoing struggle against working conditions in a globalised economy (Rall & Costello, 2010). Gender and pay inequalities have formed the basis for protest and feminist commentary throughout history and across the world (Steingrimsdottir, 2020). Traditionally situated as a domestic activity in

western society, textile craft has co-existed alongside feminist spaces, connecting women through shared experiences (Parker & Pollock, 2020). The power crafts, such as knitting, have in bringing women together for mutual support and storytelling will be discussed later in this chapter.

More recently Marr's *Domestic Dusters Project* (Marr, 2024) encourages women to stitch their gendered stories of domesticity on a duster. I made *Never Enough Quilt Block* (Figure 15) whilst reflecting on parallels between the gendered expectations in my everyday life and the achievement society (Han 2015a). It has been exhibited alongside Marr's ever-growing collection and illustrates the tensions between gendered expectations, the social roles I navigate and invisibility of my struggles.



Figure 15 *Never Enough, Always Too Much Quilt Block*, March 2025

Craft has been used as a form of resistance against confinement and oppression, including but not limited to gendered expectations. Quilts inspired by the displacement of indigenous peoples are captured in the work of Susan Hudson, an activist from the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. She uses quilting to document the impact white supremacy has had on indigenous communities reclaiming narratives and challenging colonial erasure. Her practice has similarities with those challenging dominant perspectives of mental health and social norms in Section 2.2 where perception of what considered normal and what is not, results in exclusion and othering. Trans-generational cumulative trauma has been found to have significant impacts on the mental health of other displaced indigenous peoples (Heart & Chase, 2016). However, the identity, space and voice of marginalised communities is the foundation of Hudson work. *The Indigenous Children Want to Know Why Quilt* made by Hudson in 2019, incorporates stitched questions about why they had been treated in such a barbaric way. Ethical implications of representing the experiences of marginalised people when created by members of that community mitigates the risks of cultural appropriation as it is the voice of the oppressed which is being represented.

Similarly Swedish textile artist, Britta Marakatt-Labba uses thread to preserve and share the stories of the Sami people. Her roots are in protest pieces, with her most renowned work being *Garjjet* (1981). Marakatt-Labba's work reclaiming representations of Sami values of culture, history, environment and spirituality is portrayed in *Gurjjet* (1981), which translates as *The Crows*. The crows are depicted metamorphosing into policemen and then activists fighting the illegal taking of Sami land to build power plants and dams. Both Hudson and Marakatt-Labba demonstrate how cultural identity can be layered into textile work resulting in meaningful critiques of state violence and political injustice.

The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013) and the impact of injustice on mental health are illustrated by the secretive stitching of political activist, Ruth First who was arrested in 1963 under South Africa's 90 Day Detention Act. During her 107 days in solitary confinement, she stitched a record of the days, as they passed, under the collar of her dressing gown, hidden from surveillance. The psychological effects of her social isolation had a significant impact on her mental health and sense of identity. Eventually she lost hope and attempted to take her own life. It was not enough to stitch resistance of the erosion of identity and autonomy. However, the significance of her use of needlework as a 'defiant voice' is acknowledged by Hunter (2019) with reference to First's autobiographical documentation of lived experience of sensory deprivation and the role sewing played in maintaining a sense of self. This is recorded in '117 Days' (First, 1965). The legacy of her stitched calendar remains an inspiration amongst craftivists long after her assassination in 1982. Each of these examples demonstrates the power of craft in represented lived experience narratives and the importance of identity and cultural space. These perspectives are included to demonstrate the significance for broader marginalised communities; however, exploration is limited by the scope of this review.

2.4.2 Defining Craft and Craftivism

As established in the introduction, craft and craftivism are pertinent methods for storytelling, resistance and challenging dominant narratives. In this section I will build on previously discussed historical practices and position craft as an embodiment of care by analysing examples of craft practice. The concept of care is key in resisting the pressures of a 'Burnout Society' as it encompasses care for the materials, the environment, the process, the self, for community and for the social issues that dominate our

contemporary landscape. Craft does not exist without the individuals who create it and present it as craft. These textile objects contribute to our knowledge of social history, for example The Bayeux Tapestry (whose creation and curation reflects historical power dynamics, including colonial influences, a theme explored in section 2.4.3). The influence of institutional power structures is evident in the hierarchical divide between arts and crafts. This is addressed by Alison Aye's *RA Bastard Shites Quilt* (Aye, 2024), illustrating years of rejection from the Royal Academy Summer Show. The gendered art/craft hierarchy originating from institutions like the Royal Academy (Butchart, 2018), is a theme explored further via the PhD quilt and the case study in Section 4.5.

Craftivism has been described as a response to dominant power structures in society (Literat & Markus, 2020) with its powerful combination of craft and activism. Although the term was coined by Betsy Greer in 2003 (Greer, 2014) and her definition provides a useful starting point, a review of the historical context of craftivism and the use of textiles to bring about social or political change indicates that it has existed for many years. Greer's (2014) craftivism was born out of anti-war reaction against violence and the war on terror. Other projects such as *Knitting for Peace* (Christiansen, 2011) and *Project Linus UK* (n.d.) demonstrate the capacity for collective social action and embodied care. This extends to diverse forms of artistic protest (Sanders-Bustle, 2022), from individual acts resisting corporate commodification (Fountain, 2023) to large-scale initiatives like the *Welcome Blanket Project* (Press, 2018), which address social and emotional needs asylum seekers and immigrants with an emphasis on slow, mindful connection (Gauntlett, 2011).

However, these projects are not without critique. Concerns regarding the predominance of white, middle-class perspectives (Black, 2017) necessitate a broader consideration of who crafts and why. Political textile artist Aram

Han Sifuentes challenges the framing of craft as traditionally women's work, highlighting how these perspectives further exclude and marginalise some groups (Paitz, 2022). Her work represents the lives of the many immigrants working in the garment industry; an industry that mostly employs people from marginalised groups as discussed in section 2.4.2. Sifuentes' *Protest Banner Lending Library* (Paitz, 2022) reclaims craft as a voice for the disenfranchised. Similarly, collective actions like the *Monument Quilt* organised by FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture. (n.d.) was used to showcase craft's capacity to disrupt narratives of shame around sexual violence and build solidarity (McGovern, 2019), as seen with the 'Me Too' movement (Jaffe, 2018).

Finally, craft has the capacity to offer a pause from the modern impersonal hustle culture by creating space for reflection and contemplation due to its resemblance to mindfulness (Matthews, 2016), further strengthening benefits for mental well-being (Corkhill et al., 2013). This section has highlighted how diverse textile practices are reclaimed for political and social dissent (Parker, 1984), intersecting with mental health and identity. While research on the specific benefits for neurodivergent individuals is emerging (Long, 2024; Sheehan, 2024; Porter, 2025), the mindful, reflective and inherently tactile nature of craft may have more to offer by being particularly appealing to those seeking to cope with the sensory overload and social pressures of modern life. These qualities could offer opportunities for both sensory seeking and sensory calming, depending on the craft and individual, as well as providing structure, predictability and focus as an alternative to social demands. Fundamentally, there is evidence to demonstrate the potential for these creative activities to offer a Flow-Thirdspace, the central theory for my thesis, where self-acceptance and self-expression can flourish, particularly in how it offers space and time away from social pressures.

2.4.3 Craft as Narrative and Agency

Analysis of the literature offers examples of individuals using craft to provide agency, challenge, and re-negotiate stigmatising labels and personal narratives. Developing the themes of gendered inequalities and the medicalisation of distress discussed previously, in the following section I provide examples of how textile craft has been used as a form of resistance and self-expression. By creating a Flow-Thirdspace through material practice, these historical and contemporary makers demonstrate how craft functions as a site for narrative reconstruction and sovereignty, offering a way for individuals to move from being an object of medical discourse to an active subject of their own story.

Lorina Bulwer, born in 1883, is my first example of how craft was used to resist institutional power. She was committed to the Great Yarmouth Workhouse by her brother, reinforcing the hierarchical dominance of the Victorian patriarchy, at age 55 following the death of her mother. Externally defined as experiencing mental illness and classified as a 'lunatic', this labelling simultaneously silenced her and denied her the conceptual resources to make sense of or articulate her own experience, an example of Fricker's (2007) hermeneutical injustice. She subsequently spent the remainder of her life stitching her outrage and protest into long embroidered letters, demonstrating her articulate counter-narrative (King & Jones, 2020). These irate stitched letters (Figure 16) illustrate her resistance against confinement and exclusion from society, offering an example of how she used creative expression to reclaim her voice and challenge how narratives are imposed upon individuals who are marginalised and silenced. The use of capital letters, synonymous with shouting in text, frequently underlined and cramped words, creates a dense narrative which embodies her rage and reclaims her identity. The intersections between gender and psychological discourse in the Victorian

era (Shuttleworth, 1996) and Chesler's (1972/2018) analysis of the dominant narratives surrounding women and mental health, help to contextualise the impact of interpreting distress as mental illness.

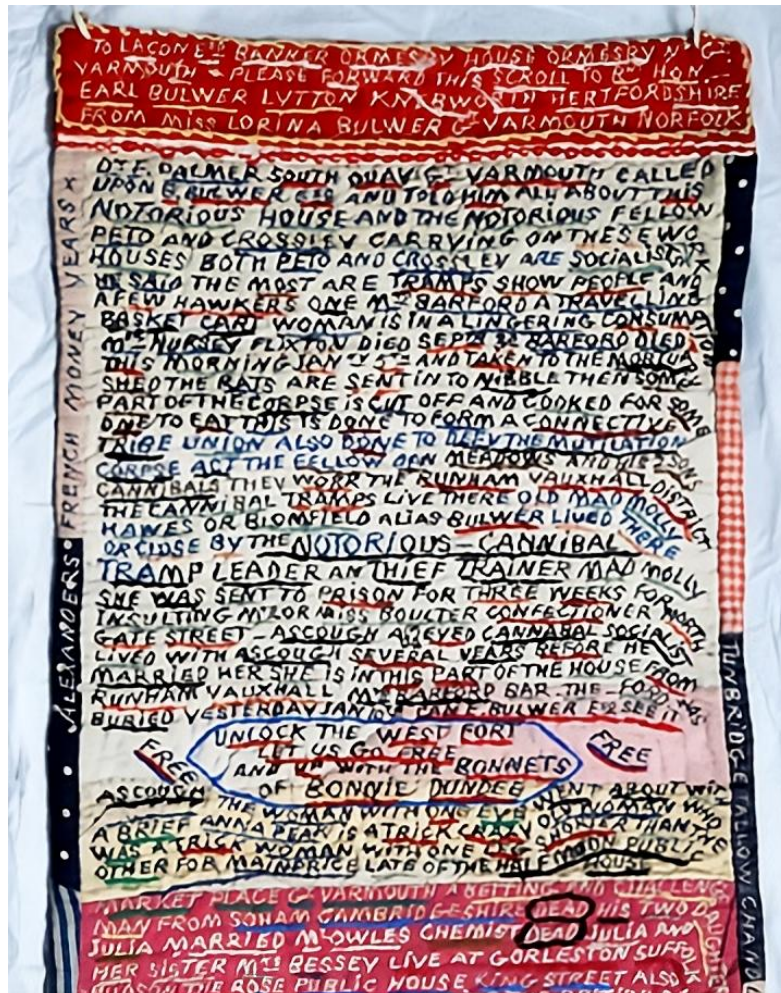


Figure 16 Section of Lorina Bulwer's Work, Photo taken by author, People's History Museum

February 2023

By decoding her work as one of protest, it demonstrates the use of craft as a coping mechanism in addition to offering a means for expressing her contempt at being defined by the label of mental illness. The use of craft to process the complex web of emotions associated with gendered identity: the loss of her role as a daughter caring for her mother, the objectification and dehumanisation of the female body in traumatic experiences such as

sexual assault (a thread running through her letters), allowed her to take control of her own narrative. Her act of self-expression can be seen as a form of 'self-making,' a term used by Rose (1998) to describe the ways in which individuals actively construct their identities in response to social and psychological forces. Bulwer, in effect, was using craft to rewrite her own story and resist the pathologising narratives imposed upon her.

Sharing similarities in personal outrage at psychiatric intervention, Agnes Richter created a jacket from her linen inpatient uniform, over which she embroidered a form of autobiography (Röske, 2014). Although the text is written in Deutsche Schrift and mostly impossible to decipher, Hornstein (2017) considers Agnes's jacket to be a valuable lived experienced account of mental illness. Analysis of the jacket has shown there to be thousands of needle insertions, reminiscent of the irate stitching employed by Bulwer, the sentiment of Downey's (2017) work and *The Space Between Quilt Block* (Section 8.4) suggesting the value of emotional expression and a desire for autonomy and control over personal narratives (Hornstein, 2017). Richter's agency is evident in the meticulous, defiant recording of her thoughts despite her circumstances, stitched into the legacy of her jacket. The numerous stitches and fragmented text provide a tangible record of her distress, refusal to be erased and attempts to assert her identity, long after her death.

Moving from these historical examples of craft as a response to institutional confinement, contemporary artist Tracey Emin has used textiles to explore personal narratives in the public sphere. Challenging the more traditional religious concept of confession, her *Confessions Quilts Series*, constitutes a form of public art confession reflecting her personal struggles (Emin et al., 2011) and her critical views of the art world as an elite power-based establishment (Fanthome, 2013). She found a sense of agency in choosing what to reveal and how her identity was publicly

constructed and negotiated. Interpreting her work through the lens of Foucault's broader theories which explore the function of institutional power in society, in particular his discussions on confession as a tool of power (Foucault, 1990), provides another example of the use of craftivism in a subversive act of self-disclosure.

Hotel International, Confessions Blanket 1993, the first in her series, expressing narrative through material culture was constructed using a childhood blanket with significant personal names, dates and evocative words. The intimacy of her tapestry of cultural and autobiographical identity connected with the broader socio-cultural contexts which contributed to her individual identity and convey a narrative about her life, the people she loved, the significance of her family, friendships and human connection (Smith, 2020).

By using confessional blankets to publicly air, her 'dirty laundry' Emin refuses to keep personal subjects such as gendered violence and mental health, private or be defined by the associated power dynamics of shame and stigma. Again, reclamation of agency is illustrated as a central theme in craftivism extended to subvert the traditional function of confession as social control. Emin's work takes on even greater significance in the current social media landscape with Agger (2012) discussing concerns over the pressure to overshare and perform an authentic online persona. Despite social media offering a platform for neurodivergent voices to be heard and find community (Van Driel, et al., 2023), Zuboff (2023) suggests that it creates new forms of surveillance and control. Furthermore, Han's (2015a) insights about the pervasive focus of self-improvement elevate Foucault's (1997) concepts of self-governance to a new level. Emin's example of craftivism, therefore, could be viewed as a counter-strategy to governmentality and the regulation of women's behaviour through

management of bodies and emotions. However, whilst this may have been seen as empowering 30 years ago, social media has now normalised oversharing and the blurring of boundaries between public and private life. It was my own physical and metaphorical wrestling with 'laundry' that inspired my PhD quilt (Section 2.5).



Figure 17 How Do You Sleep at Night, Porter 2025. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Building on these historical examples of craftivism as resistance against confinement, medicalisation and societal expectations, Hat Porter, a contemporary neurodivergent textile artist captures how craftivism relates to Soja's (1996) Thirdspace. The focus of their work is lived experiences of restrictive practices within mental health services. This distinction is explicitly different from the material realities of institutional confinement (Firstspace) and the conceived and often oppressive, discourses of mental

health services (Secondspace). Porter's crafted Thirdspace involves the reappropriation of materials and takes the form of a protest quilt *How do you sleep at night?* (Figure 17), against the increase of the surveillance technology being used within mental health facilities and was featured in Asylum Magazine's Spring 2025 special issue on surveillance. By constructing the quilt from staff scrubs, patient blankets and gowns, the materials of institutionalisation, Porter transforms and subverts their meaning, turning symbols of institutional power into vehicles for critique and resistance.

The materials therefore are contested and representational of the harsh surveillance of Porter's experience in contrast to the comfort and autonomy associated with Emin's blankets. Porter's work provides an abstracted lived experience space for confronting the power imbalance associated with technology such as Oxehealth's sleep monitoring cameras (Porter, 2025). In response to iatrogenic harm and injustices experienced in services and psychiatric hospitals, craftivism has been used to illustrate Porter's concerns over the erosion of patient autonomy and privacy as a conceptual critique and lived experience response. Porter's work critiques of institutional power from within the materials of that power and provides a platform for articulating complex and traumatic experiences.

In addition, craft has long been associated with occupational health and therapeutic benefits. Pöllänen (2009) positions craft as a way for supporting individuals to function as independently as possible within the field of occupational therapy. Recent reports have explored this therapeutic capacity (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Fancourt et al., 2020), and Kirketerp's (2024) work on craft psychology identifies benefits ranging from reducing stress and loneliness to stimulating neuroplasticity. However, there are critical limitations to framing craft as a medical intervention. Clift (2020) raises methodological concerns regarding the bias to finding positive outcomes, and Purser's (2019) critique of 'McMindfulness' warns

against the co-option of mindfulness by neoliberal ideologies. Purser (2019) suggests that the 'Mindfulness-Academic-Science Complex' prioritises stress reduction for productivity, reinforcing the status-quo without addressing the socio-political conditions that contribute to distress. The risks here are for craft to be similarly co-opted, leading to further distress in a society that already demands constant performance. Therefore, the potential of craft to support well-being needs to be based on passion and intrinsic motivation (Kirketerp, 2024), where crafting represents genuine space and time defined by the individual as opposed to an externally applied intervention.

Instead of a simple 'cure', craft provides a means for transition from a place of adversity. Nargi (2008) documents how individuals use craft to relieve transitional anxiety and process negative emotion during periods of unemployment or political instability. These qualities of predictability and routine are particularly supportive for neurodivergent individuals who may find transitions challenging. One example is the project *Fine Cell Work* (2024), which helps prisoners transition from criminal activity by providing structured training in high-quality needlework. In a time where identity is in flux, craft is positioned as a tool for managing the uncertainty of a shifting self, creating a productive and reflective 'space-between' (Andrew, 2017). Similarly, *Common Threads Project* (n.d.) employs craft as a transformative tool for survivors of gendered violence, enabling a transition from trauma to empowerment through non-verbal, somatic processing. This aligns with the needs of neurodivergent individuals who may process trauma more effectively through sensory engagement than verbal means. Finally, the *Norfolk Trans Joy Quilt* highlights the importance of positive identity assertion (Brannick et al., 2023). By focusing on joy rather than trauma narratives, the workshops where the quilt was co-created offered a dynamic communal Thirdspace creating collective resistance and self-identification outside of normative societal constraints.

The ability to express identity through textile craft and clothing is a common motivation for making. Making, customising, altering, and mending are the tools we use to tell the story of who we are and what is important (Twigger Holroyd, 2018). Gauer (2011) found participants expressed aspects of their identity that related to conscientious consumerism or environmentalism, being altruistic, connecting with heritage, culture and traditions, in addition to expression of gender identity. This self-narrating through clothing is explored further in Chapter 4, in relation to identity performance, and in Chapter 6, where the materiality of sentimental garments is used to process life transitions.

2.4.4 Collective Craft: Craftivism and Social Change

Following on from the previous points, I now present examples of how craftivism continues to be used to address contemporary themes including further examples of displacement (*The Arpilleras*), collective grief (*Grenfell Memorial Quilt*) and injustice (*Justice for Laughing Boy Quilt*). These pieces demonstrate how varied forms of craftivism are used to support marginalised groups in expressing their own narratives, challenge oppressive societal norms and create opportunities for collective action.

The Arpilleras, are protest textiles most closely associated with conflicts in Chile and Mexico (Kindon et al., 2021). They tell stories of people's everyday lives and their fight for social justice through symbolism (Adams, 2021). These stitched stories are created mostly by women protesting the forced disappearance of thousands of people during periods of conflict, despite political protest being forbidden and seen as traitorous (Kindon et al., 2021). Made from found and recycled materials, as with Emin's, Porter's and my quilts, incorporation of meaning is expressed through choice of fabrics. *The Arpilleras* use items of clothing from missing family members. They were effective as a memorial, in raising awareness and

providing financial support when sold as decorative items with hidden political narratives. Common elements found in many of the narratives are images of the Andes Mountain range creating a connexion with the mountains of Chile; large cooking kettles to represent community soup pots and the sharing of resources that occurred throughout communities; and finally, laundries used for communal support centres.



Figure 18 Grenfell Memorial Quilt. Photo taken by author, Norfolk Makers Festival, March 2023

The concept of collective action and the incorporation of clothing is poignantly illustrated by *The Grenfell Memorial Quilt* (Figure 18), where a team of crafters' aim is to make a quilt 220ft x 72ft, to cover an entire side of the tower as a protest. Led by self-identified artist activist (a term

combining art and activism), Tuesday Greenidge, her community-based project is a call for justice and memorial for the 72 residents who died in the fire in 2017. Mirroring the intentions of *The Arpilleras*, the project's clear political message is evident in the use of life-sized representations of people holding banners in its attempts to address socio-economic inequalities. By humanising the victims, many of whom were from racialised and immigrant communities, craftivism is used to raise awareness of the factors that led to the disaster.

The *Justice for Laughing Boy Quilt* (Figure 19) was created to protest the death of Connor Sparrowhawk in an assessment and treatment centre in 2013. It builds on these principles of collective action and evocative personal messages in an incredibly moving protest and act against injustice. It is a clear reminder of the importance of disability rights in the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society. The shift from personal advocacy to collective activism is a journey explored by Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2009) in their research on mothers of children on the 'autism spectrum'. Here the fight for an individual child can broaden into a campaign for systemic change and justice for many. The quilt itself embodies this transition, highlighting the use of resistance craft in the construction of political identities by illustrating how symbols and imagery can be employed to communicate values and political messages. Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2009) argue such activism often stems from direct, challenging encounters with service systems and a profound need to ensure others do not face similar injustices. The quilt patches included repeated motifs for example, '107 days' to represent the time Connor was in the assessment unit and numerous buses which symbolise his passion for transport and offer a powerful visual representation of his life and collective grief over his death. Craftivism, in this instance, is used to embody emotions, build solidarity, and demand accountability.



Figure 19 Justice for Laughing Boy Quilt, 2014. Photo taken by author, People's History Museum, February 2023

Despite potential limitations in structural change, the power of these collective craftivist acts making space for shared expression, fostering community, and creating solidarity remains undeniable and profoundly important for those involved. *The Arpilleras* challenge the silencing and eradication of the disappeared in oppressive political regimes. *The Grenfell*

Memorial Quilt provides a Flow-Thirdspace for continued challenges to the systemic failure that led to socio-economic inequalities ultimately resulting in the fire and as a space of memorial. *Justice for Laughing Boy Quilt* highlights recurrent failures for societies' vulnerable groups in the devaluation of disabled lives which contribute to injustice within systems of care. The role and relevance of space and time is apparent in each of these examples in allowing collective constructed textile spaces for shared grief, resistance and mutual support. I present craft as examples of collective projects which produce powerful protest objects and construct communal Flow-Thirdspaces where participants can collectively process experiences, build solidarity, and articulate shared narratives of resistance and hope.

2.5 Personal Craft Narratives: The PhD quilt

In the previous sections I have provided an overview of how craft has been used as a tool for storytelling and conveying individual narratives, as well as how it continues to offer a Flow-Thirdspace in contemporary times. This section will look more closely at how tangible materials, specifically the artefacts and reflections I have incorporated into the PhD Quilt, create unique ways to 'show' rather than 'tell' (Wittgenstein, 1921/1922) narratives that are often inexpressible through words. These objects hold significant personal meaning, embodying physical and emotional memories that contribute to the ongoing construction of the unflattened identity which I argue is fundamental to well-being. My autoethnographic narrative is included here to provide evidence of how the personal and political, theoretical and practical intrinsically entwined. My life is the evidence. This story is the crucial red thread of the quilt. I had to stitch my own history back together before I could help anyone else. It is the foundational strand that binds my grief to the collective resistance found in the following chapters.

Narrative identity relates to the concept that we construct a sense of self through the stories we tell and the meanings we assign to these experiences, a process discussed theoretically in Section 2.2.3. In the context of this research, I argue that craft objects serve as a material anchor for this identity work. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 4, the act of making allows neurodivergent individuals to reconstruct a multifaceted self-concept that resists the flattening associated with medicalised labels. Furthermore, in Chapter 6, these material narratives demonstrate how my concept of Flow-Thirdspace allows for the processing of grief and trauma, transforming difficult life events into a tangible record of survival and resilience.

The value of craft in this process of recounting experiences is that it facilitates the inclusions of interpretations, emotions and values. These stories shift and change over time as our understanding of who we are, and circumstances alter. Narrative identity is therefore constantly evolving as we experience different stages of life and encounter new environmental influences. Building on the historical foundation of craftivism, I now discuss how craftivism intersects with my narrative identity which leads to establishing the gap in the research I intend to address. The following examples of the *AIDS Quilt*, the *Pussyhat Project* and *Fashion Revolution* demonstrate how craftivism weaves my own lived experiences with collective narratives as evocative symbols of grief, resistance and social change.

The power of grief to either alienate or connect communities has recently been demonstrated during the pandemic, when restrictions and isolation contributed to the complicated processing of emotions associated with loss (Wallace et al., 2020). I start this exploration into the power of connection through emotion with *The AIDS Quilt*. It was coordinated by Cleve Jones as *The Names Project* and was founded in 1985 and connected a community

stricken by grief. During a memorial march for Harvey Milk, Cleve Jones and fellow activists had written the names of people who had died of AIDS on placards which were attached to the San Francisco Federal Building. Whilst reflecting on the heart wrenching display of so many names, the aesthetic reminded him of a patchwork quilt (Hunter, 2019). At the time AIDS was predominantly killing people from the gay community, however it coincided with the death of my grandmother in 1986, fuelling my younger sister's fear that everyone would die of AIDS and my early experiences of feeling responsible for managing the emotions of others. *The Names Project* was a way to redress the stigma associated with AIDS and HIV and protest against inaction by the government, who were thought to be ignoring what was happening (Patton, 1985). The quilt panels were intentionally made 3 feet by 6 feet, the size of a grave to replicate the memorial services and funerals that people were reportedly not permitted to hold. (Hunter, 2019).

Jones (2000) describes how discrimination and stigma prevented families from sharing their grief or openly discussing how the person had died which changed the nature of the quilt. It represented the pain and anger that was being experienced across society (Jones, 2007). Fountain (2023) used oral histories to document the UK version of the AIDS quilt and the stitched memorials as visual texts to form collective memories of people who died from the epidemic. Fountain's (2021) poignant and evocative memory study shows how craft preserved their stories and identities whilst challenging dominant and harmful narratives about AIDS. The stitching together of individual stories of loss and grief created a collective identity which rehumanised their experiences and represented a call for action against government policies and rhetoric. I met Cleve Jones at the Exhibition of the *AIDS Quilt UK* (Figure 20) in the summer of 2025 at the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern. With the time and space for reflection, I felt the weight of grief through the enormity of the quilt, the respectful silence of

the audience and a personal revelation of why the loss of a loved one results in an enduring pain that shapes one's life.

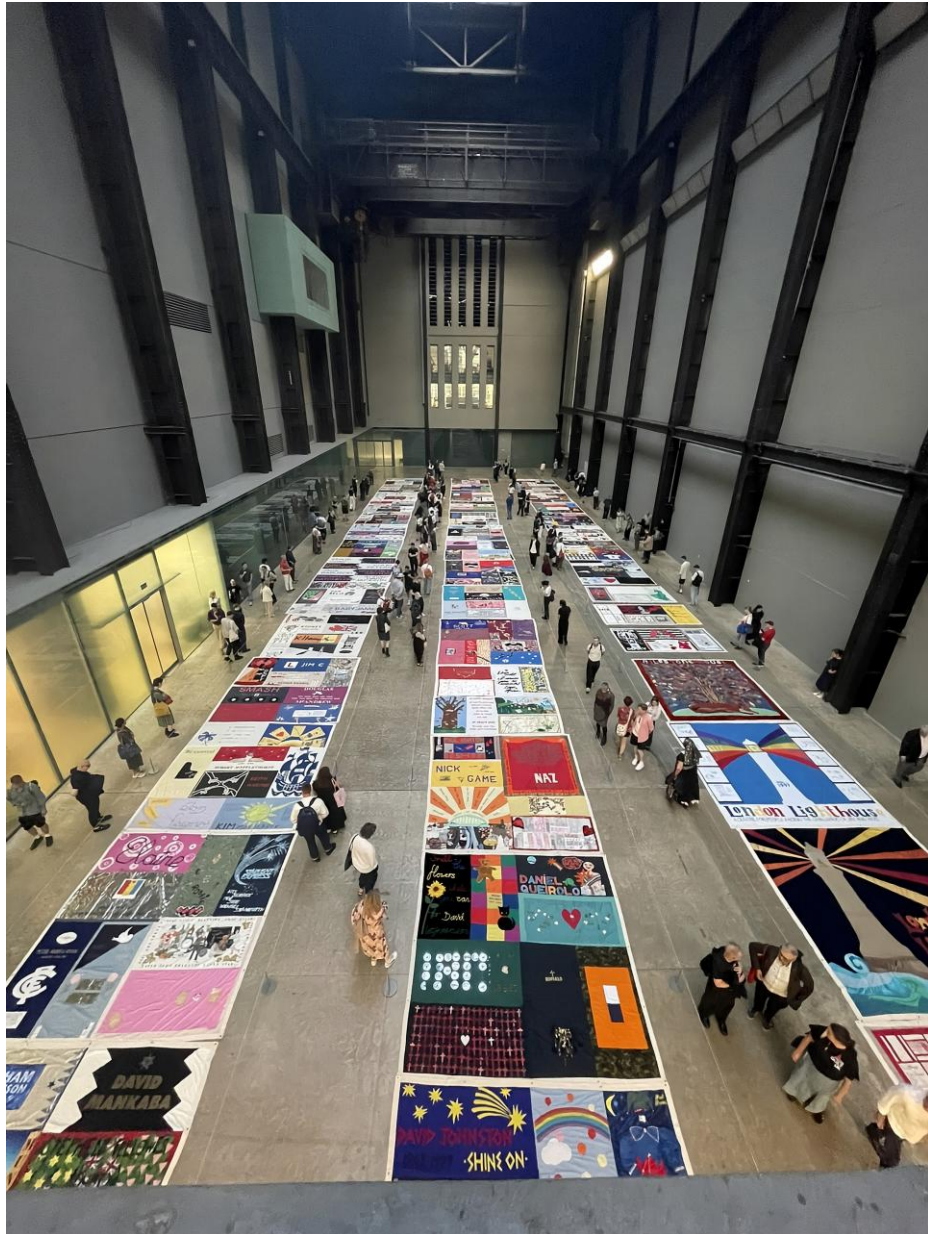


Figure 20 AIDS Quilt UK. Photo taken by author, Tate Modern, 12 June 2025

Despite concerns already discussed regarding the attention economy, social media was pivotal in the success of Krista Suh's and Jayna Zweiman's collaboration, *The Pussyhat Project*. Inspired by President Trump's misogynistic comments about sexual assault, the project aim was to raise

awareness about women's rights using highly visible knitted pink hats at the Women's March on Washington, 19 January 2017 (Black 2017). Yarn crafters shared videos, information, and patterns for the simple pink hat with cat ear corners which became a visual symbol of social engagement. The digital age enabled virtual participation through Facebook groups, Instagram and Ravelry, the online community for knitters and crocheters. This sparked sister marches across the world, the reclamation of the term 'pussy' and demonstrated the ever-evolving nature of feminist protest (Earnest & Leslie, 2017). This project embodied the feminist principles of collective action whilst challenging patriarchal power structures; however, it has been criticised for the centring of white feminist perspectives. Concerns included racial exclusion relating to the colour symbolism of pink and trans-exclusionary language relating to the term 'pussyhat' due to its association with female genitalia (Black, 2017).

This highlights the discomfort of craftivism illustrating the socio-political tensions prevalent across contemporary society. Figure 21 shows the Pussyhat I knitted as I came to the end of two years of therapy with the ADHD and ASD Clinic at the Maudsley Hospital. I made the hat to thank the Senior Psychologist who had helped me find a way forward. As a refugee herself, she had shared that Trump's America would be a hostile place for her. Once again, I felt the weight of what had not been said, knitting my emotions and gratitude into the stitches.



Figure 21 Me wearing the Pussyhat that I made for my therapist, July 2018

The concept of making the invisible visible is supported through social media amplification allowing specific hashtags to collect individual perspectives to create a cohesive narrative through craftivism. *Crafts for Climate Change* (Coat of Hope, n.d.) have also used social media hashtags to draw attention to environmental issues in addition to exploitation of natural resources and sustainability in relation to fast fashion and unethical practices in the garment industry (Fashion Revolution, 2016).

A pivotal moment in the development of my craft and identity involves the themes of institutional dehumanisation and stigma discussed by Goffman (1961) applied to the Rana Plaza factory collapse of 2013. The disaster saw the death of 1,134 garment workers providing cheap clothing for the fast fashion industry (Rahman & Moazzem, 2017). Similar to scandals exposing the treatment of people in the institutions and asylums, Rana Plaza was the catalyst for social change. Goffman (1961) exposed block treatment and institutionalisation of mental health patients in his ethnographic study and Robb (1967) reported on the inadequate treatment of elderly inpatients. Both were contributory factors in deinstitutionalisation (Mansell & Ericsson, 2013). However,

scandals associated with mental health services continue. As discussed in the previous section, Connor Sparrowhawk's death occurred during his time as an inpatient and cases of abuse against patients with intellectual disabilities, Winterbourne View 2019 and Whorlton Hall in 2019, highlight failings within the support system (Willis, 2020).

Each of these examples involved human rights issues. The case of Rana Plaza reached global significance when Rana, who had illegally constructed the upper floors of his factory, was charged with murder. Public opinion was key to driving the changes in the garment industry, with people using social media to amplify a calling for accountability, transparency and more sustainable alternatives to ensure workers' safety. Fashion activism movement, *Fashion Revolution* responded to the disaster with the *#Imadeyourclothes* campaign, followed by *#lovedclotheslast*. By providing garment workers with narrative identities, it rehumanised each of them. It gave individuals the opportunity to tell their stories, encouraging the connection between consumers by challenging the anonymity of the fast fashion industry. This is where my activism started, in my response to injustice, rejection of fast fashion and reuse of pre-loved materials.

Expanding on direct advocacy, other craft-based approaches seek to reimagine the future of our relationship with clothing. Twigger Holroyd's (2018) influential work on reknitting existing garments as a component of the 'domestic circular economy' and 'fashion fictions' (Twigger Holroyd, 2025) utilise speculative design and participatory making to construct and reconstruct alternative fashion systems and relationships to textiles. These possible futures are crafted as to explore 'what if' scenarios that challenge the unsustainable and often dehumanising norms of the current fashion industry. By engaging people in making and imagining, Twigger Holroyd's practice demonstrates how craft can be a powerful tool for envisioning and

enacting more ethical, sustainable, and personally meaningful textile futures, extending critique to active, hopeful co-creation.

It is within this complex and often fraught history of textiles as personal, social, and political objects that my own engagement with craft as a Flow-Thirdspace for navigating profound personal challenges emerged. My textile practices reuse and repurpose the materials of my family members as a way of preserving the memories and meanings held within the fibres. Crafting provides me with the time and space to reflect on socio-political causes which are important to me and represent my views on social injustice, as well as navigate profound personal challenges and reconstruct my own sense of self. There have been many points in my life when I have experienced significant challenges with my perceived identity, but none more than as a parent which will be discussed throughout this thesis, a narrative I explore in depth through the *Reflections Quilt Block* in Chapter 6 and *Finished Blanket Quilt Block* in Chapter 7.

In 2009, just before the ‘lifequake’ (Feiler, 2020) that resulted in a significant disintegration of my identity, craft came back into my everyday routine providing me with structure, predictability and rhythm as an anchor during the chaotic emotional turmoil that follows significant shifts in self-perception. I was pregnant with my third child and the other two were old enough for me to sit and knit whilst I watched them play. Morning sickness and hyperemesis resulting in frequent hospitalisation throughout each of my pregnancies had been debilitating, but I had learnt to accept this and chose to knit squares for a baby blanket to help me relax and rest.

When I lost that baby, my life unravelled. It was during moments of flow that I found my Flow-Thirdspace (discussed further in Chapter 7) away

from the realities of my sadness and fear as I pieced together my first quilt. My progress was visible and palpable in each strip of the quilt I stitched. I was doing something, I was making a quilt, I was moving forward. I set myself goals based on the quilt. I called it my 'I am 40' quilt and made a promise to myself that I would finish it by my 40th birthday at the end of that year, just after the first anniversary of losing Jack.



Figure 22 A stack of the original quilt blocks for the 'I am 40' quilt, as featured in my first blog post documenting the use of craft to navigate grief (Bass, 2010).

I visualised the quilt on my bed, and I saw myself managing, getting through the days, crafting hope. I slowly went from not wanting to get out of that bed in the morning consumed by tears to looking forward to the next steps in my quilting journey. Even within the profound darkness of that period, the structured process of quilting, the reassuring hum of the sewing machine, and the satisfaction of a completed seam offered tiny,

almost imperceptible shifts. I began experiencing minuscule glimmers of hope, fleeting flickers of light which felt like pinpricks of optimism. I started writing about the process (Bass, 2010) and slowly pieced my life back together, using my hands to move me forward to find flow in meaningful activities, to escape from falling down my bottomless pit of despair.

When my life fell apart after my diagnoses of ADHD and autism, I had tools and strategies mapped out ready to reconstruct my evolving identities. It is these autoethnographic elements, of my own crafting as coping that provided a foundation for the PhD quilt as a methodological tool, as a means for documenting and processing the PhD journey. My Flow-Thirdspace is a lived material and conceptual space where my research, pain from personal experience and participant narratives intersect and are made meaningful. My long-term engagement in crafting through grief is summarised in the *Finished Blanket Quilt Block* (Chapter 7), an autoethnographic record of an imagined future where I found the means to articulate the difficult stories that are invisibly held within so many individuals struggling to navigate the pressures of a 'Burnout Society'. These are physical red threads that connect blocks of the PhD Quilt. It is a record of my survival. Through this work, I am finally laying to rest the 'perfect person' I thought I had to be. I will never be her. That version of me was an illusion. The process of making the quilt blocks enabled me to see that.

2.6 Conclusion: Identifying the Gap

There are multiple layers of historical, sociological and spatial factors that contribute to emotional well-being. We live in a culture where positivity is presented as the goal, we are encouraged to push through and past our capacity, however, when we are met with one of life's inevitable

challenges, this approach fails us. In Foucault's (1977) 'disciplinary society', individuals were governed by external forces. However, in Han's (2015a) 'achievement society', it is the individual who is now the oppressive force eliminating space for reflection and contemplation, vulnerability or failure.

Lived experience narratives are an essential means of challenging these dominant perspectives. Mental health challenges, causing emotional distress can create a vicious cycle, contributing to feelings of stigma and isolation that further compound the difficulties of daily life. Shining light on the complexity of these challenges is the motivation for many insider researchers to tell their stories. They offer valuable insights for the needs of individuals who encounter services, at the point of crisis, when considerations of context and environmental factors can be overlooked due to the presentation of acute distress.

As Alvarez (2024) illustrates in *Unravelling*, his autoethnography of suicide and renewal, support too often focuses on symptom measurement rather than exploration of lived experiences. Narratives of lived experience, such as Williams' (2009) *Nobody Nowhere*, offers invaluable insight into what it is to be autistic, from the inside out. In addition, Quinn's (2018) *UNbroken* demonstrates the importance of creative expression and autonomy as self-authorship, in her encounter with inpatient mental health services. Common themes in lived experience narratives are encapsulated in Fricker's (2007) concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices.

Finally, Dean's (2024) autoethnographic study analysing her lived experience of being a suicidal autistic adult exemplifies the value of an insider researcher perspective as a survivor of suicidal behaviours and the importance on critical reflection. Dean (2024) attributes becoming suicidal to 'autistic burnout'. She reflects on how trying to mask her differences combined with failing to communicate needs in a high-pressure job teaching young people with additional needs led to a series of

misdiagnoses including borderline personality disorder and depression. It was only after her research, receiving an autism diagnosis and subsequently interviewing autistic adults about suicidal thoughts that she was able to associate her own experiences with anxiety and fatigue to the point of collapse.

By integrating discussions on craft, neurodivergence, and the 'Burnout Society' with the theoretical framework developed in this chapter, I have demonstrated the relevance of craft for neurodivergent individuals.

Therefore, I suggest that craft has the potential to provide a valuable tool for emotional regulation and resistance thereby counteracting some of the detrimental effects of social expectations by promoting a more inclusive and less 'one-dimensional' approach to support, supported Marcuse's (1964/2013) critique discussed earlier.

While I have acknowledged broader benefits of craft, my autoethnographic perspective, informed by lived experience and the conceptual lens of Soja's (1996) 'Thirdspace', offers informative nuances. The examples discussed, from Lorina Bulwer's stitched defiance against hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007) to contemporary craftivist critiques of institutional power (Porter, 2025), demonstrate the general therapeutic potential and also specific ways in which craft enables the articulation of experiences often silenced or marginalised by dominant (Secondspace) discourses. My own narrative of crafting through grief and identity reconstruction, resulting in my PhD quilt as an autoethnographic Flow-Thirdspace, attempts to add depth to this understanding.

Therefore, rather than identifying a 'gap,' I suggest that the value of my research is in its potential to shed further light on these intersections. I propose that craft, far from being a simple hobby, can function as a critical space for neurodivergent individuals to construct meaning, assert agency, find flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) amidst sensory or societal overwhelm (Han, 2015a, Williams, 2018). It could help build alternative narratives of

self and community within personally and collectively crafted Flow-Thirdspaces, experienced through reflexive, illuminating moments found even in the midst of profound challenge. We know the 'Burnout Society' grips neurodivergent people. We know craft helps general well-being and I have explained how it helped me, but we do not know how neurodivergent adults specifically use craft as a Thirdspace to resist contemporary societal pressures. That is what my thesis explores.

Show and Tell No. 3 *Ceasefire*



Figure 23 Ceasefire Quilt Block

As the third biographical interlude, this patch provides an example of reactionary craftivism. I made this quilt block on 28th October 2023, three weeks after the 7th of October attacks in Israel and the subsequent onset of the devastating conflict in Gaza (Beaumont, 2023). It is the only block out of the 36 made for the PhD Quilt, that I completed in a single day. I was shocked by the events, stunned that we still live in a world where killing people over land is possible and needed a means for expressing these feelings.

On that rainy October Saturday, I stood in the doorway of my shed, protected from the weather, secure in a home where I could always feel safe and burned holes into the fabric of a worn bedsheet. The scorch marks and holes represent the pointless destruction of war and the devaluation of human life.



Figure 24 Scorching the fabric for the Cease Fire Quilt Block

Around the letters of the word 'Ceasefire', I stitched vines to symbolise hope for future peace. Vines grow through cracks, cling to ruins, and reach toward light as discussed later through the concept of Komorebi. This was the only form of optimism I could offer and far less demoralising than doomscrolling. One criticism of craftivism relates to its potentially performative nature (Caron, 2014). However, others argue that such expression is vital in the absence of alternatives for real action (Corbett, 2017).

More than two years on, I look at this block and feel great sadness for the deaths that have continued to amass since the day I stitched it. This grief is further complicated by the hijacking of emotions within the attention economy. Algorithms often incentivise rage-baiting and extreme polarisation to ensure maximum engagement (Bail, 2021). This creates a hostile online echo chamber where systemic pressure uses our shared anger to pitch one side against the other. This block therefore represents a call for a ceasefire against the digital division and misdirection of attention (Williams, 2018). Crafting, in its slowness, provides a space to consider the nature of manufactured outrage. There is such pain and grief and anguish that I am unable to find the words to complete the sentence but can only hold on to hope through my creative practice.

Ceasefire Quilt Block is a bridge to the methodology that follows. It demonstrates that when words fail or become dangerous, creative methods provide space for truth-telling and a material justification for the 'Ethics of the Veil' (Section 3.5.2). By acknowledging that some histories are too sensitive or 'unmentionable' to be told plainly, I have developed an ethical framework that utilises the quilt as a protective layer for vulnerable narratives. It is my response to the 'scorch marks' of systemic violence. In the following chapter, I move from these moments of crisis to detail the creative architecture and participatory methods that underpin my work.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction and Theoretical Context

With the context and theoretical landscape set, I now shift to the details of the methodological approach I took. The challenge of studying lived experience narratives within contemporary mental health discourse lies in the inherent complexity of human identity, particularly during times of crisis. As established in the theoretical framework (Chapter 2, particularly Section 2.2), the dominant medical model tends to pathologise distress, reducing these complex, multifaceted crises to individual deficits constituting a flattening of human experience. This pathologising approach, as discussed through the lens of Foucault's (1990) critiques of 'biopower' and Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, often results in the obscuring of context, environmental factors, and longitudinal life narratives. At the point of acute crisis, an individual's agency and power to articulate or advocate for their needs are often minimised (Quinn, 2018).

By working with creative methods, crafting, and storytelling, I resist a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and challenge the pathologising impact of diagnostic labels. Furthermore, by facilitating engagement with flow states through craft, the methodology is designed to create the space necessary to illuminate 'hidden stories,' thereby ensuring my research aligns with the social model of disability and actively develops support structures that promote autonomy, self-acceptance, and independence.

My background is in creative arts, so I chose to use creative methods for data collection, analysis, and sharing what I found. I engaged in an iterative 'back and forth' with several participants, involving them in the interpretation of findings to ensure my research remained grounded in

their authentic voices. This process of participatory sense-making is best exemplified by the *Daisies Quilt Block* (see Section 7.3). I have attempted to make the research as participatory as possible within the constraints of a PhD, which has led to a wonderfully 'messy' methodology. Although this 'messiness' could be seen as a drawback, it was a deliberate methodological choice that resists the academic imperative to reduce complex lived experience to neat, quantifiable data. It took time and care to unravel this and knit it back together to form this chapter, mirroring the iterative and emergent nature of the data itself.

I employ the principles of embodied inquiry (Leigh & Brown, 2021) to investigate the physical reality of emotion; this approach acknowledges that somatic experiences are inherently resistant to quantification (Hamid and Singh, 2023). This is particularly significant when investigating the 'saturated self' (Gergen, 1991) within a 'Burnout Society', where human experience is frequently reduced to metrics and diagnostic checklists. Incorporating flow states into this work, provides insight into how these individuals experience moments of engagement, productivity, and meaning, despite their challenges. To reiterate, I argue that these moments of flow are the mechanisms through which a Flow-Thirdspace is constructed, providing a reprieve from the fractured attention economy. Therefore, the PhD Quilt is central to my methodological approach as a material platform for this 'showing,' allowing for an 'unflattened' (Sousanis, 2015) representation of identity that resists the reductionist potential of the medical model. It is used to demonstrate how craft facilitates multimodal approaches to participation and has value for expressing complex ideas, emotions, and stories, thereby showing what words often cannot say.

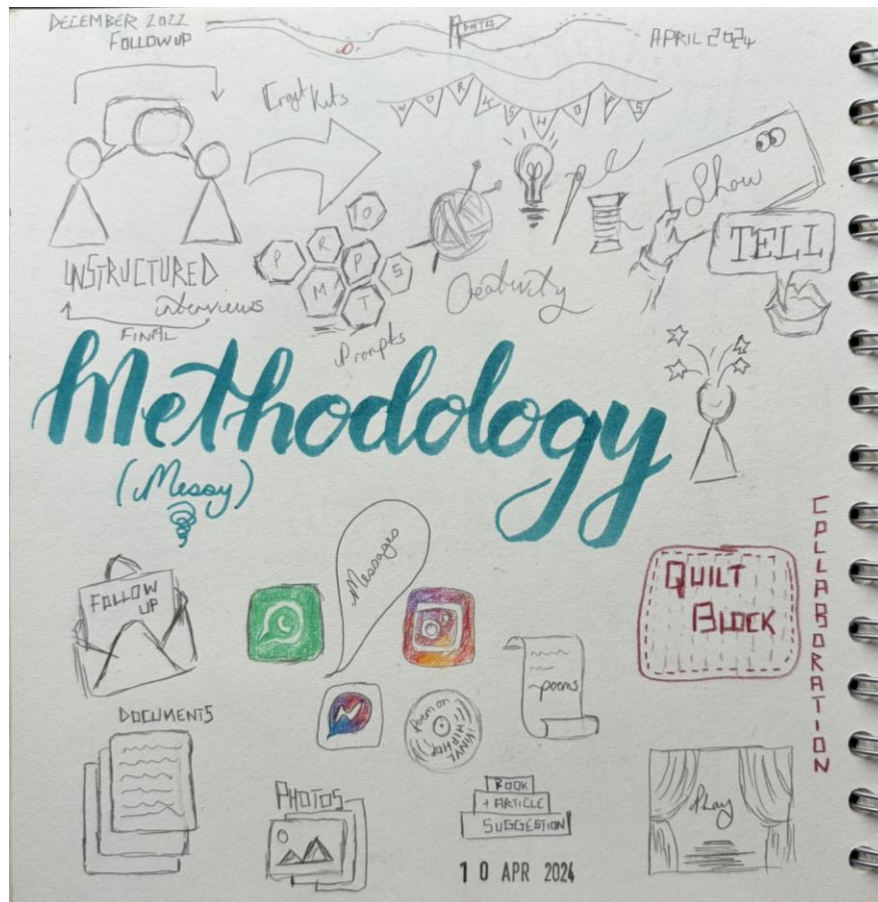


Figure 25 Sketch of the Methodology, April 2024

3.2 Research Paradigm

My qualitative research blends three specific frameworks: social constructivism, symbolic interactionism and narrative inquiry to explore how participants create their own realities in opposition to the 'flattened' identities imposed by medicalised models (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The quilt blocks function as a shared symbolic language (Mead, 1934/2015) which extends traditional narrative approaches by situating my methodology within Letherby's (2000; 2003) auto/biographical and relational sociology. In doing so, I highlight the relevance of the researcher's embodied, emotional experience. Following Cvetkovich's (2012) use of personal memoir to think through the connections with

'public feelings', I build on a relational foundation by including my own autoethnographic field notes and crafting as methods of investigation.

I incorporate Soja's (1996) Thirdspace as a primary spatial lens. This allows me to challenge the binary of the physical reality (Firstspace) and the conceptual/diagnostic label (Secondspace) by investigating the lived, creative experience of the maker. Additionally, I use the concepts of flow states (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) and Becker's (1963) perspectives on labelling. Becker (1963) viewed labelling as a social process and explored how external labels impact self-worth and identity performance. By centring the Flow-Thirdspace as a site of resistance, my methodology explores the complex intersections of identity, agency, and well-being for neurodivergent adults. I consider the inherent limitations of verbal articulation, aligning with Wittgenstein's (1921/1922) philosophy of 'showing' what cannot be 'said,' and embrace De Jaegher & Preiser's (2022) concept of participatory sense-making.

3.3 Research design and Questions

The design was explicitly constructed as an unflattening of sociological methodology. By pairing unstructured interviews with creative prompts, my research was designed to capture the non-linear, multi-dimensional realities of neurodivergent identity. Creative research methods aimed to facilitate co-production and active participation, with an emphasis on 'showing rather than telling'. I wanted to ensure the research was accessible and inclusive by avoiding any jargon that could exclude or alienate participants from the neurodivergent population.

Central to the research design is the PhD Quilt, which functions as a multifaceted tool for data collection, participant interaction, and a material

site for analysis. By integrating craft into the research design, my work provides an alternative to traditional data extraction to create a collaborative Flow-Thirdspace. This allows for the exploration of the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in a holistic and inclusive manner, positioning the participants as 'experts by experience' throughout the entire research process. In the absence of a fixed normal, a concept historically constructed and enforced through disciplinary mechanisms (Davis, 1995), lived experience narratives offer a way to understand the impact of the power of diagnosis illustrated by Figure 8 (Section 2.2).

3.3.1 Research Questions

I did not come to this research with a neat set of academic questions I hoped to answer. I began this PhD because I wanted to tell the unheard stories of neurodivergent people who I knew were struggling to conform to the unrealistic expectations of modern life. I did not want to extract data from them, instead I wanted us to make a quilt together, so my research questions were not fixed at the start. They evolved slowly as I developed as a researcher, and as my participants and I shared our experiences through making. To honestly reflect the stories that were actually told, stories of surviving burnout, processing grief, and finding spaces simply to 'be', the questions that guide my thesis are:

Central Overarching Question:

How does the shared, collaborative process of crafting and quilting allow neurodivergent adults to tell their stories and survive the pressures of a 'Burnout Society'?

RQ1 - Identity & Motivation (Addressed in Chapter 4):

Why do we make things? How does the motivation to craft help neurodivergent people push back against one-dimensional labels and show who they truly are?

RQ2 - Attention & Flow (Addressed in Chapter 5):

How does it feel to make? How does the deep focus and flow of crafting provide a physical and mental escape from the overload and exhaustion of everyday life?

RQ3 - Coping & Connection (Addressed in Chapters 6 & 7):

What changes when we craft? How do these creative practices act as a 'toolbox for living' that helps us process grief, build connections, and finally own our own stories?"

3.3.2 Methodological Aims

My research was designed to investigate the transformative potential of material practice and the creation of a Flow-Thirdspace which acts as the analytical anchor for the findings presented in the subsequent chapters. I chose to focus on the act of crafting, particularly what craft does, as a methodological entry point. By scaffolding the research around parallel practice, I created a safe environment where participants currently experiencing mental health challenges could engage with the study without the requirement of immediate, high-stakes verbal disclosure about sensitive topics. This focus on the material process allowed for a more organic emergence of the underlying motivations and identity work explored in the sub-questions (RQ1-3).

My rationale for this approach was to establish how the process of making influences a crafter's mental health and sense of self. To ensure the inquiry

was grounded in lived reality, participants' views played an integral role in refining the research questions. For example, feedback from the pilot stage led to a deeper investigation into the specific mechanisms of flow states and the sensory contents of the craft kits.

By positioning participants as 'experts by experience,' the research design challenges the traditional power imbalance between researcher and subject. I view the participants as the primary authorities on their own creative and neurodivergent lives. While I acknowledge my own insider positionality as a late-diagnosed autistic ADHD researcher and crafter, I am reflexive regarding my potential biases, my design ensures that the findings are co-constructed through the participants' own material and narrative contributions. The design ensures that the findings are co-constructed through participants' narratives and material contributions. This results in a collaborative approach which sits outside traditional research processes.

3.3.3 Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods were chosen over quantitative approaches because my research aims to explore the depth, nuance, and complexity of human meaning-making, qualities that are inherently lost when experience is reduced to numerical data. In the context of a 'Burnout Society', where individuals are frequently reduced to metrics and diagnostic statistics, a qualitative approach captures nuances. I chose to place participants' perspectives at the centre of the research to capture the rich, subjective realities that lie beneath the surface of medicalised labels.

In-depth unstructured interviews and creative workshops were used to allow participants to express their experiences and emotions in their own words and through their creative outputs. This methodological choice was

intentional; it provided the space for 'hidden' or non-linear stories to emerge, which a structured survey would inevitably overlook. By prioritising 'lived experience' over 'symptom measurement' (Alvarez, 2023), these methods allow for an inductive inquiry that is responsive to the unique attentional and sensory profiles of neurodivergent adults.

3.3.4 Justification for Choice of Creative Methods

Neurodivergent people are often categorised as having differences in social communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), and there is research that suggests they face significant barriers in accessing traditional support (van Ommen et al., 2023), especially talking therapies (Wright, 2024). By incorporating the concept of flow states, my intention is to highlight how achieving a state of total absorption can be beneficial for neurodivergent individuals, providing deeper insight into their lived experiences and the strategies they use to achieve a sense of fulfilment and self-worth. Flow states are relevant here because these moments of deep focus can provide a sense of control and enhance the overall quality of life, despite the sensory challenges individuals may face (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990).

Craft is used as a methodology in a similar approach of Cvetkovich's (2012) 'utopia of ordinary habit.' In this sense burnout and distress are viewed as public feelings resulting from neoliberalism where slow, deliberate, intentional crafting constitutes a mechanism for survival. Similar to Cvetkovich (2012), the artefacts are an alternative to data points and a political response grounded in theoretical argument. I used creative prompts as a 'showing rather than telling' methodological entry point. As such the interviews were included to complement these methods and were offered as a follow-up to understand the insights participants gained during

the creative process (Mason, 2002). This dual approach allowed for more personal details to emerge that might have been stifled in a traditional group setting or a formal interview structure.

I approached the research through three specific prompts. These were chosen because prompts are familiar within crafting settings and provide a non-clinical way to explore identity. This was essential to avoid the stigmatising language associated with the medical model. It allowed participants the time and space to conceptualise their experiences in their own way. To ensure consistency across the thesis, these prompts were designed to align with the three research questions:

Prompt 1: **'Who are you?'** This prompt explores how individuals conceptualise their multifaceted identities. It is underpinned by social constructivism, allowing participants to define themselves through their own narratives and creative expressions. This directly relates to RQ1, exploring how the experience of flow sustains the motivation to reconstruct and express an authentic, unflattened identity.

The Material Process: Although there was not a specific prompt relating to attention and flow, the request to engage in the sensory act of making allowed participants to reflect on the phenomenology of their work. Through this key component of crafting, I investigated RQ2 exploring how neurodivergent adults describe their subjective experiences of attention and flow.

Prompt 2 and 3: **'Mini Protest Banner'** and **'You Should...'** These prompts capture the storytelling elements of narrative identity and resistance which directly aligned with RQ3, examining how these practices, and their associated flow states, profoundly influence mental well-being and act as strategies for coping.

Verbal articulation of emotions is often cited as a complication of neurodivergent conditions, with reference to alexithymia (Poquerusse et al., 2018), but has also been associated with the impact of trauma on psychological distress (Fang et al., 2020). This links to questions about whose voice will be narrated through the research (Rogers & Ludhra, 2012), the ethics of confidentiality, and the importance of respecting the aspects that participants wish to remain secret (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). This will be discussed further in Section 3.6.

3.3.5 Sampling strategy

Due to the sensitive and innovative nature of this project, convenience sampling was the most appropriate strategy. This method allowed for the selection of participants who could provide rich, detailed insights specifically related to the motivations for crafting experienced by neurodivergent adults. As defined by Clark et.al., (2021), convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants who are easiest to access are selected. Using this method, enabled me to leverage existing contacts within the neurodivergent crafting community, which was then expanded through snowballing. While practical, it was essential to address potential biases to ensure as diverse participant sample as possible.

The chosen population was particularly relevant for this study as late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults can find it helpful to reframe their life histories through the lens of neurodivergence (Aldridge & Stilman, 2024). This process can be intense, requiring significant self-reflection and emotion work. Many of these individuals have reached adulthood without adequate support for their cognitive and processing differences, leading to issues such as low self-worth, diminished self-esteem, and frequent

experiences of struggle and failure (Norris et.al., 2025). Their voices often go unheard as they have masked their difficulties to fit societal norms.

The sample consists of 22 late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults aged over 18, with additional mental health challenges who engage in crafting. This population was chosen due to my insider perspective and shared lived experiences. It was open to all genders and varying levels of crafting skills, however there were no requests for inclusion from participants assigned male at birth. The recruitment process was designed to be gender-neutral to ensure a broad range of perspectives and was open to all individuals regardless of gender identity. Despite this inclusive approach, the 22 participants who chose to engage with the study were exclusively assigned female at birth. Within this cohort, five individuals identified outside of cisgender categories; these participants described themselves as non-binary, trans, gender-fluid, or gender-neutral, or they expressed a preference for they/them pronouns. This demographic profile reflects the specific community that engaged with the research through online crafting networks. Therefore, it resulted in a limited representation of experiences with an emphasis on feminist perspectives within the neurodivergent community.

Participants were recruited through social media, online crafting groups, and my own extensive network of crafters, including other researchers and practitioners in the fields of craft and mental health. The development of online technologies during the pandemic and their positive impact on inclusion (Pandey & Zheng, 2023) facilitated the recruitment of international participants, though protocols for diagnosing and classifying neurodivergent conditions may vary. Due to each participant being assigned female at birth, their narratives were frequently situated within historical and social experiences of gendered socialisation. This included

discussions of the mental load of motherhood, domestic expectations, and the 'vortex of gender construction' (Section 4.4.3). Consequently, a feminist theoretical framework was adopted as the most effective lens for analysis. My approach allowed for a rigorous examination of how these shared social scripts impact identity and mental health, while still respecting the diverse and fluid ways in which the participants currently define themselves.

To promote the study, I created an eye-catching invitation, which was shared on social media (Appendix A). Inclusion criteria required participants to be over the age of 18, diagnosed with or self-identifying as neurodivergent, interested in crafting, and willing to share their stories. Individuals under the age of 18 were excluded due to ethical considerations regarding informed consent.



Figure 26 Detail for Participant Recruitment Poster

3.4 Data Collection



Figure 27 Engagement Web Sketch July 2026

To truly capture the unflattened realities of my participants, I had to discard the rigid, chronological timeline of traditional research. You cannot rush trust, especially when asking neurodivergent adults navigating burnout to share their hidden or painful stories. Therefore, the engagement for this project did not happen in manageable stages like a 'pilot' followed by a 'main study'. Instead, it evolved slowly and organically. As illustrated in my hand-drawn Engagement Web (Figure 27), the research process built over time, much like a tree. It began by sowing the initial, tentative connections and my own independent autoethnographic making.

I offered craft kits and prompts as suggestions and invitations to create. Through the shared, non-verbal language of craft, the necessary trust began to take hold.

Due to the challenges navigating the realities of the 'Burnout Society', participation had to be fluid and multi-directional. Engagement ebbed and flowed depending on an individual's capacity on any given day. Sometimes participation looked like a formal follow-up conversation; often, it was asynchronous WhatsApp messages sent late at night, a photo of a work-in-progress, or discussions about collaborative stitching of a quilt block. This messy, highly responsive approach was essential. It allowed participants to step forward and connect when they had the energy, and to retreat into the safety of their own crafted 'Flow-Thirdspace' when they did not. In this way, the methodology was not something I imposed upon them, but a collaborative ecosystem we grew together. It was an iterative and participatory process that was developed from December 2022 to August 2024. My project design prioritised access, inclusion, and participation both online and in person to accommodate participants' varying preferences and accessibility needs. This ensured that individuals who may have had difficulty attending in-person sessions due to geographical or physical constraints could still participate fully. The aim of the research was to gather detailed qualitative data about the lived experiences of individuals. Craft was chosen as a creative means for supporting individuals who struggle to articulate what has happened to them or has led them to seek solace in flow state activities. This alternative approach was relevant for this population due to differences in social communication, both expressive and receptive, and because traditional interviews might present barriers to inclusion.

The data were collected through online communication platforms, interviews, responses to prompts, workshops, and show and tell contributions, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that the focus was on

telling stories through craft/craftivism. Using craft as the foundation for my research facilitated conversations about the creative process and materiality as a vehicle for discussion. This approach builds directly on the principles of the 'Photo Elicitation Interview' (PEI) technique (Rogers, 2026; Bates et al., 2017). As Rogers (2026) demonstrates in her research with disabled and marginalised populations, visual and material prompts enable people to tell complex stories, providing essential scaffolding for those who find traditional, linear verbal narratives challenging. In my study, the participants' crafted artefacts function in the exact same way as Rogers's photographs. The artefact acts as a 'third object' in the room, shifting the intense conversational focus away from the participant and onto the material, thereby reducing the cognitive load and social pressure of a direct interview. The creative element provides the option of not talking, a space for listening to the unspoken, and reflecting on the silences. Parpart & Parashar (2019) offer context for the value of silence in research by repositioning silence as actively meaningful.

3.4.1 Participant Engagement

Involving the participants in as much of the research process as possible was important to me because my experiences of not being heard were the inspiration for the research design. This commitment to co-production meant that the methodology was an emergent process, shaped by the participants and the suggestions they made (Figure 27). Their input was actively used to shape the research design which enabled participants to choose their level of engagement, with options to participate in a way that suited them best. Most of the initial interviews, which formed the pilot stage, were discussions about how the participant wanted to be involved, providing an opportunity to establish a relationship and explore their interests. Participants could choose to just participate in the initial

interview, which focused on motivation for crafting, identity, and mental health, or engage in further sessions and/or making based on their individual preferences and availability. Subsequent sessions included:

- Follow up interviews to gather additional information
- Craft sessions as a creative research method for gathering data
- Craft kits to facilitate personal or collaborative contributions based on one of three prompts: 'Who are you?', 'Mini Protest Banner', or 'You Should...'
- Quilt block collaboration—working collaboratively to create a stitched story quilt block

Participants could engage with the kits and prompts throughout the data collection period, either independently or during the workshops. The resulting objects, alongside any work-in-progress, were then used as elicitation tools in subsequent interviews and interactions.

Participants were able to engage in a way that made them feel comfortable and in control. It allowed them to share stories and opinions that reflected the influence craft/craftivism had on their identity and mental health (Sicco, 2022). As discussed previously, masking is common among neurodivergent people and poorer mental health outcomes can result from the pressure to fit in. This research approach aimed to reduce the necessity or inclination to mask and foster opportunities for more honest experiences.

Structure for interviews and personal reflections:

1. Initial Interviews:

- The initial interview introduced the research project and was an opportunity to establish rapport with participants. This interview also provided a chance to discuss any concerns or suggestions to facilitate engagement and any necessary adaptations to support their needs.

2. Follow up Interviews:

- Participants could choose to engage in further unstructured interviews. Rather than imposing rigid, predetermined questions, I used their crafted objects to elicit participant-led reflection. Because the research design was inductive and participatory, the focus of the discussion was guided by the participants. The core themes of my final research questions emerged, through conversations about these objects. Participants directed the dialogue toward what drove them to make (RQ1), how their bodies and minds felt during the immersive process of making (RQ2), and how this practice helped them cope (RQ3). The flexible nature of these allowed participants to share aspects of their stories asynchronously, using online communication platforms outside of the interview, facilitating participation in a way that felt comfortable and meaningful to them.

3. Framing Questions:

- To reduce anxiety and provide a sense of direction, participants had the option to receive framing questions beforehand to make them feel more at ease during the interview. Although this was a suggestion from the pilot stage, no one requested this adaptation.

4. Adaptations and Flexibility:

- Throughout the interviewing process, participants were given as much flexibility as possible in how and when they participated. This approach considered processing differences, sensory requirements, and individual preferences. Interviews were conducted over 20 months, to provide opportunities for the development of rapport and trust.

5. Recording and Reflection:

- Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and transcripts were made available to them. I also kept field notes and used these reflections as inspiration for quilted blocks created during this period, measuring approximately 40cm x 40cm. This autoethnographic element helped me to connect my thoughts with the ideas of participants, adding a personal layer of reflection to the research.

Participants were offered various ways to engage with interviews, using technology to provide accessibility features dependent on their specific needs and preferences. These included:

- Face to face
- Microsoft Teams chat feature
- Microsoft Teams video feature
- Zoom
- Instagram Direct Messages

- Facebook Messenger
- WhatsApp
- Email

Microsoft Teams was the most appropriate method because the data were held within secure cloud storage managed by the University of Kent. Each participant could request access to a video and transcript of the interviews. This option ensured that participants had some control over their data and could review the interview content if required.

Participants were asked to read the information sheet outlining the research and sign the consent form. They indicated their preferred participation method using a Microsoft Forms Questionnaire or other messaging formats listed above. It was made clear that they could change their minds and withdraw their data up to a month after data collection was completed in August 2024. They had access to the recordings and transcripts if they participated via Microsoft Teams, chosen for its accessibility features such as typing in the chat for those who prefer not to speak, closed captions, and the option to have the camera on or off. One of the limitations with social research is the dynamics between the researcher and participants, so these efforts were made to redress the power imbalance.

Creative methods share goals with queer methods (Browne & Nash, 2010) in their aims to challenge traditional norms, explore diverse perspectives, and mediate power imbalances in academia. Both queer and creative methods emphasise deconstructing conventional paradigms and promoting inclusivity, with creative methods using artistic expressions like visual arts, performance, and storytelling to engage underrepresented voices. Queer methods seek to destabilise normative assumptions about gender and sexuality through non-linear research approaches. Creative

methods focus on innovative representation and emotional impact, while queer methods, developed from queer theory, critique power dynamics and social constructs, aiming to queer the research process itself. The flexibility of creative methods allowed individuals to work on pieces at home that then contributed to a larger project, the PhD quilt.

The concept of a patchwork quilt with its possibilities of multiple personal aspects and identities, has been likened by Koelsch (2012) to Deleuze & Guattari's (1980/2013) *Thousand Plateaus*. Collections of stories and perspectives make up the complete narrative of an individual.

Unstructured interviews, scaffolded around craft-based parallel practice, helped to facilitate co-production and participation in the research. There was an emphasis on showing rather than telling. The research priority was accessibility and flattening hierarchies. Reducing the use of jargon which could potentially exclude or alienate the participants or those with stigmatised identities supported this aim. Using stitched quilt blocks/patches as snapshots of significant elements of a person's story allowed the disparate to become part of a whole. Linear narratives are not always the best way to describe the scattered nature of thoughts and memories so attempting to organise these can be challenging and limiting. Sometimes by asking someone to order how things happened and in what order, logic becomes the focus instead of the key aspects that are the steppingstones to constructing meaning (Hall & Holmes, 2020).

Prior to working with participants for the main study, I experimented with formats for the workshops while developing my methodology and then trialled some of these ideas in my pilot study. This included a workshop at the LSSJ research festival in July 2022, where participants were provided with fabric, thread, and needle and asked to create a mini protest banner

about a concept or idea that was significant to them to facilitate the storytelling and discussion.

I had originally intended to collect data by conducting a series of interviews with a small group of people during the pilot phase and then recruiting again for the main study. However, this was not how it worked in practice. Due to the larger-than-anticipated response to my initial call for participants, I interviewed twenty-two people and then the main study was completed with a smaller group of these, consisting of sixteen of the original participants plus one additional person.

3.4.2 Craft kits

The idea of the craft kit is not a new concept in research. As interest in creative methods has increased, projects such as Mayne's (2017) *Woolly Reflections Project* have provided participants with kits to support their creative process and record their thoughts. Craft kits have become a large part of the crafting industry and have enabled small independent creatives to use entrepreneurial skills to make an income as part of their creative endeavours. My craftivism kits were based on kits by Sarah Corbett (2017), with her permission and employed her same ethos of reusing fabrics as a 'gentle protest' against the fast consumeristic society. Following feedback from initial interviews by participants, I created similar kits. Blaze suggested sweets and Oakley's love of craft swaps, especially knitting based ones, inspired the inclusion of a 5g ball of yarn. The kits were posted to nine of the participants, however only one participant returned a completed artefact created with the contents.



Figure 28 Contents of the Craft Kits

Craft kit Contents

- Aida (a special grid fabric used for embroidery)
- A notebook to record reflections
- A herbal tea bag
- A sweet
- A fabric pen
- A tin of needles and pins
- Various colours of embroidery thread
- A card with the workshop prompts written on it
- 5g of sock yarn

- A postcard with a thank you note and instructions
- A selection of fabric scraps

3.4.3 Data Collection and Engagement Web

My data collection was a wonderfully messy and hugely creative experience. The process unfolded through an organic, back-and-forth rhythm of unstructured discussions, craft workshops, active making, and shared reflections. Participants contributed objects from their own personal crafting practices as well as tangible responses to the research prompts. All of these relational interactions ran alongside and actively shaped, the continuous, parallel development of the PhD quilt.

Sowing Seeds – Early Connections: December 2022 to April 2023

In the early part of the project, each participant was given the opportunity to contribute to how the following stages would be developed including how much they would like to be involved. Many participants experienced mental health challenges that limited or restricted access to the research, so attempts to make it accessible was an ongoing process. Flexibility in participation was crucial to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of the participants, ensuring that everyone could engage in a way that felt comfortable and manageable. Positive feedback was received about this approach. All participants received an email about the workshops beforehand and had the option to opt out of the emails if they wished. Some participants were unsure how they wanted to participate but wanted to receive follow-up emails anyway. Recruitment remained open throughout the pilot, allowing participants to join after the workshops had started. Parker supported this approach by saying; “You are the sort of academic I am trying to be! It is hard pushing back on stuffy and

exclusionary 'traditions'. Makes me so happy to see your work!!”

(Instagram DM, 27 February 2023).

Craftivism Workshops

Four 1.5-hour weekly craft sessions were planned to run over February 2023, where participants could craft together online. The dates and times were voted for by the participants using a Doodle poll. The first three sessions were related to each of the prompts for the projects, with each prompt having a related Padlet (an online platform for sharing ideas):

- Prompt 1 – **Who are you?**
- Prompt 2 – **Mini Protest Banner**
- Prompt 3 – **You Should...**

The Padlets were available for topics of discussion with the option to be added to throughout the pilot. Participants shared what they were working on in a ‘Show and Tell’ section either during the workshop or afterwards in the Padlet. Unfortunately, these online workshops were not well attended after the initial session. See Appendix D for a detailed breakdown of attendance. Feedback was collected, and participants stated that the workshops were important, so the format was revised for the main study.

Feedback Session and Form

A final session where the group could get together to share what they had created and talk about how these early stages had gone was planned, but only one person attended. A Feedback Form was created that asked specific questions about the development of the project and offered the opportunity for continued participation. Participants provided insights on the accessibility and structure of the workshops, the effectiveness of the prompts, and their overall engagement with the project. Based on this feedback, several adaptations were made:

1. Workshop Structure:

- Participants suggested more flexible scheduling options to accommodate different time zones and personal commitments. As a result, the main study included a mix of online, in-person, and hybrid events to increase accessibility and participation.

2. Session Content:

- Feedback indicated that some prompts needed clearer instructions and more context. The main study incorporated detailed explanations about craftivism to ensure participants felt confident in their contributions.

3. Technology Use:

- Participants highlighted the importance of using accessible technology. We continued to use Microsoft Teams for its accessibility features, such as closed captions, the option to have cameras off and the chat function. In-person workshops were also available for people who preferred these to online. The range of communications options were a strength especially the use of Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger and email.

4. Feedback Options:

- Participants appreciated having multiple ways to provide feedback, including anonymous options. I continued with this approach, by planning feedback forms, sessions, and Padlets to gather comprehensive and honest feedback, however people chose to share their thoughts in a final interview rather than these less personal options.

By incorporating these adaptations, the development of my methodology included principles of co-production in its design. The iterative process of

collecting and responding to feedback ensured that the study remained participant-centred and responsive to their needs.

Taking Root – Collaborative Crafting: May 2023 to August 2024

As the initial 'sowing seeds' period naturally evolved, the insights and adaptations shared by the participants organically shaped how we moved forward together. By May 2023, the project began 'taking root.' Sixteen of the original participants chose to stay and deepen their engagement, and one additional maker joined our network, bringing the total to seventeen active makers. From this point, our interactions became a continuous, interwoven dialogue. We engaged in unstructured follow-up conversations and asynchronous online chats, sharing deep reflections on their material contributions, their responses to the prompts, and the physical artefacts they were creating.

From May 2023 to April 2024, a series of monthly craft workshops were planned, however, once again, this element of the project was not well attended, despite participants continuing to request them, so the final workshop ran in September 2023. These workshops were designed to be flexible and accessible using input from participants. However, the nature of mental health challenges continued to make it difficult for some of the participants to engage, despite wanting to attend. This highlights on going barriers to support, despite adaptations being made.

Throughout feedback was continuously collected to ensure my research remained participant-centred and responsive to their needs. Participants were able to provide feedback through sessions, forms, and anonymous Padlets but online communication platforms remained more popular. Follow-up interviews were conducted to reflect on participants' experiences, the impact of craft on identity and mental health, and the

pieces they created. These objects were the focus of the interviews, employed to elicit deeper insights into the participants' journeys and the effectiveness of the research approach.

Participants had the opportunity to work collaboratively with me or individually to create stitched story quilt blocks. These quilt blocks formed an integral part of the study's analysis, representing the collective narratives and experiences of the participants. The quilt block collaborations are included throughout this thesis as the Show and Tell biographical interludes between chapters.

From March 2024 – August 2024 a series of final interviews were held to gather participants' reflections on the project and to discuss what they had created. These also provided an opportunity to discuss the overall experience, share suggestions for future research, and celebrate the participants' creative contributions. It allowed participants to decide if they would like to be involved in the analysis stage of the project.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

Analysing and interpreting creative outputs, like the quilt blocks, can be subjective and complex. Ensuring that data were systematically analysed to produce reliable and valid findings required careful planning and methodological rigour (Leavy, 2020; McNiff, 1998).

To address these complexities, I adopted a participatory approach to data analysis. This occurred as a back-and-forth dialogue with the participants.

12 of the individuals from the pilot stage were involved. They were invited to read and respond to my initial writings and interpretations, contributing their own ideas to ensure the analysis remained faithful to their lived realities. Critically, this analysis often occurred as part of the creation of the PhD quilt. The physical object functioned as a shared analytical space where themes could be visualised, discussed, and revised. By sharing and creating the quilt with participants, we engaged in what De Jaegher & Preiser (2022) term 'participatory sense-making'. The material interaction allowed for a deeper exploration of the unflattened narratives, ensuring that the participants had agency over how their stories were being stitched into the final academic text. This process is most clearly evidenced in the *Daisies Quilt Block* (Section 7.3), where the analysis of powerlessness was co-constructed through the physical layering of individual experiences.

Analysing qualitative data, especially from creative methods, was complex and time-consuming. Ensuring that the analysis was systematic and rigorous while capturing the richness of the data was a significant challenge (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Combining data from interviews, creative outputs, and other sources required a coherent analytical framework. Ensuring that these different data types complemented each other and contributed to a unified understanding of the research question was essential (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

NVivo 15 Software was employed to organise and manage the various data outputs from my data collection phase. The coding and annotation tools helped to streamline the analysis process and explore the data efficiently and systematically. The visualisation tools worked well with the more creative nature of my research design, allowing me to map the relationships between the text-based elements and material artefacts. It is important to note that the findings from this study may not be

generalisable to all neurodivergent adults with mental health conditions due to the limited sample recruited. Therefore, clearly defining the scope and limitations of the study is essential (Nind, 2014) and will be addressed in Chapter 8.

3.5.1 Creative Methods and Thematic Analysis

I used the PhD Quilt as a primary medium for understanding the lived experiences of late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults. Inspired by McCloud & Martin (1993), who used the comic book format to analyse the medium of comics, I used the quilt to describe, analyse, and physically unflatten the complexities of textile craft. A quilt, with its ability to integrate disparate fragments of equal importance, is a valuable metaphor for the research process and a dynamic analytical tool. Each participant contributed to a collective textile narrative, ensuring that the production of knowledge was a shared, rather than extractive, project (Cole & Knowles 2008).

The primary framework for data analysis was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), chosen for its flexibility and ability to synthesise diverse data types, including interview transcripts, material artefacts, and visual field notes. However, in this study, the quilt was integral to the coding process, acting as a Flow-Thirdspace where themes emerged, intertwined, and were re-contextualised. It allowed for an embodied approach to understanding narratives that verbal data might flatten or obscure (Creswell, 2013).

3.5.2 Procedures for Participatory Data Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-stage model, I integrated my creative practice into each step of the analysis:

Familiarisation with the data: This stage involved translating initial reflections into the *Anatomy of Analysis Quilt Block* (Figure 29). This was the first analysis block where I saw the raw data begin to transform into conceptual themes. My process represents a shift from traditional data management to a practice of material coding, where the relationships between participants' stories were literally and figuratively sketched and then stitched together.

Generating initial codes: Data were uploaded to NVivo 15 for systematic digital coding. Simultaneously, I engaged in material coding by selecting fabrics and threads that represented the emotional and sensory hotspots identified in the transcripts.

Searching for themes: I collated codes into potential themes, using both NVivo's visualisation tools and the physical arrangement of the quilt blocks. By moving blocks and patches around, I was able to see relationships between participants' stories. However, NVivo alone was not sufficient for comparing the varied types of data collected, so I used sketch notes, field notes, photos, and the quilt blocks to assist.

Reviewing themes: This stage involved an iterative back and forth with participants. As discussed in the *Daisies Quilt Block* (Section 7.3), participants were invited to review my initial interpretations. Their feedback was incorporated directly into the quilt, making the analysis a site of co-production (Burns et al., 2021) and addressing the risk of participant exclusion (Kara, 2023).

Defining and naming themes: I refined the specifics of each theme, ensuring the names captured the unflattened quality of the participants' experiences. My final thematic map formed the structure of my analysis

chapters, connecting the original creative prompts with the emergent research questions:

- Data generated primarily from the **‘Who are you?’** prompt evolved into themes of unmasking and resistance in Chapter 4 (**Identity and Motivation / RQ1**).
- Data from the material process of making informed the themes of monotropism and immersion in Chapter 5 (**Attention and Flow / RQ2**).
- The **‘Mini Protest Banner’** and **‘You Should...’** led to the themes of emotional regulation, relational repair, and narrative sovereignty, in Chapters 6 and 7 (**Well-being, Coping, and Transformation / RQ3**).

Producing the report: The final report consists of both this written thesis and the PhD Quilt which work together. The quilt is also a material archive of the findings, presenting the ‘who,’ ‘why,’ and ‘how’ of the research simultaneously to the viewer. My integrated approach ensured that the voices of neurodivergent individuals were heard and materialised. Inclusivity in research is supported by Leavy (2022), who documents the value of the arts in research, and Milton (2020), who advocates for participatory practices that respect the ‘double empathy problem’, where difficulties in individual interpretations are viewed as mutual. By stitching the analysis, I have created a rigorous, ethical record that reflects the complexity of Gergen’s (1991) ‘saturated self’.

input from autistic individuals (Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019) and the focus of The Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC, n.d.). As discussed by Milton (2012), the 'double empathy problem' functions as an autistic focused explanatory framework for challenging the production of knowledge; it ensures the research remains faithful to neurodivergent lived experiences. My shared status within the crafting community directly addressed this challenge.

Ethical implications of an autoethnographic approach relate to the potential for increased rapport resulting in a sense of connection. Berger (1972/2008) suggests that if we can share our own stories, we are able to relate to each other through those stories, especially ones of sadness, grief, loss or personal challenge. If we can put ourselves in the position of others, we are able to care, cultivate rapport and a relationship built on emotional reciprocity between researchers and participants and with you, the reader.



Figure 30 Stitched Field Note 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other', Spring 2022

Figure 30 includes a stitched quote from Priestley's play, *An Inspector Calls* (1945/2001), which appears in the last scene. It is the moment where

Inspector Goole demonstrates how the attitudes and behaviours of more privileged individuals contributed to the demise of Ava Smith. This is revisited in Show and Tell No. 5 *The Flags are Drowning*. The responsibility of care and compassion for my participants has guided this project, with ethical considerations being at the forefront of my approach.

As with all research that engages human participants, care was taken to address ethical issues. An information sheet (Appendix C) was provided to all potential participants to ensure informed consent was obtained and included a list of mental health support agencies. While initial ethical approval was granted in December 2022, the subsequent evolution of the project into a collaborative textile inquiry created a complex tension between institutional requirements for anonymity and the desire to credit participants for their creative labour. However, a formal addendum to name specific participants was ultimately declined by the ethics committee in 2024. Although this felt like a setback at the time, this decision led to a significant methodological shift toward a practice of material negotiation and 'veiling' of the data.

In researching human experience, prioritising considerations for care are essential. Rogers & Weller (2012: 2), ask the question: 'who cares, how, why and when?' It was my responsibility to ensure that the interests of participants guided the project throughout and that caring was a fundamental element of the process. The collection of stories had the potential to trigger past traumas, especially following times of crisis such as COVID-19 (Cramer, 2020) and because of the implications of late diagnosis (Gellini & Marczak, 2024). The complexities of social relationships in addition to the intersection between lived experience and trauma required careful consideration and continuous reflective practice. The use of creative methods was intended to shift attention to the present where

reflecting on thoughts could happen through engagement in craft. There was the potential for harm but also for benefits in the development of compassionate collaborations, production of knowledge and a greater understanding of how complex emotions such as loss, grief and trauma impact our identities (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). Allowing people to share their stories has been viewed as an indication of respect and communicating that their story is of value (Crawford & Kooper, 2022).

Kara (2017) describes how coproduction can democratise research and shift power balances but how identities also have power, the dynamics of which can compromise relationships and threaten integrity of the research. Phillips et al., (2021) discuss how autoethnography can be used to 'think with' participants but acknowledges that there can be conflicts in beliefs and understandings. Oliver et al., (2019) explore whether the benefits outweigh the cost to participants and researchers whilst Lenette et al., (2019) focus on the complexities and potential risks of coproduction. There were many issues with my methodology, and this required ongoing ethical consideration. This was one of the benefits of conducting the research in two phases. The pilot phase enabled me to work through some of those issues with participants prior to the main study.

Much of the literature related to autoethnography and ethical concerns addresses emotive issues such as oppression, discrimination, grief and loss. Engaging with literature for the methodology, was an iterative process which continued throughout the research project to ensure that the research remained ethical. I used narrative inquiry and field note writing practices to inform my reflections and attended writing workshops and webinars to develop my skills.

3.6.1 Confession Quilts

The biggest challenges I experienced related to ethical dilemmas. The complexities of my family relationships played on my mind as I read about the ethics of writing stories which are interconnected with others. Some autoethnographic authors choose not to seek consent from the people who are entwined in the narrative (Ellis, 2007). Some writers wish to protect those they love from the truths that will cause them distress (Berry & Adams, 2016). Inclusion of others in their stories, despite the consequences, because they are considered integral to the narrative, can make it difficult to protect the identities of those people (Edwards, 2021). This personal dilemma informed my approach to ethical dilemmas throughout the project. The role of psychiatry and neuroscience in alleviating suffering is beyond the scope of this review, although it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of medication on cognitive function, a factor that has undoubtedly influenced my own ability to undertake this work.

As discussed in Chapter 2, *The Confessions Series* followed a low point in Emin's life where she experienced two abortions and was a disillusioned graduate. Emin gained fame and notoriety in the contemporary art world in the 1990s for subverting traditional subjects, mediums and techniques and for placing her life experiences at the centre of her work. Her autobiographical stitched blankets inspired the use of quilt block field notes for this project as a method of showing without saying. I identify with how her art became a personal reflection of the people and experiences she encountered. In reflecting on the death of my father, shortly after graduating from a Creative Arts Degree in 1993, there are many aspects of Emin's story, that mirrored mine. I employed narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2012) to explore my personal ethical issues and attended

counselling to reflect on my own experience to reduce subjectivity when analysing the data.

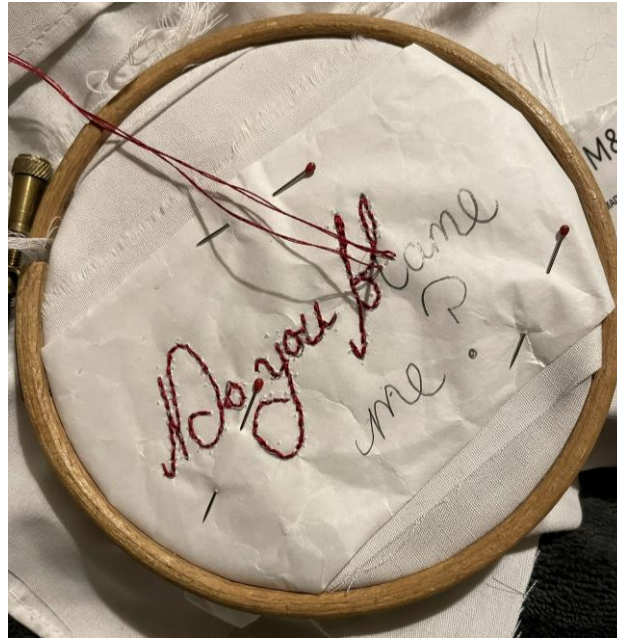


Figure 31 Stitched Field Note November 2021

During the first year of my PhD and the development of my creative approach, I met many challenges. My own diagnostic process required me to reflect on 46 years of my life. Mostly these were the mistakes I had made and the difficulties I had experienced. ADHD and autism are surrounded by pathologising rhetoric. Blame seemed to hang in the air, so I stitched the reflexive question: 'Do you blame me?' (Figure 31). In the autumn of 2021, my parenting skills and emotional resilience were challenged. It is impossible to describe and detail the circumstances without mentioning my daughter, because the distress she experienced transitioning from child and adolescent mental health services into adulthood is private and personal to her. I can only take responsibility for ensuring I continue learning from her about the support she needs from me in navigating her position in society. It remains a precarious journey fraught with self-doubt and uncertainty.

3.6.2 Ethics of the Veil

As I progressed through the data collection and analysis phase of the project, I faced the challenge of balancing the anonymity of participants required and outlined by my ethical approval from the School of Social Science ethics committee at the University of Kent and the dilemma of crediting participants for their valuable insights and creative artefacts. Again, I turned to narrative inquiry and stitched field notes to explore the complexities of ethical dilemmas. I created two quilt blocks: *Swimming through Silence* (Figure 59) and *Reasonable Adjustment* (Figure 97) to work through these conundrums. The issue of anonymity was initially highlighted by Romy's involvement in the analysis stage of the project but proved to be a wider issue. When the 2024 ethics addendum was rejected, I had to find an alternative to standard anonymisation which led to me creating the 'Ethics of the Veil.' This process involved a material and symbolic negotiation with participants to determine how their narratives and artistry could be acknowledged without compromising their safety or institutional requirements for anonymity. Rather than allowing these constraints to erase the participants' individual contributions, I worked to rework and 'veil' the data within the PhD Quilt. This is best illustrated by the *Settle Quilt Block* (Show and Tell No. 6), where I coproduced a physical lace veil with Tate to conceal a personal poem, allowing it to be hidden in visual documentation but revealed in person. Similarly, my experiences and Juno's reflections on academic pressure were transformed into the symbolic *Goat Expectations Quilt Block* (Show and Tell No. 8), while the *Daisies Quilt Block* (Section 7.3) used collaborative layering to weave the specific experiences of Romy and Hollis with my own into a collective narrative of resistance.

I also used material coding to demonstrate the integrity of participant critiques. For example, by replicating the specific font used in Banned's original 'a thorn in the side' work, her voice remains 'hidden in plain sight' within the *Crochet is my Lifeboat Quilt Block* (Section 6.2.5). These creative responses transform the quilt into a protective Flow-Thirdspace where vulnerable narratives can exist within the academy, maintaining their right to opacity while resisting the totalising 'gaze' of the institution. The material negotiation created an ongoing dialogue of trust between the participant, researcher and reader culminating in the symbolic lifting of the veil. In Chapter 8, I present an unveiled version of the *Settle Quilt Block Unveiled* (Figure 107) which demonstrates how participant agency results in a crafted dynamic process that combines protected refuge and empowered visible consent.

Furthermore, the 'Ethics of the Veil' and the practice of material coding were central in the management of data that I chose not to include in written form. While participants consented to discuss craft, our unstructured conversations inevitably touched upon or silently circled sensitive subjects such as gendered violence, disordered eating, and distorted self-image. To transcribe and analyse these disclosures would have felt extractive and crossed ethical boundaries. However, the emotional weight of these shared experiences remained in my thoughts as I wrestled with how to include them without violating trust. I used material coding as an ethical, protective container for these experiences, selecting specific fabrics that held my own memories of turning to joy to escape the nightmare of similar traumas. By wrapping these unwritten, unspeakable themes in fabrics that represented safety and joy, the material provided physical refuge within the research process.

3.7 Strengths and Limitations of the research design

My primary justification for using creative methods in qualitative research is related to ethical principles especially the medicalisation of difference (Conrad, 1992) and biopower (Foucault, 1990). These factors can result in the exclusion of neurodivergent adults in the decisions made concerning their well-being (Milton et al., 2014). In addition, the commodification of autism (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2012) and the self-help industry (Purser, 2019) highlight some of the issues with capitalist approaches to support.

Although I have my own experiences of the diagnosis process and crafting, I acknowledge that this singular perspective presents a significant risk of subjectivity. However, the use of textile craft/craftivism as a creative method does allow for the representation of complex emotions. Many neurodivergent people have a heightened insight into their own social experiences due to the challenges they face and the consequence of misinterpretations (Mitchell et al., 2021). Despite the benefits of autoethnographic approaches, there is an increased risk of oversharing, especially in the age of social media (Agger, 2012), and this could bias my interpretation. One of the barriers to knowledge production based on lived experience has been the funding and focus on causation and remediation (Benevides et al., 2020). Creativity is an innovative means of representing information, reducing the risk of making assumptions about participant's views and priorities. It provides an alternative for interpretation of the social world, in a society that places value on normality, which is a strength of this project.

Ethical considerations have significantly influenced the methodology and outcomes of my study. The involvement of participants with mental health challenges required a careful balance between allowing space for reflection on personal adversities and avoiding potential harm from revisiting

distressing experiences. This was managed by seeking fully informed consent at each stage, particularly during the analysis, where feedback and discussion informed the content. However, this process may have influenced the data collected, as participants were aware their responses would be reviewed and could change what was written.

The emotional and psychological safety of both participants and me was paramount, leading to disengagement from sensitive subjects at times. This may have resulted in incomplete data on certain topics. Additionally, as a way of reducing the influence of my own ethical stance and positionality on data interpretation, I chose to withdraw from social media at the end of the data collection phase to process the emotional impact of participants' stories and to avoid bias from social expectations. This was also a strategy for ensuring that I made a clear distinction between being in the field as a researcher and my position as an insider.

There were practical limitations related to the physical skills and abilities of participants, especially for those who wanted to stitch and create textile pieces independently. Adaptations were made to accommodate physical disabilities, injuries and conditions that made the use of fine motor skills challenging, with the option to contribute via alternative forms. This included pottery, poetry, zines and a play. A strength of my research design was the pilot stage which allowed the views and feedback from participants to be incorporated into the main study to make it more inclusive.

Adaptations were identified through a combination of participant feedback and consultation with participatory research literature. Preliminary interviews and surveys were conducted to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by participants and pilot crafting sessions were held to gather direct input on the tools and methods that would be most helpful. The implementation was an iterative process, with continuous

feedback being gathered and adjustments made as needed to improve accessibility and effectiveness. This approach ensured that the research was inclusive and respectful of the diverse needs of all participants, which was another strength.

Limited resources posed several challenges, particularly in terms of the availability of materials, financial constraints, and time limitations. Financial constraints restricted the number of craft kits available, limiting the number of participants who could receive one. Additionally, time limitations have impacted both participant availability and my capacity to provide the individualised workshops requested by participants. These took hours to negotiate and organise. It is important to note that it was mental health challenges that restricted access to the workshops and not the time or effort that had gone into arranging them. There were days where participants expressed how much they wanted to attend but were not feeling mentally well enough to do so. To mitigate the limitations related to resources, several strategies were implemented. Donations of materials were sought from the online craft community. The use of recycled and upcycled materials was encouraged, adding a unique sustainability dimension to the creative process while being cost effective. There was very little I could do to overcome the significant mental health challenges individuals faced, other than to offer compassion and understanding.

A potential limitation of this study relates to its primary focus on institutional friction. The research was influenced by an awareness of how professional environments can become 'hostile landscapes' for neurodivergent individuals and so my analytical lens did focus on themes of epistemic injustice and narrative theft. I acknowledge that therefore I may not have captured every instance of how supportive some institutions can be, however, my intent was to provide a targeted examination of the

challenges individuals face and the mechanisms of resistance required to navigate them.

There were significant limitations with my sampling strategy. Participant diversity, including variations in age, gender, and socioeconomic status, was the main issue which affected the generalisability of the findings. Convenience sampling was used due to constraints of doctoral research, i.e. time and resources. To ensure diverse representation, strategies such as targeted recruitment efforts, inclusive outreach programs, and collaboration with community organisations could be employed to engage a broader spectrum of participants. Despite efforts to adopt a design based on coproduction, there remained a power imbalance, as with any research, particularly when participants were reliant on guidance or instructions from me and this is given consideration in the analysis and discussion chapters. In addition, the findings are limited by the socio-economic status of the participants. To enter a Flow-Thirdspace, an individual requires a baseline of physical safety, material resources, and a private environment such as a desk or a creative space. Perhaps most significantly, it requires disposable time. For neurodivergent people living in poverty or those trapped in the precarious cycles of the gig economy, the rhythmic labour of craft is likely to be a luxury they cannot afford. My research may therefore be viewed through a middle-class or stable-professional lens in that it reflects the experiences of those who have the cultural and temporal capital to turn a practice of refuge into a doctoral study.

Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge a cognitive and linguistic bias within the research sample. The participants are largely late-diagnosed adults who possess the verbal and intellectual resources required to theorise their own pain. For example, they were able to engage with complex concepts such as 'epistemic injustice' and 'neoliberalism.' This represents a specific type of neurodivergence. I recognise that this study

does not capture the voices of neurodivergent individuals with significant intellectual disabilities or those who are non-speaking and lack access to these academic scripts to define resistance. My findings regarding the Flow-Thirdspace must therefore be understood within this specific cognitive context.

Finally, I recognise that my perspective is situated within a specific professional and personal landscape. My ability to engage in this work, and to use craft as a 'Great Refusal' (Marcuse, 1964/2013), was supported by the privilege of having both a dedicated workspace and opportunity to pursue a doctorate. I am acutely aware that for many neurodivergent individuals, this remains an inaccessible luxury. My own sensitivity to the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy (Weber, 1904-1905/2001) also creates a specific analytical filter. I have managed this positional bias through consistent reflexivity and critical dialogue with my supervisors. By detailing the limits of my approach, I ensure that it is understood that Flow-Thirdspace is not a generic fix.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a qualitative, participatory methodology designed to capture the nuanced, non-linear experiences of late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults. By choosing an innovative approach that combines unstructured interviews with creative textile methods, I have created a methodological Thirdspace that resists the flattening of human experience characteristic of the medical model. I have offered an alternative to traditional data extraction by prioritising coproduction, positioning participants as experts by experience whose material and narrative contributions are the foundation of this research.

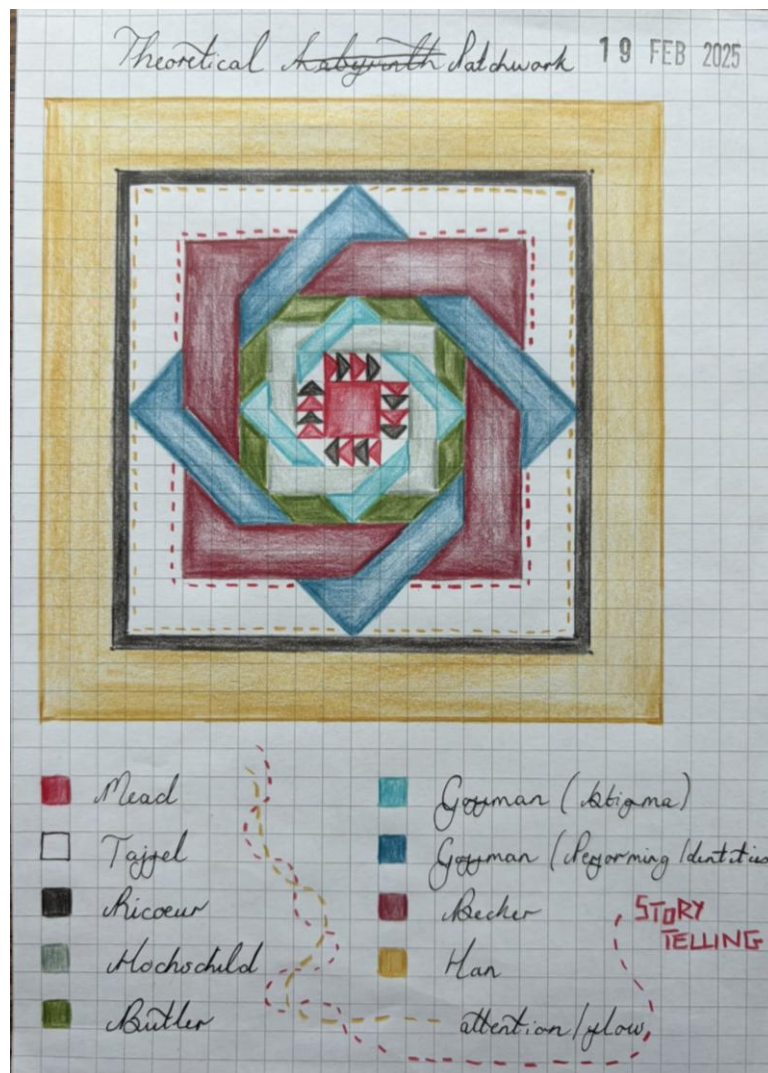


Figure 32 Theoretical Patchwork Sketch, February 2025

The *Theoretical Patchwork Sketch* (Figure 32) was drawn as a visual and conceptual map of my methodological journey. It was an ongoing iterative process. Just as patchwork requires the slow, methodical piecing together of complex parts, the construction of this thesis has required a constant negotiation between theory and practice. The interwoven geometric shapes, which form the basis of the patchwork design, reflect the prismatic nature of identity and mental health. The interwoven of concepts, including Goffman's (1959) identity performance, Mead's (1934/2015) social self, and Becker's (1963) work on labelling illustrate the dynamic intersection of power and positionality. As I conducted the interviews and constructed the thesis the work of Han (2015a), Soja (1996) and

Csikszentmihályi's (1990) became foundational in the development of my theory of Flow-Thirdspace.

My methodological chapter provides clear justification for the analysis that follows. By using the PhD Quilt as an analytical tool, I can 'show' what words alone cannot 'say' (Wittgenstein, 1921/1922). This sets the stage for Chapter 4, where I transition from the 'how' of the research to the 'who' of the participants. Using the 'Identity Pizza' metaphor as a central framework, I will begin the core analysis by exploring how Flow-Thirdspace allows neurodivergent individuals to reject one-dimensional labels and reconstruct multifaceted, unflattened identities. The reliability and validity of my work can be found in my methodological transparency. The process of stitching the research, literally and figuratively, ensures that the findings remain grounded in the lived, sensory, and often hidden realities of the participants. By embracing the messiness of this participatory process, I have documented a record of resistance that captures some of the complexity of the neurodivergent self within a 'Burnout Society'.

Show and Tell No. 4 Don't chase answers

The fourth biographic interlude illustrates how this research was guided by an ethical framework established in Chapter 3. I prioritised the concept of 'nothing about us without us' discussed in Chapter 5 and the dismantling of traditional researcher/participant power dynamics. My stitched field note (Figure 33) is a small, stitched warning. It is a material reminder of the ethical tightrope I walk as a researcher. The phrase 'Don't chase answers' is cross-stitched in a simple, almost pixelated font, intended to evoke a digital glitch or a pause in the relentless stream of information.

Don't chase answers (Figure 33) captures a moment of methodological crisis. In the early stages of data collection, before I fully understood how the analysis would evolve, I found myself falling into the trap I sought to critique and finding it difficult not to look for neat, categorisable 'answers' that would validate my work. I was fearful of unconsciously flattening the multidimensional lives of my participants into data points that fit a predetermined narrative. The slow meticulous process of cross stitching the words 'Don't chase answers' represents my resistance to that impulse.

I was inspired by Horkheimer & Adorno's (1947/2002) critique of 'the culture industry'. They argue that the drive for standardisation strips away everything unique and complex. It reduces life to a calculable unit. In my research, this was experienced as the pressure to turn my participants into a product. There was the temptation to chase neat answers for academic consumption. By refusing this, I rejected the 'McDonaldization' of identity. I consciously chose the messy and the unflattened path instead. I realised that by chasing answers, I risked treating my participants as solutions to a theoretical problem, commodities to be extracted to build my own academic capital rather than complex humans in deserving of respect and compassion.

This danger is demonstrated in Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), where participants famously felt betrayed by how they were portrayed and flattened into sociological types rather than recognised as full individuals. I did not want my participants to read this thesis and see themselves reduced to 'answers' that position me as the 'expert.'

Therefore, my stitching was as a permanent, tactile 'note-to-self' reminding me to take my time and stop chasing. I started to understand how important it was to listen to the silences, the hesitations, and the contradictions. It was my reminder to not smooth out the edges. The meaning comes from the wisdom and humility involved in fostering relationships. By refusing to chase a single, convenient truth, I allowed the space for the unflattened, messy, and meaningful reality of the Flow-Thirdspace to emerge in the chapters that follow. *Don't chase answers* (Figure 33) is an example of a mini protest banner, protesting against subjectivity in the research design and bias in my interpretation and analysis.



Figure 33 Stitched Field Note, July 2022

Chapter 4: Who are you? Identity and Motivation



Figure 34 Who are you? Stitched field note, December 2023

4.1 Introduction: From 'Flatlands' to Flow-Thirdspace

The reasons neurodivergent people engage in craft are a foundational concept for the development of my thesis; however, I started by trying to understand how flow sustained my own motivation for crafting. I did this by translating my own dark flat days into stitched imagined futures filled with the vibrantly coloured and textured textile creations I dreamed of making when times were tough. I propose that craft, and specifically my multi-layered PhD quilt (which is not flat), which directly addresses my first research question about motivation and flow. This is therefore a practice that resists simplification and reintroduces depth, texture, and multiple perspectives to lived experience and identity.

After I lost baby Jack in 2009, I decided to make my first ever quilt to push myself forward, learn to accept what had happened and try to continue living my life. The process was clearly defined, the steps of making are simple: imagine your creation, find the materials and then make the artefact. This type of becoming builds on the original concept in *Flatland* by Edwin Abbott (1884/2008), the ‘unflattening’ of academic writing presented by Sousanis (2015) and creates justification for the use of Soja’s (1996) Thirdspace, in understanding the role of craft as resistance. In his satirical novella, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Abbott (1884/2008) imagines a two-dimensional world inhabited by geometric characters. For the citizens of the ‘Flatland’, life is constrained by the lines and angles of their plane; social hierarchy is rigid, and the concept of a third dimension, of ‘up’, is unknown and subversive. The protagonist, a simple square, is confronted with the radical possibility of a world with depth. This is a reality that the closed-minded leaders of his world, ruled by what I conceptualise as a ‘Televised Mind,’ (discussed in section 4.3.1) actively suppress. A ‘Televised Mind’ is a thought process that can only perceive a single perspective.

In this chapter I will explore how the pressures of contemporary life, critiqued by Marcuse (1964/2013) as the disciplinary force of the ‘One-dimensional’ society and Han (2015a) as the ‘Burnout Society’, create a social ‘Flatlands’. It is a world that demands conformity, certainty, and the performance of a simplified self, a pressure felt acutely by the late-diagnosed neurodivergent adults in my study. Informed by Abbott’s (1884/2008) character narratives and Sousanis (2015) who ‘unflattens’ an academic thesis into a doctoral graphic novel, I frame the motivations for individuals to engage in textile craft as a radical act. I describe how our

protagonist, not a humble square, but a more complex hexagon, discovers the third dimension. It is not a square peg in a round hole problem.

The unflattened dimensions of the PhD quilt form the intersection of a lived and experiential fields; a textile-based reimagining of Soja's (1996) Thirdspace accessed through the concept of Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow states. Flow-Thirdspace is a space of depth, complexity, and resistance, where an unflattened self can emerge. In this chapter I focus on prompt one, the foundational question posed to participants: 'Who are you?' and argue that for neurodivergent individuals, craft acts as a critical tool for resisting societal flattening and reconstructing multifaceted identities. In doing so, this chapter addresses my first research question, demonstrating how the motivation to craft is inextricably linked to the neurodivergent process of meaning-making through flow.

The analysis is structured in four parts. Firstly, I establish the 'flat' context of pressure and misrecognition that participants are reacting against, presenting the symbolic hexagon as an analogy for exploring this oppressive social 'Flatlands'. Secondly, I present the *Collective Identity Quilt Block* and its 'Identity Pizza' metaphor as a central framework to analyse the unflattened selves that participants construct through making. Thirdly, I discuss the motivations for this creative work, arguing that they are fundamentally acts of resistance against the pressures of the one-dimensional society, from the neoliberal demand to monetise passions to the critique of restrictive gender roles. Finally, I examine what happens when an artefact from our imagined dimension is presented to the established hierarchy or 'rulers of Flatlands', in a case study of the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) rejection. My detailed example of our collaborative submission to, and rejection from, the RA Summer Show 2024 will be used

to test the resilience of this proposed creative Flow-Thirdspace against the institutional power of the mainstream art world. Throughout this journey, I argue that for neurodivergent crafters, the needle and thread are tools for breaking a one-dimensional plane, for escaping the 'Flatlands' and building a world with depth, one stitch at a time.

4.2 The Tyranny of the Flat: The Burnout of a One-Dimensional Self

Goffman's (1959) concept of masking encapsulates the lived experience of participants and their responses to the one-dimensional pressure to conform to expectations and fit the constraints of 'being normal'. Marcuse's (1964/2013) theoretical perspective of conformity as suppressed critical consciousness and Han's (2015) self-optimisation as a manipulative quality of the 'achievement society' both imply the flattening of human experience and distraction from who people truly want to be. These theories present a painful reality for many neurodivergent people, who struggle to mask their differences. Oakley and Parker are key examples of the impact of Goffman's (1959) identity performance and stigma associated with difference. This masking contributed to their motivation to resist the pressures through craft.

All participants have been given pseudonyms as outlined in the ethical considerations section of the methodological chapter to protect their anonymity and each name was carefully chosen to reflect an aspect of the participant's personality, values or interests. Oakley was chosen as my first example of this approach, following a wonderful comment she made about trees. "I have never met a tree, I didn't like", she declared and when asked

what her favourite tree was, she went on to inform me that it was an oak. After receiving a photo of her hugging, the trunk of an enormous ancient oak tree (Figure 35), the pseudonym was fixed in my mind, it would be Oakley.



Figure 35 Photo from participant - Oakley hugging an oak tree

Oakley described herself as a professional working in mental health support including services for autistic individuals. She has a master's degree in psychology and learning disabilities where she specialised in autism. She identifies as being neurodivergent and loves craft, mostly knitting and crochet but can also sew. “I have a love / hate relationship with my sewing machine”, she informed me during her first interview.

Oakley’s professional journey clearly illustrates the personal cost of navigating a ‘Burnout Society’. During the first year of data collection, Oakley had left her “dream job” or what she had thought would be the ideal job following her studies. She had also been considering applying for a doctorate in clinical psychology again but had eventually decided not to apply at that point. She described how the application process involves “a

whole lot of hoop jumping” and confessed she had thrown herself into creative projects as a distraction.

Her feelings about this period were raw and unequivocal:

And you know, looking back now, I was desperately unhappy, and I used almost all of my annual leave entitlement just to get away from the situation and... and I felt very... I felt very bad that I'd got myself into that situation. (Interview 3, 11 December 2023)

How Oakley expressed herself through her craft and clothing was apparent in both her contributions to the PhD Quilt and our interactions via email. She sent me several photos of how she expressed who she was through her clothing reinforcing the theory that words are inadequate and flat when attempting to express the complex, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory roles and internal states that exist all at once.



Figure 36 Image of self-portrait quilt block made by Oakley in response to the prompt 'Who are you?'

Her struggle and attempts to find balance were discussed in depth and expressed through the materials incorporated in the collaged quilt block she created (Figure 36). Oakley used the materials provided in the craft kit to create her collage. She resisted a flat portrayal by laying fabric, embroidery, embellishments including a miniature knitted project. She placed her "conflicting affections" of the garden outside and the indoor activity of crafting, side by side. The layers of meaning in her symbols (oak tree, inside/outside, her blank face, cat, bookcase and dollhouse) demonstrate a move towards multidimensional self-representation. Her detailed craft process and the diversity of her interests represent an act of unflattening her experience.

These external pressures were not limited to the professional environment. Participants also expressed deeply personal responses to the imposition of painful labels. The burden to always become a better version of yourself, of never being enough just as you are, were often internalised as negative, flat labels. The self-imposition of social comparison was equally detrimental for Parker. The journey for Parker towards authenticity, and the deliberate, narrative choice of their pseudonym provides a clear example of this struggle and the beginning of a craft-based response. The story of our research relationship begins with an act of personal making intended to counter an act of invalidation.

I met Parker at a support group for people exploring the meaning of their neurodivergence and in that first meeting I was drawn to how they explained their search for understanding differences in gender identity. They were quiet, gentle and I could relate to their sense of feeling a little lost. I was speechless when I heard someone then deny their existence by expressing the disbelief of any other genders than male and female. I watched Parker shrink into invalidation; the incredulity folded into silence. Before the next session, I made Parker a golden yellow pompom, in solidarity and that solidified our friendship, based around our passion for crafting. Therefore, our conversations during the data collection did not follow a formal interview structure. They unfolded in fragments, Parker's late-night replies, the sharing of craft related content, interactions spanning days or weeks. These exchanges emerged through trust, distraction, care, a shared understanding of avoidance, and curiosity. Rather than treating this as messy data, I embraced the adaptations that enabled Parker to contribute in a way that they felt comfortable. Their appreciation was expressed by Parker in the following postcard.

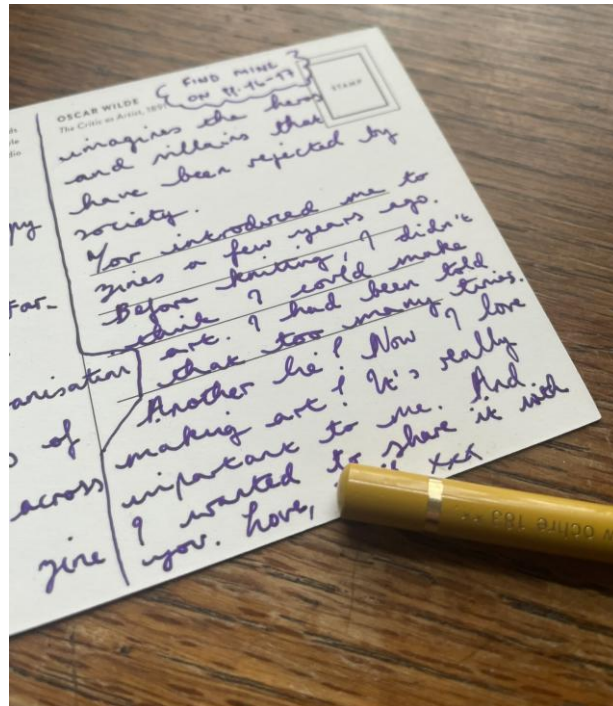


Figure 37 Postcard from Parker

I chose the pseudonym Parker deliberately. As their contributions unfolded, they reminded me of Peter Parker. For this shy and underestimated character, becoming Spider-Man was never just about the powers. These are shifts that represent learning to hold contradiction. Parker's transformation was stitched through trauma, responsibility, and the tension between visibility and concealment. In choosing this name, I wanted to reflect the quiet resilience I saw in them: the way they carried uncertainty, the way they shrank in moments of invalidation, and the way they still showed up.

Their quilt block (Figure 38) provides a harsh visualisation of these imposed identities. It was created from a zine Parker made, printed onto fabric and stitched into the PhD quilt. Alongside the image, I added a quote from a

postcard they wrote to me (Figure 37): 'Before knitting, I didn't think I could make art. I had been told that too many times... Another lie!' Parker's quilt block provides a tangible record of the painful, one-dimensional labels that can be imposed by an external world. A world that fails to understand neurodivergent experience. The abrasive, stitched words are evidence of the 'Secondspace' discourses of failure and otherness that my research challenges.

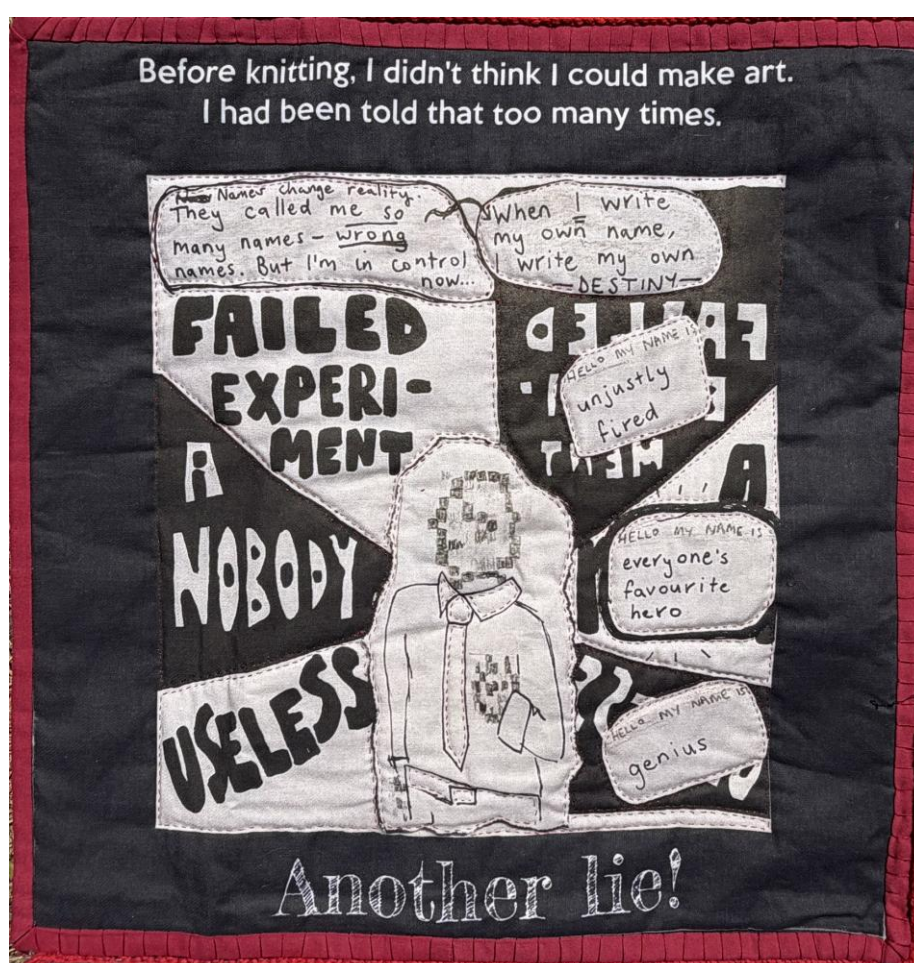


Figure 38 Quilted version of Parker's Zine page

On the left-hand side words like 'FAILED EXPERIMENT', 'NOBODY', and 'USELESS' encapsulate the essence of a flattened identity with a text bubble resisting the power enacted by others. By stating that 'Names change reality' and reclaiming autonomy with the bold statement, 'But I'm

in control now', Parker's work foreshadows the identity reconstruction that is clear on the right side of the canvas. These harsh criticisms and judgements are skilfully reflected as a mirror image; however, this section is where Parker is embodying resistance in the phrase 'I write my own destiny', a theme that is reflected in analysis of many of the participants' contributions. The multi-page format of a zine has the ability to unflatten more traditional interview formats and redress the power balance between researcher and participant by enabling a more authentic exchange of ideas. Zines prioritise the voice and contributions of the maker (Walsh, 2025). The opportunity to express views in creative ways, positions the participant as the one with the knowledge, responsible for what is shared and how.

By placing the externally conflicting and imposed identities side by side with Parker's resistance and unwillingness to accept the status quo, different facets of identity can be explored sequentially and simultaneously. This approach is especially useful for the expression of continuous conflict between external demands and an internal state. It allows the maker to challenge the social process of labelling. Parker's layering of narratives also reflects the aims of graphic medicine, where visual storytelling is used to explore complex emotional and medical experiences through comics (Green & Myers, 2010). In addition, McCloud & Martin's (1993) *Understanding Comics* explains how the interplay of image and text allows for nuanced, nonlinear narratives. The concept of closure, where the reader plays an active role in interpreting the meaning, mirrors how Parker makes the tensions and contradictions within their lived experiences, visible.

For other participants, their distress in relation to conformity to social norms is shown in the painful, disorienting experience of living in the 'Flatlands' when stable identities dissolve. Aster's story, for example, provides a familiar narrative of what happens when the core roles of wife and mother are disrupted in her following quote:

I was lost for a long time... It severely affected my mental health when I ended my marriage. I was no longer a wife and the expectations that came with that role were no longer there, which caused me to question who I was as a person. I was in limbo and everything was so uncertain, my future, finances, everything. It was so very difficult to cope with it all. (Facebook Messenger transcript, March 2023)

Societal narratives lead people to believe that life is a linear story of success building upon success, as an individual follows the normative trajectory of graduation, employment, marriage and family. However, Bauman's (2000) *Liquid Modernity* provides a counter-narrative. Aster's experience of being "in limbo" is a perfect illustration of life in a 'liquid' world where the solid structures that once defined identity, like marriage, have melted away, leaving a profound sense of uncertainty and precarity.

In the rest of this chapter, I will explore how Parker, Oakley, Aster and the other participants use Flow-Thirdspace to reject these labels and write their own, more complex stories. I will argue how the crafted responses to the research prompts begin to challenge one-dimensional understanding of the self and demonstrate some of the participants' motivations for expressing a more complex and nuanced identity. The craft practices are often dismissed as hobbies however the creative practices discussed in the

rest of the chapter provide an alternative perspective where they are essential acts of refuge and self-care against pressure and misrecognition.

4.3 The 'Identity Pizza': Slices of an Unflattened Self

In thinking about how to represent the diverse nature of my participants and their human experiences, I made the decision to abandon standardised demographic categories in favour of a multidimensional visual representation of how individuals described themselves. *Collective Identity Quilt Block* (Figure 39) is a collaborative artefact involving contributions from participants as part of my PhD research project and other creative workshops that I ran whilst developing the methodology. It is a stitched table of participants' details. Instead of asking standardised demographic questions, I asked participants to tell me who they are.

The *Collective Identity Quilt Block* emerged through social interactions during the data collection period. Based on my first prompt, 'Who are you?', the resulting collection of characteristics, expressed through symbols, illustrates a shared understanding of who we are. We are not simply one thing; rather, we are a collection of interests, roles, and values. Our differences shape our sense of belonging. The prompt 'Who are You?' was significant here in eliciting that information and is exemplified by Oakley and Parker in their contributions discussed in the previous section.

In total I had twenty-two participants who signed consent forms, illustrated by the clear strikes in the tally chart in the bottom left-hand corner (a nod to Ruth First's dressing gown collar tally discussed in Section 2.4.). There

were a further two individuals who contributed to the research but due to their ongoing challenges did not wish to have the commitment formalised (reflected in the broken lines and the loose black thread). These two individuals were both involved in significant caring roles. Lola's mother had cancer and sadly passed away in early summer of 2025 and due to complex personal circumstances, Dara currently provides primary care for her grandson in place of his mother. There were many others who contributed to the quilt through the workshops I held during the data collection. The hanging thread indicates that collective identity and engagement with Flow-Thirdspace is ongoing and therefore not quantifiable. The key elements of individual identities and how the twenty-four unique people who contributed to this project identified themselves, therefore provides a solution to not wanting to influence the concept of identity by having predefined categories.



Figure 39 Collective Identity Quilt Block, June 2025

A recurring theme is that identity is intimately shaped by passion, age, and meaningful relationships. These relationships are reflected in how people see themselves and in what they actively do. Some of the 'labels' are responses to a prompt 'what is your most important characteristic?', others are answers to the question, 'who are you?', however all of the stitched descriptors indicate just how differently people viewed themselves. Common themes are relational identities where people expressed how significant their gendered unpaid caring role for others was, for example: middle aged mum, wife, mother, grandmother, great grandmother and partner. The role pets played was noted in terms such as dog advocate, cat dad, land snail mum and dog mum.

At the time of writing Chapter 4 (Summer 2025), there was a distinct sting of loss in my own identity following the recent death of my own beloved dog. There remains an ache in my heart as I reflect that for many of those years that I walked Sherlock to the local primary school to collect my children, many people simply referred to me as Sherlock's mum. However, the space he left was filled by a puppy, resulting in new identity as I slowly become known as Marnie's mum. The theme of identity loss is referenced later in this chapter by Aster and discussed in detail in Chapter 6. There were a distinct number of people who identify themselves by the things they actively do: crafter, gamer, artist, zine maker, outdoor swimmer, singer, reader, runner, craftivist, visual poet, explorer, musician and student. People's ages were also common responses and important for understanding their historical context and the cultural shifts they had lived through. The participants in my study ranged from 24 – 75 years old. It is not possible to calculate the mean age because not everyone disclosed their ages but to many of them, this was an important aspect of who they are.

Others shared emotional states and personality characteristics at the start of their interview: scared, very, very, very hyper, quietly determined, day dreamer, chatty, empowered and sad. Unsurprisingly for research focused on the lived experiences of neurodivergent people, diagnostic labels were disclosed: autistic, ADHD, likely has BPD. A few shared their gender identity for example cis bi woman, more shared their cultural identity: Welsh, American, Egyptian, German, Australian and British and for others their professional identity was a key aspect of who they were, even if it was something they tried to be but it didn't work out for them: "I tried working as a teacher but..."

The identity pizza analogy, represented by a textile pizza (Figure 39), offered by one participant, captures the multiple dimensions of identity: at the base, the core of who we are, lies in the physical and embodied elements such as age, appearance, and inherent traits (blue eyes, brown hair). This is representational of 'Firstspace' (Soja, 1996), the material reality of our identity. The toppings, aspects that are temporal and transient, demonstrate identity's social construction, shaped by external perceptions and preconceptions. This fluid, shifting aspect forms 'Secondspace', where identity is conceived and reshaped by others through frameworks such as diagnostic labels. Yet it is the pizza, in its entirety, that provides a space for us to exist, encompassing our contradictions, complexities, and paradoxes. This is what I refer to as a Flow-Thirdspace, where everything comes together as a true representation of our collective identity. Juno explains her feelings towards reclaiming diagnostic labels in the following quote.

As I've got older. I would put them [diagnostic labels] on my pizza [...] because a label can be used, it's like the goat... Goat was a

derogatory term for the climbers and now they call themselves goats. We have goat fest here [...] you can like a derogatory label [...] I am dirty cause I've been camping for a week, and I am hairy 'cause I don't care about spending heaps of money on haircuts and I'm a rock climber. You think that's an insult that it's not. Like neurodiversity or a disability, I'm forever pulling people up for having internalised stigma about disability because they don't realise ... (Final interview, 16 May 2024)

Nearly everyone I spoke to, first and foremost, identified themselves by name, but ethical research prevents the disclosure of participant identities. Here, Josie stepped in and offered her name, not just as a name placeholder, but as my daughter and an integral part of who I am and my motivation for undertaking a PhD. Her name symbolises how central names are to identity. This is apparent in the largest community arts project in the world, the *AIDS NAMES Quilt* (Jones, 2016) where naming those who had died of AIDS was fundamental (see Section 2.4). Just as Josie's name threads through my narrative as a symbol of identity and kinship, the *Collective Identity Quilt Block* backing, crafted through the crazy quilting method, materially echoes this entangled, multi-sourced form of selfhood. The process allowed me to reuse scraps from the other blocks of my PhD quilt (Figure 40). It is therefore a technique that embodies how multiple identities, even when fractured and messy, still come together to form a whole, mirroring Goffman's (1959) notion that selfhood is not singular but a dynamic, multifaceted performance.



Figure 40 Backing of Collective Identity Quilt Block

In the next section I will now explore some of the key slices or themes of this collective 'pizza', starting with the foundational experience of neurodivergent identity itself, which is often defined by a rejection of simple binaries.

4.3.1 Slice 1: The Rejection of Binaries - The Neurodivergent Self

Much of the time when I sit down to create a quilt block, I do not fully know what I am doing or how it will turn out. This process of embracing uncertainty is reflected in Bauman's (2000) argument of liquidity where previous structures of societal stability have become uncertain or fluid, characterised by constant change. However, we are surrounded by binaries suggesting absolute truths which Bauman (2000) rejected in favour of contextual situated knowledge similar to the theories of Haraway (1988)

discussed in the introduction. Within the quilting of a block there is space to embrace uncertainty without viewing it as a failure of knowledge echoing Bauman's (2000) recognition that fluidity defines our era and Haraway's (1988) insistence that situated knowledge arises precisely from our current, embodied position in the world.

I chose the binary of ordinary/special to challenge online discourse that neurodivergence into a commodified spectacle. Supported by Cvetkovich's (2012) framing of crafting as a 'utopia of ordinary habit', my intuitive and responsive process was influenced by my embodied experience of engaging with the data. In *One Hundred Hexies* this is represented by our metaphorical protagonist from section 4.1; hexagons, affectionately known as 'hexies' in the crafting community, each one part of a collection of my creative field notes.



Figure 41 *One Hundred Hexies Quilt Block*, Summer 2023

This block was made during a period in my PhD research where I had been reflecting on how values and beliefs are shaped by perspective, our situated knowledge; examples of how dichotomies like private/public, good/bad, ordinary/special get reinforced, especially through social media. In a culture where spectacle is commodified and competitive, 'specialness' becomes a performance, one calibrated for consumption and exclusion. Being 'special' demands conformity to narrow norms shaped by social capital leaving those who cannot perform due to disability, neurodivergence, socio-economic status, or ethnicity invisible. This flattening of society is reminiscent of Han's (2015a) self-surveillance, oppression, and a subtle form of self-harm, compelling people to shape themselves in service of marketable perfection.

As Sunstein (2009) suggests, extremes are pushed to the forefront until 'special' is so diluted by repetition that it loses all meaning, and the ordinary becomes obsolete. In this sense, a capitalist society cannot tolerate the ordinary because it cannot be packaged, branded, or sold. That is why being ordinary becomes an act of resistance in its refusal to improve, optimise, or perform. In my quilt block, the word 'ordinary' is stitched with a multitude of colours, textures, and fabrics, each fragment reflecting the difference and depth of my participants' experiences. In contrast, 'special' is constructed from identical pieces of Liberty lawn, a fabric marketed as aspirational, repeating itself into flatness. One side holds narrative, the other mirrors a system that thrives on sameness disguised as uniqueness. I found this expressed in the lyrics of Fontaines D.C.'s (2020) song *Televised Mind* which inspired this block with its critique of hypnotic repetition and conformity where nuance gets traded for spectacle. Both the 'Televised Mind' and *One Hundred Hexies Quilt Block* are responses to the echo chamber effect where through social media, neurodivergence, people's beliefs and identities are increasingly shaped and reinforced by agreement and reinforced by social approval.

This block is my pixilated rejection of this binary thinking and conforming to a 'Televised Minds' approach. It allows individuals to be whoever they want by creating space to sit with complexity. It consists of one hundred hexagons (hexies), each one neither fully ordinary nor fully special but designed to fluctuate in and out of attention in a state of flux like people do.

The word "hex" works on multiple levels: geometric, magical, resistant. It is a stitched protest defying flattening by reflecting slowness, subtlety, and a textured kind of thinking-through-making. It took weeks to make each individual hexagon. The block might look decorative, but it is intended to be political in how it critiques black-and-white thinking, and how social media encourages division.

4.3.2 Slice 2: The Performed vs. Authentic Self

Goffman's (1959) concept of performing identities provides reference for my next section which analyses the participants who described situations where identities were expressed as masking the authentic self in order to fit in or unmasking as an act of resistance. It is necessary here to examine how this rejection of binaries is closely tied to the neurodivergent experience of masking, a concept perfectly encapsulated by Goffman's (1959) distinction between a 'front stage' performed self and a 'backstage' authentic self. This tension was a recurring theme, clearly articulated by Oakley in her narrative of professional dress versus personal comfort. Oakley has worked in a variety of industries over her career history which has necessitated a more formal approach to dressing, such as suits. However, over the years her style has changed and become more reflective of her personality. In her contribution, she has chosen an informal jeans

and t-shirt outfit for her stitched self-portrait and explained in our subsequent discussion how these are relevant to her sense of self. She describes how her style and personality developed and was increasingly expressed through what she wore. It is this top layer of the self, the external presentation that is easily manipulated and moulded by the individual providing the opportunity to belong, conform or rebel as discussed by Oakley:

I started in sort of catering roles and worked for quite posh hotels, so you had to wear a very posh uniform and being a chef again... uniform. And then I worked in quite a few sort of banks and building societies...again, uniform or suits...very posh. And I've been a department manager. I was responsible for about 170 people, which was horrific and I never, ever want to do that again...but again suits and then when I started working [...] I developed a much sort of softer style. I was able to wear, I think, what represents a lot more of my personality. So, sort of my work clothes would be more sort of dresses or tunics and leggings and jewellery. But then when I got home jeans and T shirt. Really comfy jeans and T shirt. For going out, it's jeans and a nice top and I... I never dreamt of a wedding dress like that. That just isn't me.
(Interview 3, 11 December 2023)

The role of clothing in Oakley's performance of identity is supported by literature on expression of gender and sexual identity (Hetu et al., 2014; Fountain, 2023) and is echoed in the contributions of another participant. Sage described a loss of identity following the birth of her first child in lockdown and the subsequent depression she experienced. She shared how shifts in her identity were reflected in her clothing:

I feel I went in phases [...] I used to go to work with like glitter and like wearing cargo pants. I used to love cargo pants. I would wear a glittery top with them for example, or sequined stuff and people would tell me this does not go with that, and I thought yes, it does... I'm trying to be a walking piece of art... Yeah. But over the years [...] I'm always in a white T-shirt and a pair of jeans now. (Interview 1, 30 January 2023)

This conflict between who we authentically are, and the performance of self is so important for Oakley, that she has stitched it directly into her quilt block (Figure 36). There is complexity to her use of symbolism, especially deliberately leaving her face blank, a poignant representation of the difficulties of self-representation and the ingrained habit of masking.

Parker's work (figure 38), in contrast, is a direct and forceful act of unmasking. By stating that 'Names change reality' and reclaiming autonomy with the bold statement, 'But I'm in control now,' their work foreshadows the identity reconstruction that is clear on the right side of the canvas. This subtheme of identity reconstruction and narrative sovereignty was reflected in analysis of many of the participants' contributions and is discussed further in Chapter 7.

4.4 Motivation: Resisting One-Dimensional Society

In the previous section I established who the participants are and why identity is a valuable topic for reimagining selves and resisting the pressures of society to conform and perform. Having therefore described

the complex, unflattened identities constructed by participants, I now argue that the motivation for this creative work is frequently an act of resistance against imposed categorisation. It is a multi-layered response to the flattening pressures of one-dimensional society, reflecting how none of the participants presented one sole reason for crafting but instead unravelled a non-linear intertwined narrative. Through their craft, participants resist the homogenisation of personal style, challenge stereotypical gender roles, and create space for the messy, difficult emotions that are often silenced by public discourse.

4.4.1 Resisting Conformity: The Pressure to Perform Productivity

The core theme of this section relates to the pressure that exists for everyone living in a capitalist society: to prove worth through productivity. This has been confounded by social media's reinforcement of social comparison. Han's (2015a) 'achievement society', where a continuous push towards achievement and success results in validation linked to what we do rather than who we are. This has left many people trying to survive burnout. As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues in *Authentic™*, the neoliberal perpetual drive to be constantly productive as well as performing production has led to a situation where individuals are no longer people, but brands to be marketed, packaged and sold. The self as well as one's passions are seen as needing to be economically viable (Duffy, 2017). Resistance against a one-dimensional society extends further than who we are, personal appearance, what we do and into the practice of craft itself. Within a neoliberal framework, there is pervasive pressure to conform to the demands of the market, to monetise creative labour, and to perform a specific kind of 'legitimate' productivity, described by Duffy

(2017) 'aspirational labour'. The next subsection explores how participants, navigate the compulsion to turn a practice of refuge into a 'side hustle'.

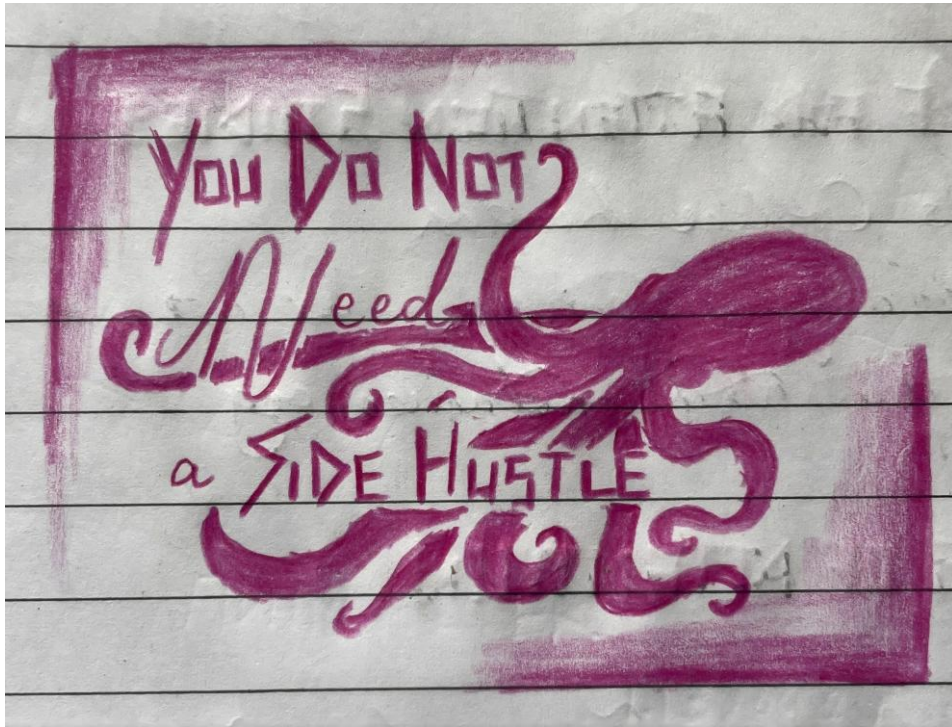


Figure 42 Original sketch for Side Hustle Quilt Block, 6 September 2024

The sketch (Figure 42) and quilt block (Figure 43) resulted from a personal and intellectually reflective process, engaging with the emotional and societal pressures placed on mothers to be endlessly productive, visible, and economically viable. It is an autoethnographic insight gained from listening to stories of mothers. The central image, an octopus, is used as a metaphor for the multiplicity of roles defining my life: mother, specialist tutor, PhD researcher, active person living with injury, and most recently bearer of the emotional weight of grief. Each arm gestures toward a distinct domain of responsibility, yet the overall composition is intended to illustrate fragmentation, exhaustion, and the impossibility of doing it all well.

The swirling stitch pattern created by the quilting represents the recursive, overwhelming nature of maternal labour, reminiscent of a fog that closes in when lost in the affective experience of burnout and perceived inadequacy. This visual motif is my stitched interpretation of Bauman's (2000) concept of 'liquid modernity', in which identities are fluid, precarious, and constantly reconfigured under the pressures of late capitalism. In this context, the maternal subject (my octopus) is stretched thin across competing demands, with little space for rest or reflection.

Stitched into the textile block is the phrase 'you should sell that'. This is a familiar refrain in crafting communities that reflects broader neoliberal imperatives to monetise creative labour (Duffy, 2017). This phrase is inspired by Gill's (2023) terms such as the 'new sexual contract' and 'postfeminist sensibility' where women are expected to be entrepreneurial, self-managing, and emotionally resilient. Within Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) communities, of which many of my participants belonged, this manifests in the rise of the 'momtrepreneur' mothers who leverage their lived experience to support others, often through coaching, advocacy, or product development (Broderick 2022). While this work is frequently meaningful and community-building, it is also shaped by economic precarity and the demand to brand oneself as both expert and commodity.

Initially, my response to this phenomenon was emotional, anti-capitalist and sceptical of the autism/SEND industry. My first sketch (Figure 42) was critical of the ways in which care and grief are commodified, particularly when mothers are positioned as both carers and entrepreneurs. However, through the process of making this block with its slow, tactile, and reflective practice, my perspective shifted. I began to see not just systems,

but individuals: women navigating constrained choices with resilience, creativity, and care. This shift reflects Bordo's (2023) critique of cultural narratives that flatten women's experiences into either victimhood or empowerment, ignoring the complex negotiations that occur in between. As a result, the text in the final quilt block was subsequently changed to 'do I side hustle? / do I need side hustle?' and is stitched in pink and green, allowing for multiple readings therefore resisting interpretive closure. The ambiguity reflects the tension between agency and necessity, self-expression and survival. Pink evokes emotion work and femininity; green alludes to the coexisting feelings of growth, envy, and economic need. Together, my intention is for the audience to consider not just the question, but the conditions under which the question arises.



Figure 43 Side Hustle Quilt Block, March 2025

My Side Hustle Quilt Block is both a personal artefact and a discursive response to the insights of my participants. It critiques the societal expectation that mothers must be endlessly productive, while also respecting the nuanced, often invisible labour of care. It creates a Flow-Thirdspace where my grief, identity, and ethical reflection are stitched into the fabric of unflattened ideas. It resists the demand to brand or sell every part of us, and instead offers a space for ambiguity, empathy, and aspirational refusal. However, that does not stop me from posting it on social media to share my research, whilst I stand, peeling the potatoes.

The tension between craft as refuge and craft as 'productive' labour was a recurring subtheme in participant discussions. The need to justify rest or creative activities by framing it as useful work was articulated by Blaze, who talked about the legitimacy of repairing clothes. Blaze embodied non-conformity in their engagement and contributions to the project. When asked what they would like the project to be if it did not have to be a PhD thesis, they suggested “a pony” as a way of kicking back against expectations. “They are just them, aren’t they?” Blaze explained. This led to the pseudonym Blaze, the perfect name for a ‘Pathological Demand Avoidant Pony’.

Blaze emphasised the importance of craft being a way of performing productivity but also expressing values of sustainability and permanence in contrast to planned obsolescence. They described the labour-intensive challenge of creating hand embroidered cross stitched name tags to attach to Christmas gifts but confirmed their value by stating that they would be reused every year and were therefore an indelible gift imbued with meaning. Blaze elaborated on the importance of creating tangible objects:

I like crafting, I enjoy it and I find it relaxing. But at the same time, you end up with a product that shows the result of all of your effort, and it's kind of a way to circumvent neurotypical capitalist nonsense, that you're only being productive or you're only having a good day, if you've done something that has a result. And usually that means like going to work or I don't know, tidying your house or something like that. But when I need me time, which is a quite a lot of me time I require as a disabled person. I like that I can craft and people that don't understand my need for it, still find it valuable cause I've like got a product to show, yeah. (Interview 1, 13 January 2023)

Blaze also described the pleasure in repairing for the same reason; being seen as productive. However, Blaze also resisted a one-dimensional view of productivity by linking her crafting directly to her own capacity, describing how she had different levels of craft based on her energy levels:

But even within craft, though, right? ... So, like Lego craft, very low down the hierarchy. But then cross stitching, if you're making my tags is slightly higher up, everyone's like, OK, that's nice. But then literally doing the same thing. If I was like repairing a seam hole or something, everyone was like, oh, yes, very important. You can do that. That's good. But like, to me, they're all the same. So, it's very strange ... the hierarchy of what's important. (Interview 1, 13 January 2023)

Blaze's quote perfectly demonstrates the unflattened reality of how external demands and expectations of what are socially acceptable

occupations of time, influence how they feel about what craft they engage in. The motivation for Blaze is linked to the perceptions of others but also in the end result. “The product at the end, that's like your little gold :) sticker, a validation,” Blaze confirmed.

Furthermore, the experiences of Violet in relation to motivation for and value of her crafting provide a direct example of someone consciously resisting the ‘side hustle’ mentality. Violet explicitly contrasts the therapeutic purpose of her craft with the pressure to sell it in the following comment:

But you have to set your intention a little bit with it, which is why I'm doing this for me because I feel stressed. I need to down regulate, not I'm doing this so I can post it online or start selling them. Not that those are bad things, but they come with huge, huge pressures. Business pressures, I'd say then. (Interview 1, 13 January 2023)

Violet continues with her astute analysis of the societal and internal pressures to monetise and demonstrates how she resists conformity by reframing her craft as a “therapeutic tool”. The internal conflict between making for joy and making for the market was analysed with incredible insight by Violet. She traced the pressure from its societal origins to her own conscious act of resistance, articulating the entire journey in a single, reflective passage:

We all have societal values and a lot of them align with being productive and producing things of value and within a capitalist framework, it's very fix it now, do it now, churn it out and onto the next one. Whereas I did start crocheting from that mindset and what happened is I didn't finish anything... But when I just come back to knowing this is actually for me, the purpose is only for me when I get rid of that "Ohh, I could sell it..." and reframe it back to a therapeutic tool [...] One of the first things people will say and I did it to you. Remember I said "Ohh you can sell these". Yeah, it's like our brains are hard wired to go straight to the "how could she profit off that? How could she make a living?" And that's important because it's an element of survival for people. So, I'm not offended when people say that, but just it's interesting to me how that can then be digested as a pressure. And then take away the joy and the purpose of, well, actually this is a therapeutic tool for me.

(Interview 2, 7 September 2023)

Violet articulates the core concepts of Han's (2015) 'achievement society', Marcuse's (1964/2013) 'Great Refusal', and the concept of allowing oneself time and space, through her reflections. As discussed above, participants lived experiences mirror key aspects of my theoretical framework in how they identified the societal pressures to be productive and responded to this by acts of resistance and justification. Together, these narratives reveal a complex negotiation rather than a simple rejection of capitalist pressures. The motivation is not to abandon productivity entirely, but to redefine it on their own terms, to align it with personal capacity, and to consciously protect their Flow-Thirdspace and crafting praxis from complete commodification.

4.4.2 The 'You Should...' Manifesto

The neoliberal imperative to conform to a productive, monetised self, powerfully articulated by Blaze and Violet alongside the exploration addressed through my *Side Hustle Quilt Block*, constitute just one facet of a much broader and more pervasive landscape of societal expectations. These pressures are far more than economic, they encompass embodied, emotional, and deeply personal demands, communicated through a relentless chorus of 'shoulds' that dictate how we should look, feel, and be. My autoethnographic reflection, *You Should... Quilt Block* (Figure 44) was created to capture and critique this overwhelming discourse.



Figure 44 *You Should... Quilt Block*, Spring 2023

My personal experience of the pressure to commodify every aspect of your life through the growing pressure from social media is captured in the quilt block. Many crafters have experienced the pressure to monetise their work, and I too fell victim to the trend for an online Etsy Store as well as spending hundreds of hours creating 'stock' to sell at craft fairs. I had long packed away my meagre craft business into a cliched vintage suitcase before I began my PhD journey, however once I had decided to create a PhD quilt, I reopened the case to sort through my crushed dreams and make space for the quilt fabric storage. Not only had I allowed myself to be manipulated by the internet into believing that I should be selling my soul, but I had also been persuaded that any mother worth her mid-2010s aesthetic needed to be obsessed by the nostalgic draw of the vintage tea party. Dotty Angel had been my idol and heroine in the escape from the mundane chores of endless washing and tidying that filled the hours when I was not at work. I was sold on the dream that there could be more to life and that I should be more, I should be aspirational. I was convinced that cutting vegetables into heart shapes would make me a better mother.

I took out the stained lace tablecloth that had suffered from many a tea party with my young children, stunned by the memories of how much time I had spent worrying that I was not good enough because I had not managed to juggle working with making every meal from scratch. I put together the lace tablecloth, my handmade crocheted hearts from Valentines Day themed house decor displays and the leftover coffee cups fabric and reimagined them into a quilt block which encapsulated these gendered expectations that are targeted at women.

At the start of 2023 I collected all the wonderful self-improvement advice from Instagram's targeted advertising that filled my stream that January to

stitch them into a handy reminder about how much social media can make individuals feel inadequate. The block took 6 months to complete as I grappled with the internalised messages to be something I could never be. The theory underlying the ideology of 'confidence culture' (Orgad & Gill, 2022) where women are persuaded that it is their lack of confidence that is the main barrier to success and happiness rather than systemic inequalities, was prevalent throughout the participants comments. They described the unrealistic expectations placed upon them as contributory factors in relation to mental health challenges which I interpreted as an entire list of stitched 'shoulds' as a direct artefact of Orgad & Gill's (2022) 'confidence culture'. The contemporary imperative that women should solve systemic problems (inequality, precarity, sexism) through individual, internal work on their own self-esteem, self-care, and confidence is reflected in the following quotes from participants, starting with Aster:

Perfectionism was a real issue for me when I was studying. Perfection for me equalled success. Through my childhood I was taught that if you do something then you should always do it well. It caused me a lot of problems. I would work excessively, but it was unproductive a lot of the time. I would work really hard and put a lot of time into my studies and hyperfocus on it which made it difficult for me to juggle everything else in my life and meet the other expectations I had of myself, and others had of me too. I started to feel like I was failing at everything and letting people down. I felt worthless and not good enough a lot of the time. I felt like an imposter at university, like I didn't belong there, that it was all just a big mistake them accepting me onto the course. (Facebook Messenger Transcript, March 2023)

Aster's experience of perfectionism demonstrates another facet of this pressure to perform unrealistic and idealised selves which is critiqued by Gill's (2023) *Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media* and is a direct illustration of Han's (2015a) 'Burnout Society.' The internal pressure to succeed in all roles, described by Aster as a "juggling act", leads to excessive but unproductive work, burnout, and imposter syndrome. It demonstrates how the pressure to be productive is not just economic but inherently tied to self-worth. This self-worth is also reflected in how Sage felt about the way she looked:

I gave birth and then like I gained so much weight and I struggled... I lost weight this last year. But like, I struggled so much and I couldn't... I don't have the time to go shopping, like it's all online and it's not working and my body's deformed, so I can't find stuff that fits me. So, I just wore very bad clothes, which I wasn't happy with, but I mean that was part of lockdown and everything... and being pregnant and losing weight. (Interview 1, 30 January 2023)

My You Should... Quilt Block was created as a response to these harsh reflections of self by participants, which bore striking resemblances to the messages I had observed from Instagram: 'You should be prettier', 'You should buy into the diet industry', 'You shouldn't be yourself, it's bad for capitalism', which are stitched on to the quilt block. These directly map onto Orgad & Gill's (2022) directives of confidence culture. They place the burden of adaptation of the self, on the individual woman to present herself in a certain way. The following quote by Rana demonstrates how political problems extend into every aspect of life. She describes how even her post-graduate employment opportunities become personal challenges:

I started, like, really coming into my own and I think as well like a lot of my work, I've fortunately have won quite a lot of awards for. So, it's been quite reassuring to know that I'm kind of in the right place and doing the right thing. But yeah, it's definitely come at a cost (to her mental health), that's for sure [...] Job hunting it is such a tedious experience and even like I was just talking to a couple of friends and I was like, I don't know why, but I'm feeling so much anxiety for just submitting for a job and they're like, oh, no, actually, I feel this way as well. Or actually, you know, I feel it in a little bit maybe not so much or and I found myself going into like a Facebook page and be like does anyone else feel like this? Because I feel so anxious for just applying to a job. Even though I know it's a numbers game and even though I know it's. Like you can't take it personally and all this type of thing, but it doesn't stop you from thinking like that. (Interview 1, 5 January 2023)

Another sub-theme that emerged among participants was the pressure to market themselves, or their creations, as products, often framed as simply being our 'authentic' selves. Success in selling creative work was frequently linked to performing confidence, echoing the demands of emotional labour as theorised by Hochschild (1983) and the critique of confidence culture (Orgad & Gill, 2022). Hochschild's (1983) foundational concept provides an explanation of how social expectations demand the management of one's own feelings to produce a publicly acceptable emotional state (being positive, resilient, aspirational) is a form of intense labour. In addition, confidence culture demands that women perform this emotion work constantly, not just at work, but on their own perceptions of self. Rana's need to earn a living, utilising the education that she has invested in, adds even more pressure to the performance of success and achievement.

However, Rana spoke eloquently about the influence of her cultural identity and affinity with Brick Lane as a way of grounding herself in what was truly important to her (Figure 45):

A lot of my work is inspired by culture and my whole graduate project was about Brick Lane and about the immigration story of Brick Lane. So, it was really easy to get, like, kind of immersed in that because I could go to London anytime and go and have a look at... Brick Lane, if I was ever stuck for inspiration. (Interview 1, 5 January 2023)



Figure 45 Photo of Rana's Family Portrait

Her optimism and hope shone through in the passion she shared when discussing her own ways of coping with mental health challenges through her textile work:

I have struggled with mental health, ever since I was 13 years old. Back then, anxiety and depression weren't talked about as much as they are now. I had many friends who were struggling, but the stigma around mental health at that time, made it impossible to figure out my own stance on it. Looking back on that time, I realised that I suffered from anxiety and had regular anxiety attacks. I think my mental health got worse once I started my A-levels, with me experiencing my first major loss of a family member. My uncle unfortunately had committed suicide. This was such a shock to the system as I was in my final year at school and experiencing a tragic loss at the same time. It was this loss that really showed me the importance of mental health and the paralysing effects it can have. It is because of this reason, that I am such an advocate for mental health and people talking about their experiences. Once I came to university, I struggled with depression frequently. The fact that I was so far away from home made it difficult for me to go back as regularly as I wanted to, as well as not having a full support network in the first semester as you were making friends. Of course, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. I found that textiles was a release for me in difficult times. It gave me something to focus on, instead of my intrusive thoughts. It transported me to a different world almost, one of creativity and imagination.

4.4.3 Resisting Gendered Flatness: Craft as a ‘Lean Out’ Practice

Research highlights several risks for neurodivergent individuals, including isolation (Umagami 2023), manipulation (Pearson, et al., 2023) and sexual assault (Reuben, et al., 2021). The process of labelling neurodivergence as a deviation from the norm, contributes to marginalisation and stigma (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963) leading to discrimination (Jones et al., 2021). Labels potentially reinforce the binaries and divisions (autistic/ non-autistic, neurodivergent/neurotypical) strengthening medicalised narratives that pathologise difference (Russell, 2021). As a result, the pressures to conform to societal expectations increase risk of burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020) or exclusion (Raymaker et al., 2017).

Gender further complicates these dynamics, as women are disproportionately diagnosed with depression and eating disorders (Dattani et al., 2023; Qian et al., 2021). The rise in ADHD diagnoses (Garcia, 2019) reflects not only improved recognition but also the pathologisation of gender differences. Chesler (1972/2018) argues that historically, patriarchal systems controlled women’s mental health through institutionalisation, a legacy reflected in contemporary cases of institutional violence. As discussed in Chapter 2, Lorina Bulwer and Agnes Richter, both institutionalised for ‘acts of madness,’ used embroidery as a form of resistance, reflecting historical injustices in the treatment of neurodivergent women. The significance of Foucault’s (1990) concept of biopower continues to resonate with contemporary experiences of neurodivergent women. For example, institutional violence is documented in Quinn’s (2018) lived experience narrative, *UNbroken*, during her confinement in a treatment and assessment centre. The power to define and enforce ‘normality’ remains the dominant narrative in social groups

(Becker, 1963), reinforcing a system where deviance or neurodivergence is framed as a problem to be managed rather than a legitimate way of being.

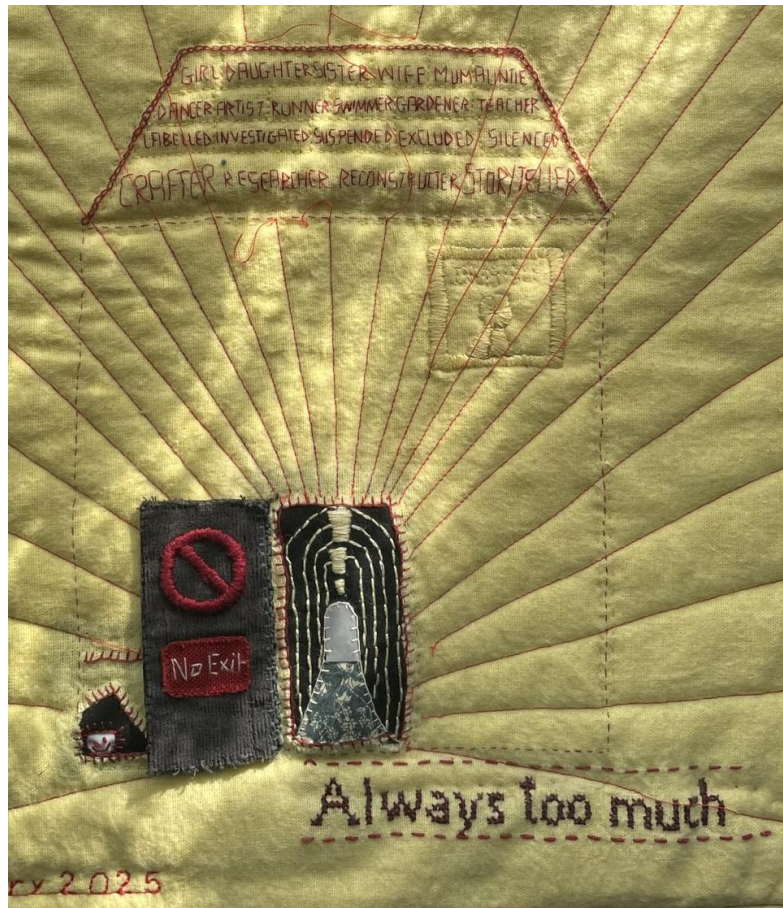


Figure 46 Detail of Never Enough Quilt Block, February 2025

Some aspects of my PhD research were incredibly slow because I had to learn complicated skills and develop my ideas, a deliberate and intentional slowness that is reflected in the development of the PhD quilt. My *Never Enough Quilt Block* from Chapter 2 was sketched in September 2022, during the early stages of my literature review. It was part of a Domestic Dusters Workshop I attended led by practice-based researcher, Vanessa Marr. At the time, I was trying to make sense of the theoretical framework I was building and why societal expectations for women persist as a central concept in craftivism. I was thinking about the pressures of gendered identity construction, and this block became a way to hold that tension.

The paradoxical concept of never being enough and, at the same time, always being too much, emerged from one of the early interviews I conducted at the start of my data collection. *Never Enough Quilt Block* (Figure 46) shows how at the centre of this scene of domesticity, a 'vortex of gender construction' from which there is no exit, dominates narratives. Under the shadow of the numerous roles assigned to females throughout their lives, a faceless figure looks out at the world, invisible behind a mask of expectation. She sits inside a domestic scene, both invisible and hyper-visible. She wears a mask of expectation and carries the weight of relational identities. She is never enough, and always too much. That contradiction was highlighted by Aster, and it stuck with me. It felt like something I had known for a long time but had not put into words or stitched together. Aster explained her feelings in the following quote:

As a mother there were far too many expectations placed upon me. Expectations I placed upon myself, expectations from my child, but also everyone else around me. As a single parent I was struggling on my own to be what I and everyone else expected me to be. It was damaging my mental health, my child's mental health and our abilities to manage in life. I was mothering too much and I knew it, but it was so ingrained into my values that I could not stop. I knew that I wasn't what he needed me to be and I couldn't cope. I felt so much pressure placed on me by the ideologies of what a mother should be. Both internally through years of conditioning and by those around me, friends, and family, including my child himself.
(Final Interview, 16 April 2024)

In the quilt block, these tensions are illustrated by the threads stretched across the roof which have snapped under the pressure and narrative

constraints of societal expectations for women. Yet, in the corner, hiding in the dust, there is a tiny speck of hope, maybe even joy, happy in the radiating rays of light. This block holds a lot of the gendered tensions expressed by participants. Although it is personal, it is also reflective of the wider scripts women are given. The ones we try to live up to, and the ones we secretly resist. I reflected on who my participants became under these pressures and what happens when something breaks as it did for Aster. These are concerns that are reflected in many of the interviews with participants and the creative artefacts they shared. Again, Aster captures the distress she felt by explaining:

I had to make changes, drastic changes but with that brought new challenges. I went against what was expected of me and sent my child to live with his father as I thought that this was best. So many people frowned upon my decision, they could not understand it. It was looked upon as me no longer loving my child, but for me it was the hardest decision I ever had to make but I made it out of love for him and love for myself. I felt unable to talk about how I wanted to live my life and do what I wanted to do for me. Due to the expectations that a mother should give up her life for her child/children as a given. (Final Interview, 16 April 2024)

This paradoxical feeling of being simultaneously 'Never Enough' and 'Always too much' is also the central affective experience of Orgad & Gill's (2022) term confidence culture. It is the emotional consequence of a system that places the burden of navigating systemic inequality onto the individual woman. The 'vortex of gender construction' depicted in the block (Figure 46) is a visual representation of the endless aesthetic and emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) described by participants. Furthermore, where this

confidence culture demands that women 'lean in' and adapt themselves to a broken system, the practice of resistance is clear in the interviews with participants and their creativity. As argued by Foster (2015) in *Lean Out*, true resistance lies not in individual self-improvement, but in a collective rejection of these demands. In the following section I will use examples from participants to show that the slow, material, and often private practice of craft functions as a powerful, embodied form of 'leaning out'.

Although Aster's experience of never feeling enough is considered by her to be an isolated personal failing, it is however more broadly a reflection of the intense structural pressures placed on neurodivergent mothers. Research highlights how the expectation of selflessness, gratitude, and positivity reinforces broader gender inequalities (Islam, 2018; Mack, 2018; Griffiths, 2021). These ideals are further intensified by neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility and self-optimisation, which demand constant self-improvement and resilience, contributing to burnout (Gore et al., 2024). Steiner & Bronstein (2019) argued, neoliberalism transforms motherhood into a competitive pursuit, amplifying the pressure to perform an impossible standard of 'good' mothering, particularly for those who already struggle with systemic barriers. In contrast to the concept of the good mother, the bad mother appears in discourse surrounding custody of children, health and education settings. Courcy & Des Rivières (2017) specifically explore the concept of blame associated with the diagnosis of an autistic child and their responsibility in promoting the best outcomes for their child, the discrimination they experience, and unrealistic expectations imposed by intervention.

For Aster, this pressure was compounded by the intersection of her neurodivergence and that of her autistic son's. As Quinn's (2018) story

exemplifies, neurodivergent mothers face immense pressure to conform to idealised expectations of motherhood even when faced with personal and structural challenges. Autistic mothers experience distinct challenges, from navigating pregnancy and childbirth (Hampton et al., 2022) to negotiating complex bureaucratic systems in education and support services. Limited research on autistic motherhood (Pohl et al., 2020) highlights how stigma and negative perceptions create barriers to support, increasing anxiety and situational mutism. Furthermore, narratives such as Prince's (2010) ethnography and May's (2020b) memoir demonstrate the complex process of identity negotiation and reconciliation that autistic mothers undergo, especially following late diagnosis.

Orgad and Gill's (2022) confidence culture describes an insistence to brand an authentic self and builds on Han's (2015) argument that achievement society is hyperfocused on relentless self-optimisation. Crafting for oneself, as an act of resistance, is a concept represented in the quilt blocks *Side Hustle* and *Domestic Dusters* and the contributions by Onyx (Figure 47) which highlight a refusal to conform to demands or to subvert that conformity by asserting individuality.

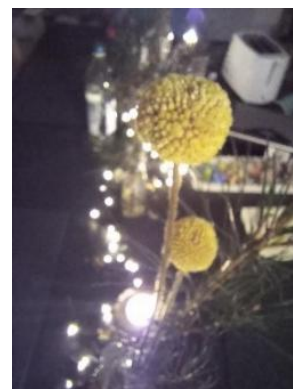


Figure 47 Photos sent by Onyx, December 2023

Onyx made contributions throughout the data collection process, although much of this was about what she felt was relevant to her rather than responding directly to the prompts. She captures why in an email she sent in January 2024:

I haven't done any crafting in the narrow sense, but what I have done is try to walk my own way through the demands of Christmas time. I have attached a few pictures. It sounds very conservative that I express myself in decoration, but to me it feels like there is a strong 'common sense' about how Christmas decorations should look like. As I do what I want, I also have to stand up for it when family members make comments and feel safe and confident in myself which is very hard for me. This Christmas was the first time I did only what I like. The permanent selfcare is new to me and good. So, it helped me. (Email, 11 January 2024)

The pressure expressed by Onyx relates back to Hochschild's (1983) emotion work, however this time in relation to the solution. If confidence culture and conformity to external factors demand the performance of positive emotion work, then craft was a space where Onyx could lean out from that performance and find a different route. This was reinforced in other participants' comments. Violet described this as a "need to down-regulate" and Oakley reflected on "a sense of calm" in relation to craft. Their motivation was not centred around the perception of others, but instead reflected focused on their own genuine, un-performed emotional state. Each participant refused to do the emotion work of pretending everything is fine. Parker's story of processing trauma through their art is

the ultimate example of this, because it represents the deep emotional work they went through in expressing how they chose to be defined, subsequently it is not performative emotion work for the benefit of an external audience.

Although many participants expressed resistance to gendered expectations, this was not the view of everyone. Rose's perspective embraced her current roles as wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother and emphasised how important those relational identities and support had always been as a formative aspect of her life, clearly articulated in a quote from her interview:

Right... well, if I just say that now, I am very much family based, so my identity is definitely at the moment: wife, mother, grandmother and great grandmother, but that has not always been the case. I grew up in a very outward looking home with a loving mother and father, which for I'm eternally grateful because I know not everybody has that background I had. I knew both sides of my grandparents...My father's father, not for very long. He died when I was 11, but the rest you know, they lived to reasonable ages. My uncle. That's my mother's brother is still alive. And he is 99. So, I've still got a family background, if you understand. So, I grew up in this atmosphere, being encouraged to do everything as well as you could. (Interview 1, 9 March 2023)

4.4.4 Crafting Depth in Adversity: Resisting Emotional and Political Flattening

Having acknowledged that there are both challenging and positive aspects of gendered identities, in this section I now explore some of the more emotional responses in relation to this concept, where grief and anger are combined with systemic critique. Analysis of performing femininity has been addressed widely across feminist literature (Rich 1976; Butler 1990, Nally & Smith, 2015) who found themes of the pressure to conform to how women are expected to behave by society. This includes how the roles are moulded by institutions and embodied in the emotion work of feminised domestic responsibilities of care. Aster's story provides a central narrative for how opposition to these traditional roles can result in internalised feelings of failure:

I feel that right from when I was a small child, expectations were placed upon me being a girl. The way in which we are expected to present ourselves in every sense of the word, from how we look, to what we do and how we behave. I struggled to fit in with those expectations as a child and when I rebelled, I was made to feel like I was wrong or just weird, so sort of othered, excluded and then that forced me to comply as I wanted to be a part of something even if it didn't really feel right. (Facebook Messenger Transcript, March 2023)

Aster's resistance to the flattening of gender was apparent throughout her contributions to the project. Her story of being "othered" and forced to "comply" provides a clear example of the social conditioning critiqued in the literature. The following quote from Aster where she describes a

motorbike anecdote clearly illustrates her confident defiance against gendered expectations:

Yes definitely. I was called a 'tom boy' when I was in my teens because I went against feminine things... When I would pull up and take my crash helmet off people would stare and, in my head, I would be like “yes I am a girl on a big motorbike, so what?!!!”
(Facebook Messenger Transcript, March 2023)

In addition, Aster discussed how her responses to trauma, grief, and injustice were also dismissed as not being legitimate and justified and were instead framed as personal failings. She described how much pressure she put on herself:

I was a working Mum but then gave up work to become a full-time student on a very challenging degree. That change came about due to my internal pressure and perfectionism and wanting to be a good parent to my son who had been diagnosed as autistic. I struggled massively in all of those roles and then because I was studying at degree level my perfectionism really kicked up a few notches and the pressure I put upon myself to do well increased and overtook everything. (Facebook Messenger Transcript, March 2023)

Invalidation was also experienced by Ash who shared the following personal narrative in an email she sent:

I am 37 and have just this fall been diagnosed with narcolepsy (type 1) after over twenty years of symptoms. Although narcolepsy isn't listed as part of your study, apparently 30% of people with narcolepsy also have ADHD and there is overlap in both symptoms and treatment. (When I got my diagnosis, I was about to be sent to a psychiatrist for ADHD testing, which my neurologist didn't think was worth bothering with at this stage since I tested positive for narcolepsy.) My narcolepsy is relatively mild, which is of course something I am grateful for in itself, but living my entire adult life so far with a vague but persistent sense that something is wrong, that I can't handle life, studies and work, while all tests came up negative has gradually eroded my sense of self-worth. At some point I gave up trying. The combination of the diagnosis (with all the explanations and understanding that follows) and medication (modafinil) has already made a big difference, although it will be a long journey where I think a big part of the struggle will be summoning up the motivation to keep struggling and not just sink back into the hazy but rather comfortable fog I am used to. There is also probably some trauma and certainly a dysregulated nervous system in the mix. (Email, 18 December 2022)

Over recent years there has been an increase in the number of women being diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions such as autism and ADHD, with the literature framing this shift in prevalence as missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis (Gould, & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Johnson et al., 2021). Tsirgiotis et al., (2022) argue that much of the research in this area had previously focused on male children which had led to diagnostic processes being biased towards this limited presentation. This narrow perspective angered some of my participants whose use of craft and creativity allowed them to express their frustrations. Their act of crafting was therefore motivated by

a need to create space for the messy, multidimensional reality of these experiences.

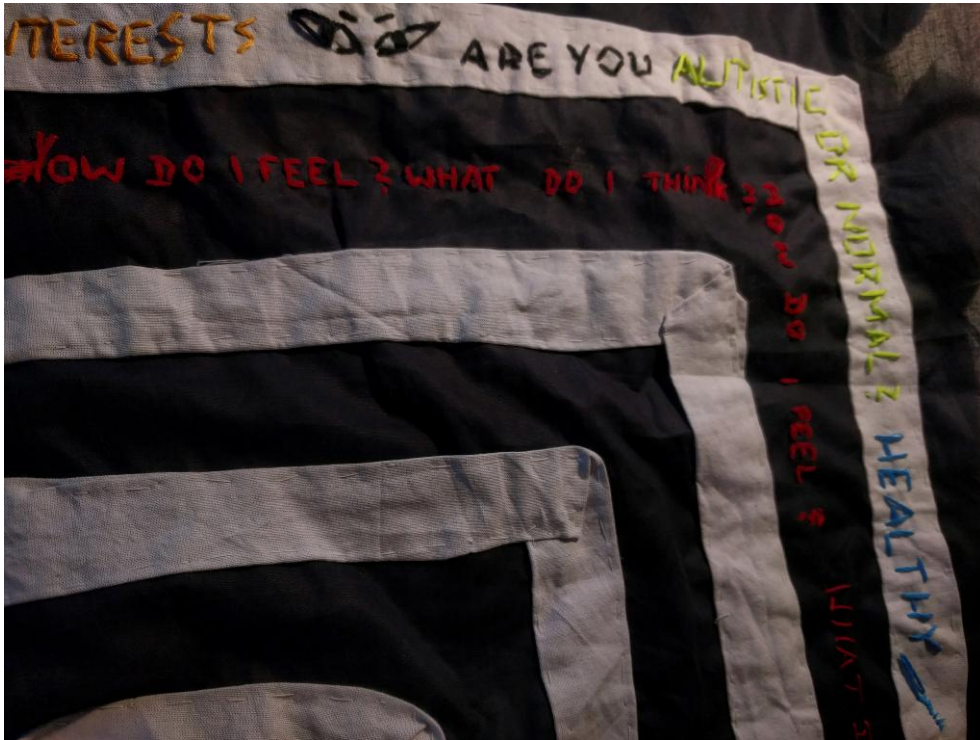


Figure 48 Photo of embroidery by Onyx, 11 March 2023

Figure 48 shows a section of Onyx's quilt block where she worked through her thoughts on autism, a recurrent theme that appeared in several of her contributions. This includes the stitched question 'Are you autistic or normal?' and repetition of the phrases 'How do I feel? What do I think?' She also shared photos of the back of her work (Figure 49), as a way of making the messy reality of her lived experiences visible, a stark contrast to the polished perfectionism of online personas.



Figure 49 Photo of the back of one of Onyx's embroideries, 19 April 2024

The examples from participants related to larger collective forms of craftivism providing and an explicit connection with unflattering public narratives that inspired this project. Perhaps the most profound motivation for craft as resistance is its use in the face of public adversity. When official narratives seek to simplify or erase tragedy, craftivism responds by unflattering the story, re-inserting individual lives, names, and raw

emotion. The *AIDS NAMES Quilt*, as noted by Jones (2016), was a direct response to a climate of shame and governmental indifference. The aim was to make personal grief a public political statement. My own involvement with the *Grenfell Memorial Quilt* was motivated by this same impulse. The act of taking materials to rehumanise and stitching them into a collaborative memorial was a way to resist the flattening of the tragedy into a statistic or a news cycle. It was an embodied practice of creating depth, of insisting on the value and memory of each life lost.

In a world of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), where historical memory and social injustice can feel fluid and easily forgotten, these textile acts persist as physical anchors. In Onyx's contribution (Figure 48) this can be observed in the metaphor of the eyes and the making visible of her self-questioning and in Parker's (Figure 38) erasure of prescribed identities in favour of their own words. They are motivated by the ongoing need to continually unflatten and re-assert complex truths against a culture that tends towards simplification and forgetting.

4.5 Case Study: The Rejection from the Royal Academy of Arts

At the end of 2023, the first full year of my data collection, I put a call out to my participants for submissions to join the *Who are you? PhD quilt* I was intending to enter for the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) Summer Show. Oakley and Parker agreed to contribute. As discussed in Chapter 3, the RA has historically reinforced the division between fine arts and crafts by excluding textile crafts from being displayed within their prestigious building. This exclusion has promoted artists like Alison Aye to craft acts of

resistance. She has submitted work over a period of 30 years, documenting each year of rejection (Aye, 2024). Although a piece of her work was accepted in 2024, albeit a mixed media collage rather than textiles, she reflected that she was not sure she liked finally being accepted by the establishment (Cain-Honeyset, 2024). She was my inspiration for the 2024 submission and the first iteration of my PhD quilt. The RA Summer Exhibition is considered to be the largest open submission of contemporary art in the world and claims to showcase a 'diverse array of works including prints, paintings, films, photography, sculpture, and architectural works.' (RA, 2026). It does not mention textiles.

4.5.1 The Submission: Our Hopeful Quilt

The lack of textile craft representation within the academy, however, did not deter Oakley, Parker and me who felt we could get something together in time for the February 2024 deadline. Other participants had shared photos of their crafted artefacts with me, but they had wanted to keep the originals, so they were not physically included in this piece. However, as discussed throughout this thesis, themes were incorporated into the blocks I created. We set to work, and I paid the £40 entrance fee.

The quilt contained nine blocks relating to the prompt *Who are you?* The central block, which was later developed into *Forever Becoming* (as discussed in the first biographical interlude) was the start of establishing the research aims and questions, the overarching 'why' the research is needed. *How are you?*, *Excel Scream* (Chapter 1) and *Inadequate Personality Disorder* (from Chapter 2), tell the story of my own struggles with identity and neurodivergent diagnoses. We took our co-created

politically aware Flow-Thirdspace (the PhD quilt) and attempted to make it visible in the institutional Firstspace/Secondspace (the RA).



Figure 50 Who are you? version of the PhD quilt submitted to the RA in February 2024

4.5.2 The Judgment - Hermeneutical Injustice

As expected, but still disappointingly, we were rejected and subsequently I asked Parker and Oakley a series of questions to capture their feelings about the process. This relates to the main theme of this chapter, identity and the subthemes of identity as crafter/artist/craftivist and unflattening identity.

In order to analyse the rejection, I return to the work of Fricker (2007) to argue that it is a case of hermeneutical injustice in how the RA, as an institution, lacks the interpretive resources to appreciate the quilt's value, which lies in its process and community narrative, its collective identity and coproduction. Within this theoretical framing, as a form of epistemic injustice, their judgment therefore constitutes an act of institutional flattening, reducing our complex artefact to a simple 'rejected' status. Parker's quote demonstrates how they valued personal integrity and the opinion of the Zine community over external validation from patriarchal institutions, such as the RA:

I do not feel bad about this rejection [...] I probably would have felt rejection from the zine much more strongly[...] this submission didn't have the same community aspect as the zine [...] In the zine community, every person's art has inherent value [...] There is no institution, there is no canon. (Email 4 May 2024)

Parker's response demonstrates the importance of the making process and how its value relates to community interactions and mutual support. It facilitates an unflattening of the hierarchies that place judgement over output rather than the inclusive element of taking part. It is in the process of creative discovery and how the community element generates its own validation, that Parker found the most value. Their experiences are closely related to narrative reconstruction and sovereignty which will be addressed in Chapter 7 and evidenced in the following quote about self-making and resistance despite the RA's judgement:

This alignment between my internal identity and my external actions is extremely important to me... if I can look myself in the mirror and know that I acted with integrity... then I am satisfied... We got rejected from the Royal Academy, but I still made the art... They couldn't stop me doing that. (Email 4 May 2024)

4.5.3 The Reframing – The resilience of Flow-Thirdspace

In Oakley's reframing of the rejection, she expressed her sense of pride as both a crafter and contributor. She offered a pragmatic and defiant counterpoint which demonstrated her understanding of how institutional systems work by stating she was 'disappointed but not surprised'. This echoes the sentiment expressed in my stitched field note (Figure 51).



Figure 51 Stitched field note, 21 December 2021

In response to my question: ‘Do you consider yourself to be an artist? Please explain your answer’, Oakley was confident in claiming her ‘crafter’ identity. She replied “No, not really, I am a crafter.” This act of defiance reclaims a categorisation which reflects how she sees herself, one which the RA seeks to exclude. The consideration of the quilt as a crafted space is an aspect that has provided Oakley with refuge, and for her, it has always been the process of making that is important and not the outcome. She explains that “having the time to work on the piece gave me a sense of calm and was definitely beneficial to my well-being.”

As for my own feelings about the rejection, I was undeterred and intended to enter the final iteration of my PhD quilt for the RA Summer Show 2026. However, by the time I got around to making the submission there were no places left, saving me the dilemma of facing the question of whether being accepted might conflict with the resistance and refusal the PhD Quilt represents. I have considered writing to Tracey Emin, one of the inspirations for my quilt to see if she would give me a chance to exhibit in her gallery in Margate and there are plans to send the PhD quilt to Australia to the Goat Gallery, without me. Participants also made suggestions about where the quilt should be exhibited as part of the ongoing collaborative analysis process. The PhD quilt has created its own community and has an online following demonstrating its ability to collectively reframe the rejection and find meaning outside of institutional validation. Rather than weakening the project, the rejection confirms the relevance of Flow-Thirdspaces that operate within a different, more humane value system. Although one perspective is to frame this rejection as an act of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007) and institutional flattening, the email responses from Parker and Oakley demonstrate how community generates its own form of validation imbued with personal meaning adding to my argument that craft offers the time and space to exist on one’s own terms.



Figure 52 Photo of Romy and Oakley's parcels next to the quilt ready to be added for the Creative Research Methods Conference in September 2025

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated craft as a practice of unflattening and a way of challenging one-dimensional societal pressures (Marcuse, 1964/2013). By sharing the work and voices of participants, I have reintroduced the depth of identity experienced by individuals and illustrated the multiple perspectives discussed by Sousanis (2015) and created a multidimensional Flow-Thirdspace in the form of the PhD Quilt. I have built this argument layer by layer, relating to my theoretical framework encapsulated in the 'Flatlands' metaphor and positioning the motivation to craft as a way of resisting societal and diagnostic flattening. Parker's block represented a direct rejection of flattened labels like 'FAILED EXPERIMENT'. *One Hundred Hexies Quilt Block* was explicitly analysed as a stitched refusal of binary thinking, *Side Hustle Quilt Block* resisted the

flattening of craft into a gendered commodity, and *You Should...Quilt Block* was a catalogue of the flattening demands of the confidence culture. Finally, the RA rejection was presented as an act of institutional flattening, which the PhD quilt and my participants resisted through reframing.

The significance of this argument, for neurodivergent individuals seeking to articulate and validate their complex, unflattened, lived experiences is in how it underpins their motivations for crafting. These include self-expression, a means of resistance or protest, a way of coping or enhancing well-being, connecting with others and creating community, as escape or refuge from an achievement-driven society and to gain a sense of mastery and accomplishment. Their contributions illustrate that, far from being a simple activity, craft is a critical, embodied, and spatial practice for resisting flatness and cultivating rich, multidimensional identities and understandings. In Chapter 5, the concept of how unflattened experiences feel, for example the quality of attention, flow, sensory engagement within these Flow-Thirdspaces, will be explored further.

Show and Tell No. 5 The Flags are Drowning

Finally, to end this chapter, the fifth biographical interlude addresses the theme of identity as narratives, embodied, social and relational. The overarching concepts of care and responsibility are outlined in the ethical considerations discussed in section 3.6 and developed in *The Flags are Drowning Quilt Block* (Figure 53).



Figure 53 *The Flags are Drowning Quilt Block, Spring 2022*

The Flags are Drowning Quilt Block is about people displaced by violence and war, a topic that remains pertinent across time. It is inspired by Faith Ringgold's (1967), *The Flag is Bleeding* (a critique of American identity), the initial Russian invasion on the Ukraine in February 2022 and Fabric of Protest Workshops I attended as part of the early stages of my research. The block links the themes of identity discussed in Chapter 4 with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), where concern for others is shaped by how we perceive belonging and difference. In times of conflict, identity becomes especially politicised, as seen in the ongoing atrocities in Gaza and acts of genocide aimed at erasing cultural identity and claims to homeland. This block and underlying value of care is positioned here because this is the context in which my PhD has been written. In a world increasingly influenced by individualism, care for others is essential.

I incorporated the orange heart iconography adopted by the hashtag '#togetherwithrefugees' to symbolise solidarity with people facing conflict and the undermining cultural identity. The flags floating in the English Channel represent the treacherous journeys and risks involved for refugees fleeing persecution and violence. Each flag is attached to the orange heart with a thread of hope. These lifelines reflect Smyth's (2021) concept of social roles as emotionally reflexive. They are symbolic metaphorical anchors of care, responsibility and accountability.

In April 2022, MPs reviewed the Nationality and Borders Bill which defines how we treat people who are in desperate need of support. At the time of making this quilt block, people from many countries around the world were at risk due to armed conflict and forced to leave their homes to seek refuge. These precarities and insecurities still persist. This block includes the flags of citizens whose stories embody how legislation reflects and

shapes collective values, demonstrating how identity is negotiated through lived experience and policy. Stitched into the orange heart is a quote, 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other' (Priestley, 1945/2001).

Priestley's (1945/2001) quote from *An Inspector Calls* aligns with Smyth's (2021) perspective that social roles are not fixed but relational and influenced by ethical values. The play addresses concerns over social inequalities and provides political context for gendered roles. Between 1912, when the play was set and 1945 when it was first performed, humanity experienced significant and devastating conflict in the form of The Russian Revolution, two world wars and the holocaust. Many lives were lost. This play still holds important messages today about social responsibility and the capitalist values of individual rights.

Our identity consists of numerous threads woven into a complex multidimensional nuanced existence. We are not defined by a singular attribute. Our opinions, values, attitudes and behaviours are influenced by our environment and our interaction with others. Identity, like society is fluid, relational and shaped by context. In the closing scene, Priestley (1945/2001) warns, 'And I tell you that the time will soon come when if men will not learn the lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.'

Throughout this chapter, I have remained cautious of framing institutional critique through personal grievance. My intention is not to cast blame, but to illuminate the systemic exclusions that shape artistic and academic recognition and to illustrate the resilience found in community and

process. I optimistically thought at the time of making *The Flags are Drowning* and writing my reflection that things would get better and that peace, tolerance and acceptance would prevail. A criticism of the *AIDS Names Project* was that a quilt was not enough (Jones, 2016). This is how I feel about my PhD Quilt; it is not enough but neither is it nothing. If as a society, we are not able to see outside of individualism and show compassion to those whose identities are flattened to such an extent that they become invisible, then no matter how many words are written, quilts stitched or protests organised, as Priestly (1945/2001) cautioned, these lessons will play out in systematic violence. So, with the context set, of who neurodivergent crafters are and why they are making, I move onto the next chapter which explores the experiences of making in greater depth.

Chapter 5: Attention, Flow, and Flow-Thirdspace

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced some of the participants and their motivations for engaging in craft. This chapter explores how participants describe their experiences of attention and flow, which addresses the second research question. My participants are exhausted by the strain of performing identity; however, I deliberately chose not to view their exhaustion as a medical disorder. Rather, I see it as a justified and valid struggle to survive in a 'Burnout Society'. From this critical stance, I argue that craft offers a Flow-Thirdspace for relief, similar to Cvetkovich's (2012) 'utopia of ordinary habit', the everyday rituals that provide continuity and embodied presence. Therefore, I address a core question: How do neurodivergent adults describe their subjective experiences of attention and flow while participating in craft/craftivism? In answering this question, the analysis shifts from the social aspects to the sensory experience, developing its political dimensions. I argue that the craft process is a form of embodied praxis, a specific way of thinking, feeling, and being that pushes back against the reductive nature of the social 'Flatlands'.

I re-examine Soja's (1996) Thirdspace as a socially crafted space that allows for an embodied, experiential state through the interplay of attention, flow and material practice. With reference to the neo-Marxist roots of both Soja (1996) and Marcuse (1964/2013), I will show how this embodied Flow-Thirdspace offers a rejection of a capitalist system that alienates individuals from their own sensory and cognitive experiences. The tensions between

norms and expectations of attention allocation are analysed through participants' descriptions of immersion, autotelic experience and sensory engagement. Following the work of Deligny, as explored by Milton (2016), my interpretation shifts from the analysis of finished products to mapping the 'wander lines' (Deligny, 1980/2015) of an embodied, unflattened process. Here, wander lines capture a mode of being that sits outside of language, focusing instead on 'the process as the meaning'.

5.2 Fractured Systems

Before exploring how flow is experienced, I establish the attentional landscape that is divided by the demands of contemporary systems and why it is so difficult for neurodivergent makers to navigate. To do so I apply the concept of fracturing to systems and lived experiences. My core argument is that the experience of textile craft is a transformative phenomenological practice when applied to the 'divided self' (Laing, 1965). My findings indicate that unique qualities of attention (hyperfocus/monotropism), the psychological state of flow, and the sensory nature of the practice are each helpful in the regulation of emotions and the processing of distress. They are also mechanisms through which a lived, embodied Flow-Thirdspace is constructed; a place to find respite and reintegrate. To build this theoretical framework, I will use the analysis of three key autoethnographic quilt blocks: *Nothing About Us Without Us*, *Cast No.3* and *Fracture*. Each artefact builds upon the last, mapping a journey from the external, systemic pressures that fracture the self, to the internal, phenomenological mechanisms of narrative negotiation and coherence.

5.2.1 Nothing about us without us



Figure 54 *Nothing About Us Without Us* Quilt Block

I begin with a quilt block that proved to be a challenge both physically and emotionally. The block (Figure 54), titled *Nothing About Us Without Us*, provides an example of making as a site of tension and re-integration. Its construction, using repurposed scraps and unnatural synthetic fabrics, some of which were tricky and uncomfortable to work with, is both descriptive of the process and central to the analysis. The materiality of the block captured in the puckering seams, slippery satins, and the bulk created by the layers, represents the uncomfortable and difficult to navigate systems it critiques. It captures the frustrations and challenges faced by anyone trying to access support. It is a bumpy road to travel full of

bureaucratic hoop jumping resulting in the disembodiment experiences of neurodivergent individuals, simply trying to survive.

I have selected R.D. Laing's (1965) 'divided self,' as a theoretical framework to account for the fracturing of selfhood under this systemic pressure, specifically the split between the embodied and unembodied self. Laing (1965) argues that ontological insecurity, created by invalidating environments, forces an individual to detach from their authentic, embodied self and operate through a false, unembodied self that performs for an observing other. These acts of 'systemic violence,' as theorised by Bourdieu (1991), flatten lived distress into manageable data. In this state, the self becomes a performer whose actions are divorced from inner reality, a split self that politely says, "Thank you very much," while the authentic self crumbles into dust and falls through the gaps. The current system demands this division, making it almost impossible to navigate because it cannot accommodate the whole, feeling, embodied person.

The 'divided self' was captured and expressed by Laine. Despite having talking therapy, a community liaison officer for neurodivergent people from her local GP surgery and a referral to a Patient Exercise Referral scheme, it was not until she paid for a private consultation to a chiropractor that she felt she was asked the right questions about her pain. It was also not until our third interview, that she felt comfortable enough to share the following information with me:

So, I've gone privately to a chiropractor who took X-rays... and also, just examined me. Nobody has examined me to that degree in the NHS for fucking years. I'm not going to lie. Excuse the French, but just like nobody has taken that time. And I was like, well, I guess I have to pay for that attention now and then just like, well, this is

the beginning of the slippery slope. But anyway, NHS on its knees notwithstanding. (Interview 3, May 7, 2024)

As Laine's comment illustrates, a forced, linear path represents a system of broken promises and dead ends, captured in my *Nothing About Us Without Us Quilt Block* (Figure 54). Its disrupted pinwheel design reflects the contrast with the authentic 'being'. In the relentless striving for the 'answer' symbolised by the stitched golden 'X' at the centre of the block, the work of Deligny (1980/2015) is valuable. Deligny's (1980/2015) maps of autistic children's 'wander lines' revealed a meaningful, embodied mode of attention and existence that resisted normative, goal-oriented pathways, despite the initial chaotic appearance. The bureaucratic lines of access are rigid and lead nowhere, whereas Deligny's (1980/2015) 'wander lines' are fluid. These 'wander lines' or unconventional routes to support are represented by free motion quilting stitches and the wonky seams of my block. The tension between these two contrasting the imposed, disembodied line and the wayward, wandering line, is the central conflict depicted in this block. This once again reflects the paradox of living within the 'iron cage' of systems and the 'liquidity' of forever adapting and becoming.

The physical struggle with the materials especially the impossibility of sewing with gold thread (it knots incessantly) on top of the slipperiness of the silk when working with the RESIST patch is the embodiment of those fractured pathways. In stitching the words of another person's lived experience, 'Righteous Anger', into the fabric, that anger was transformed into a validated legacy of the previously silenced iatrogenic harm. There is a shift from a disembodied frustration into an embodied Flow-Thirdspace, creating room where the divided self can begin to heal or at the very least exist externally. It is my way of expanding epistemologies to value embodied emotional and experiential knowledge. Meaning was generated

through the difficult, messy, physically demanding process itself, in contrast to more conventional academic approaches to producing knowledge. This block establishes the external conflict by showing the hostile, bureaucratic 'Flatlands' that imposes its rigid, disembodied lines onto the individual. It sets up the need for resistance and introduces the tension between Laing's (1965) 'divided self' and Deligny's (1980/2015) 'wander lines'. The following section explicitly connects my experience to attention, flow, and embodied Flow-Thirdspace, framing creative acts as a therapeutic, rigorous and necessary methodological pivot.

5.2.2 Cast No.3

Having established the disembodied nature of external systems and the struggle to assert an authentic wandering line against them, my question is now: how can a material practice provide a tangible site for this resistance in a moment of acute crisis? *The Cast No. 3 Quilt Block* (Figure 55) provides an emotive answer, demonstrating the creation of a 'counter-geography' from within a place of agonising confinement.



Figure 55 Cast No. 3 Quilt Block

When I broke my foot in January 2024, the pain was so intense that it was difficult to focus. I had a temporary cast on before and after the surgery, then finally at the start of February I got cast no.3, a red fibreglass 'cage'. I was uncomfortable but took solace in protection, and that I could decorate it. The pain and distress over what had happened consumed me. My life changed overnight. I could not move around anymore, and my leg needed to be elevated to reduce the swelling. Cvetkovich (2012) depression memoirs highlight the importance of movement as an escape from the darkness. I was trapped with no respite, not even sleep. I did not even have any clothing that I could get on over the cast. Out of desperation, I got some extra wide lounge pants with a floral pattern and wore them all the time. They were like wearing a blanket and so I customised my cast to match the trousers. I got some Posca pens and slowly drew on the design.

It was impossible to concentrate on reading or writing for my PhD and I seriously considered giving up on many a dark and depressing moment, but I discovered that drawing helped me. It grounded me back in the moment and as I got caught up in the flow, the pain abated a little. I had read the research about craft helping with chronic pain (Reynolds et. al. 2008; Corkhill et. al. 2013; Ryan, 2023) and drawing flowers was helping me. They were easy and did not require too much brain power. The drawing was my version Deleuze & Guattari's (1980/2013) 'lines of flight', my own 'wander lines' outside of my hopelessness.

My studies took a rhizomatic detour, away from predetermined goals of getting my PhD done and towards an obsession with my healing bones. I decided to make a matching quilt block to capture this suspension as an autoethnographic record. It was not so easy to stitch because I could not move around to gather materials and tools, so I used my Posca pens to draw the design on the fabric. As I slowly layered the colour on to the fabric, day after day, the pain became less, and the flow of movement became easier. The quilting was the next part of this slow therapeutic process which continued for throughout the rest of the medical intervention, (cast no. 4 and then the moon boot which I hated with a passion). The flowers are a beautiful reflection of an awfully depressing time, but they gave me hope and helped me continue, stitch by stitch and step by step. My cast no. 3 and the matching quilt block were a painted-on smile, underneath which there was the complex process of accepting my new identity and healing from the circumstances that had led to this situation.

By analysing my experience through the lens of critical human geography, I reject the idea of space as a neutral container, arguing instead that it is actively produced through social action, power relations, and lived experience. In essence, this is a spatial application of Wright Mills' 'sociological imagination,' (1959) demanding that we connect the 'personal

troubles' of my isolated room and a broken body to the 'public issues' of systemic ableism and post-pandemic social abandonment. By applying Soja's (1996) spatial theory, I now explain the interplay as Firstspace, Secondspace, and the composite Thirdspace.

The Firstspace was the material reality of my confinement: the bed, my elevated leg, the four walls of my room. My room transformed from a hub of digital connection to a prison; I could not even sit at my desk. The Secondspace was the devastating conceptual landscape imposed upon that reality. As the world slid back to in person, my injury forced me into an isolation more unrelenting than lockdown. I had now become trapped in a social death crushed by the pervasive, internalised feeling of being 'useless'.

I could do nothing for myself, let alone other people and my lack of productivity consumed me. I was unable to shake the feeling of having no purpose or value to society because I was 'broken.' The experience of being in cast No. 3 provided a critical turning point in my understanding of this research. I realised that the essential element for my survival was not the 'craft' in a narrow sense, but the access to a Flow-Thirdspace. Drawing, in the absence of alternatives, was a vital mechanism for shifting my attention away from the despair of my physical situation. It proves that the concept of Flow-Thirdspace is not tied to a specific medium; it is an attentional state that allows for a 'clearing' (Section 5.4.2) from the internalised pressure to be productive.

The shattering of my role and purpose reflects Laing's (1965) observation that when a person's sense of self becomes unstable, they often turn to spatial cues to locate or steady themselves. My carefully planned timeline for the linear progression of my PhD, the narrative of who I was and who I was becoming, was annihilated. In that temporal void, as Laing (1965) predicted, I was compelled to turn to space to re-establish a self. This is

where Laing's (1965) psychological insight links to geographical practice, and where the creation of Flow-Thirdspace was an existential necessity. It began on the cast, but the quilt block allowed me to layer the experience across time, to see that all was not hopeless.

Existing and drawing within Flow-Thirdspace was the spatial means of reasserting an identity that had been lost in time. This is why making is a valuable geographical act: it creates a new kind of space, a counter-geography to the place where my own world had been shattered. *Cast No. 3 Quilt Block* was the evidence I needed to prove to myself that I was not 'useless.' It was my assertion of purpose. My Flow-Thirdspace holds those contradictions: the 'painted-on smile' of my flowers (external) contrasted against the profound grief they conceal (internal).

5.2.3 Fracture

The psychological states of attention and flow were the mechanisms of the spatial production, redirecting my focus from the all-consuming Secondspace of social death and providing the energy to build myself a generative Flow-Thirdspace. In this new, self-produced space, I was no longer a 'broken' body but instead viewed myself as an active maker, a creator who had found purpose again. The quilt block is proof that even from within the most profound isolation, it is possible to produce a Flow-Thirdspace and reimagine a new self, back into existence. To fully understand the phenomenological elements of creative acts, I will now turn to the internal landscape of that fragmentation itself. The *Fractured Quilt Block* (Figure 56) illustrates the multi-layered experience of the saturated self.



Figure 56 Fractured Quilt Block

This block was created in an attempt to process what had happened. When my foot fractured, so did my identity. In the most literal and metaphorical sense, as observed by Sacks (1998), I had ‘no leg to stand on.’ My physical reality bled into every aspect of my identity, creating an imposed solitude, a state where my brain refused to quieten, playing a continuous loop of worry. My foot felt alien, shaking and twitching as if it no longer belonged to me. ‘That’s my foot,’ I thought, ‘and I have no control over what happens to it or what it does.’ My existence as an active, independent, researcher was shattered overnight. This block, with its snipped layers and frayed edges, is an autoethnographic record of what that breaking felt like, a metaphorical enactment of the surgical procedures I went through.

While Laing’s (1965) *The Divided Self* begins with an attempt to listen to lived experience, it was still situated within a framework that pathologises

and fragments. I therefore acknowledge his groundbreaking attitudes and although I am not aligned with his conclusions, I appreciate that moment in history where empathy briefly entered clinical practice although it was not enough to eliminate pathologisation. To understand the multi-layered fracturing, I experienced and witnessed requires a different theoretical lens. Gergen's (1991) *The Saturated Self* does not pathologise in the same way, instead it offers a cultural critique by exploring how postmodern life floods us with relationships, roles, and expectations that destabilise the idea of a singular, coherent self. My attention was constantly fractured, splintered between switching tasks and roles, and feeling under attack with the world just waiting for me to fail. Gergen's (1991) framing captures these pressures, but my work resists the idea of unravelling. In creating the PhD quilt, there was a focus on creating space and time to reclaim coherence through making by centring agency, voice, and embodied cohesion in place of fragmentation. However, this block, *Fractured Quilt Block* (Figure 56), is a reminder of how fragile that autonomy becomes when individuals experience the complexity of challenges that require support or intervention.

For some of my participants, 'saturation' of the self is a harsh and often brutal reality. This was the experience of Violet, whose psychotic break was a shattering of self. It was also relevant for Laine, in how she was judged not sick enough for support systems but unable to hold down a job, leaving her to fall through the cracks of a fractured bureaucracy. Laine's experience, and that of others trying to navigate multiple, disconnected support agencies, is the human cost of the 'broken pathways' mapped in the *Nothing About Us Without Us Quilt Block* (Figure 54). It was a cruel irony for Nova, who experienced repetitive strain injury as a result of the knitting she used to hold herself together, and the continuous reality for Romy, Rae, Hollis, Indigo, and Tate, who live with the constant fracturing of chronic pain.

The *Fractured Quilt Block* is an embodied illustration of how it felt to fracture and at the same time find a way to contain the impact. In a world filled with Williams' (2018) 'attention bandits' designed to hijack our focus, I found that turning my attention inward, toward the careful observation of sketching, stitching or the challenge of relearning to walk, was a way to regain control. As I stitched, the experience of flow, of getting lost in the mindful process facilitated a pause that quietened my mind and cleared a space for me to process what had happened.

This block completes the theoretical foundation for this chapter and is followed by two questions. If we are navigating a world that fractures our attention and saturates ourselves, how can the experience of making, through the specific, reclaimed mechanisms of attention and flow, provide a potential space for resistance? How can craft offer a temporary anchor in a chaotic world, allowing us to construct our own story and, stitch by stitch, find a leg to stand on, even if only for a moment?

5.3 Attention

5.3.1 The 'Arachnean' Mode: Lines of Flight

Building on my argument about the tension between the externally imposed fractured attention and the internally generated monotropic focus, I now explore how this is the catalyst that creates a restorative Flow-Thirdspace. Therefore, in this section I use Deligny's (1980/2015) concepts to reframe this as an 'Arachnean' mode of being, a rhizomatic dynamic of connection to the self, others and the environment (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2013). It allows for the contrasting of fragmented, multitasking attention demanded by the 'achievement society' (Han, 2015a) with the potential for deep, monotropic attention described by some of the

participants. These rhizomatic connections also underpin the methodology of my thesis and are applied to the PhD Quilt where each block functions as a plateau, without being more relevant than any other. In this sense, my research process represents a map, where the value is held within the multiple entry points and messy connections instead of a single, linear argument.

Although attention was refocused on craft by many of my participants, this did not present as a definitive positive, in fact the paradox of being both helpful and a challenge presented in many of their accounts. For some participants, craft occasionally contributed to negative self-concepts; for instance, Laine described the frustration of never finishing a project or the paralysis caused by plans so ambitious that they prevented her from even starting. Nova described the obsessive side of crafting, especially knitting, that had led to her repetitive strain injury. Aster talked about how crafting took over from the drudgery of her daily family life to such an extent that she started to feel guilty about the time she was spending crafting when she 'should' be doing something more 'productive'.

The process of engaging, therefore, does not follow a neat path from the saturated self to the restoration of homeostasis and a completed artefact. Instead, it is rhizomatic. Projects are picked up and put down, ideas connect laterally, materials and ideas from one project bleed into another, and meaning is made through a web of interconnections and the process rather than a linear narrative of progress. These connections are represented throughout my PhD Quilt in the repetition of fabrics, colours, especially green, red and gold as well as motifs. The reworking of materials and backlog of unfinished objects (affectionately termed as UFOs in crafting spaces) offers an alternative to the project-based, goal-oriented pressure of the 'Flatlands'. Therefore, despite craft offering a Flow-Thirdspace in the sense of an escape from 'Burnout Society', it did not eliminate the external attentional demands such as the pressure to

multitask, distractions, notifications and the mental load of gendered expectations. It is within this paradoxical flux, feeling both saturated and aligned, that the act of resistance takes place, an experience represented by the *Fractured Quilt Block* (Figure 56) discussed in section 5.2.3.

The autoethnographic block 'Cast No. 3' (Figure 55) captures the Arachnean mode in practice. Its creation was a response to a state where I could not 'think' my way through intense physical pain. Instead, the simple, sensory, low-cognitive-load process of drawing allowed an entry into a pre-lingual state where the pain of a Lisfranc injury abated a little. In entering this Arachnean state, I was able to trace a route through the pain, line by line. It allowed me to live with the distress rather than escape it. The floral forms act as an imprint of presence; the use of colour allowed the passing of time to be experienced differently. Rather than resolving the crisis like a 'line of flight' or escape, the drawing helped me to drift through wandering lines and settle in a space. Like Deligny's (1980/2015) maps, there are layers of meaning beneath the finished product. In focusing on the process, I reject the idea of a completed healing journey.

My experience of hope is reflected in how other participants described their own making. For Sol, the vision of spring planting was both a distant goal and a way of escaping the emotional weight of winter. Similarly, Laine's elaborate plan for a patchwork housecoat resulted in an affective scaffold through selection of fabrics and colour combination with the future complexity of the process transformed in her imagination, even though the item was never made. These imagined futures were integral tools for navigating the challenges of their current situation.

Framing the Arachnean mode in this way positions Flow-Thirdspace as a temporal resistance. It allows the maker to stitch together fragments of distress into patterns of hope. Whether through stitching, planting, or drawing, each process is both present and anticipatory, preventing the

maker becoming stuck in the pain of the one difficult moment. The deep, immersive quality of attention, which Aster named as an ability ‘to hyperfocus on it’, is the state of being that allows for the experience of flow, which will be the focus of the following sections.

5.3.2 External Demands

Autistic individuals are described as having heightened injustice sensitivity, often experienced as both a visceral sense of fairness and an uncompromising drive to challenge inequity (Kapp, 2016). Subsequently the challenges some experience when faced with injustice can lead to increased distress and burnout, especially when challenging stereotypes and promoting recognition of different ways of being (Stenning, 2024). However, this can motivate activism and advocacy, (Stenning 2024) also highlights the distress and burnout that arise when these values conflict with societal norms or systemic barriers. Experiences of injustice relating tensions between external pressures and internal attentional states, compelled participants to act. Some of the disclosures related to historical injustices, particularly testimonial injustice which led to a collaborative quilt block created with Aspen (Figure 57).



Figure 57 Epistemological Injustice Quilt Block

The *Epistemological Injustice Quilt Block* (Figure 57) was the result of an extended conversation about Aspen's experience of epistemic injustice within academia. As an autistic academic, Aspen faced burnout as a result of institutional violence which they defined as bullying, narcissistic abuse, and the constant invalidation of their testimony through the pathologising lens of a 'social skills deficit.' They stated that institutional power was designed to isolate and burn away an individual's sense of self and credibility.

This led me to choose Aspen as their pseudonym. An aspen grove appears as a collection of individual trees, but beneath the surface, it is a single,

interconnected organism, a vast root network that survives even when the world above is incinerated. This subterranean network is a perfect illustration of what Deleuze & Guattari (1980/2013) theorise as a rhizome in how it is de-centred, non-hierarchical, and spreading through lateral connections and where life survives by going underground. Our collaboration was a conscious act of materialising the rhizomatic potential. We wanted to create a counter-narrative that avoided the top-down perspective of the institution that had invalidated Aspen, by focusing on the legitimacy of our shared, underground knowledge gained from lived experience.

In response, Aspen wrote a poem to capture how the deficit model had been imposed upon them and theorised the resulting trauma through the lens of Spivak's (1988/2023) 'Epistemological Violence' and Milton's (2012) 'Double Empathy Problem'. They described their embodied autistic experiences in academia as that of a 'Deviant' (Goffman, 1963) and 'Radical other' (Fricker, 2007). To create a material response to this burnout, we co-selected three words from Aspen's poem that captured the aftermath of their distress: 'Voiceless', 'Distraught', 'Frightened'. I stitched them onto the white collar of a school shirt, a symbol of the rigid, institutional constraints which contrast with the fluid, interconnected aspen grove.

Our collaborative process of stitching created room for silenced experiences, creating a Flow-Thirdspace where regeneration and new growth could begin. It resulted in an artefact behind which we could protect our individual narratives, whilst still allowing us to safely present our story in academic spaces. Aspen's heightened justice sensitivity can be understood here as an intense monotropic focus directed at the health of the entire grove, where the burnout they experienced was the pain of a single tree succumbing to systemic fire. By channelling this outward-facing attention into a shared, regenerative act of making, the quilt block is a

green shoot from our surviving root system, a symbol that makes the life beneath the scorched ground of institutional harm visible.

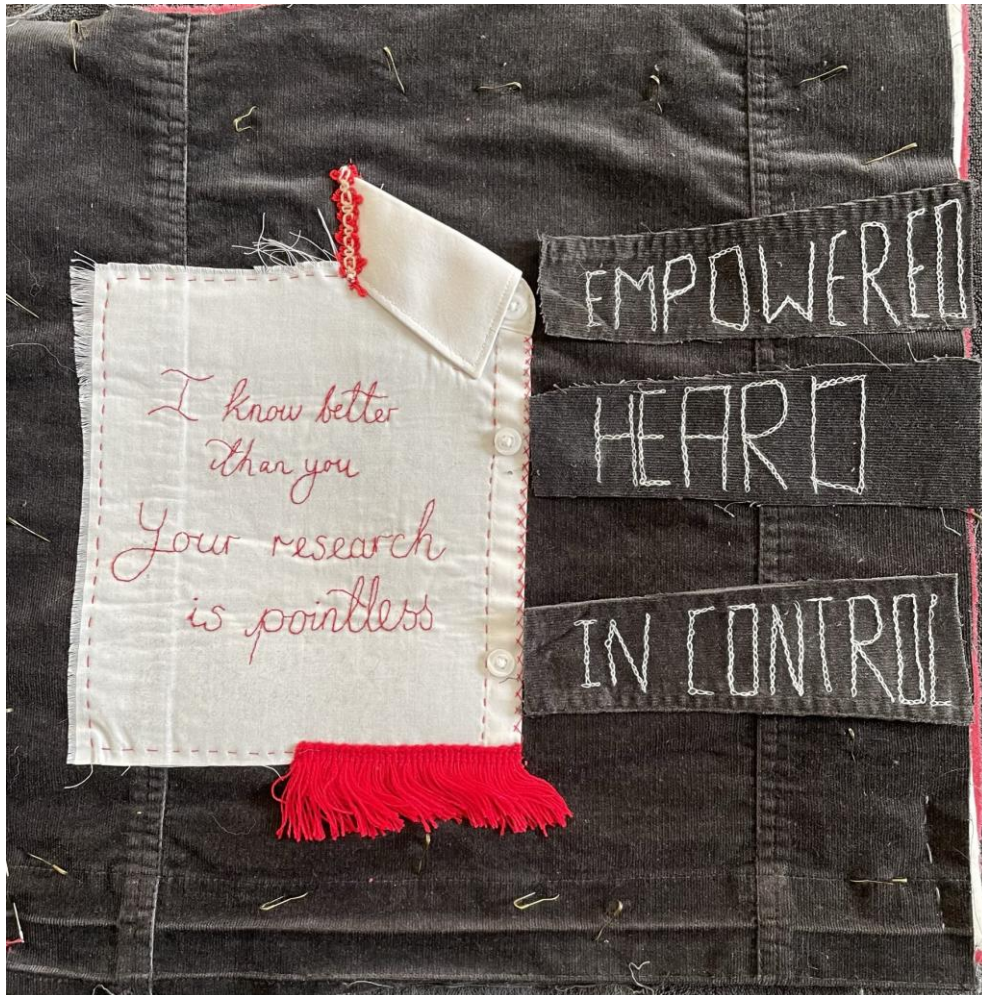


Figure 58 Revised Epistemological Injustice

I interviewed Aspen again after the process and replaced the words with: 'Heard', 'Validated', and 'In Control' (Figure 58). The Flow-Thirdspace we created prevented Aspen's distress from becoming fixed by shifting the attention towards continued growth. It illustrates that when systems try to burn everything down, survival and healing are found in the deep, interconnected, and often invisible networks of collective care and shared knowledge.

The intense focus on injustice, while a clear strength, is not without its cost, Stenning (2024). Surviving in harsh environments is exhausting. The anger and aggression that can arise from this state are often deemed socially unacceptable, particularly for women, forcing another layer of self-monitoring. Onyx provides an example of this tension between righteous anger and gendered expectation: 'I don't like myself being aggressive... but the fact that those people are very wrong allows my aggression,' she explained. Like Aspen, she finds validation in the certainty of her position, allowing an emotional response that societal norms would otherwise suppress.

The key point is that cognitive and emotional resources are finite, therefore they are quickly depleted when harnessed for essential battles of justice and self-representation. The heightened state of hypervigilance required to maintain the equilibrium is what leaves individuals vulnerable to the relentless, multitasking demands of the 'Flatlands.' The fractured, divided attention of daily life is often a consequence of this necessary political and existential work. Onyx's experience as a parent and teacher illustrates this cost: 'I couldn't concentrate on one of them, so this was my main problem with the teaching.'

Here, the monotropic strength becomes a challenge in a different context. The same attentional style that allows for an intense focus on injustice makes the constant task-switching demanded by parenting and work, an overwhelming source of fracture. This is often presented as a personal failing instead of a systemic one. Friction is created when a rhizomatic way of being is forced to operate within a hierarchical consumeristic world that imposes rigid structures and expectations. The experiences of Aster and Rae, whose struggles to balance the deep focus of their creative work with the administrative and domestic demands of their lives highlight a core

tension. Attention is an active, limited resource, constantly under siege in an attention economy that perpetuates divided focus.

5.3.3 Internal Attentional States: crafting an answer to the self

In this final section on attention, I turn the focus inward to search for a coherent, regulated self amidst external chaos. I explore the idea of crafting one of many possible answers to the self, arguing that craft functions as a valuable technology for neurodivergent individuals to actively harness their innate capacity for monotropic attention. It is through this harnessed focus that they move from a state of internal fragmentation to a more settled state of nervous system regulation, through the creating an embodied Flow-Thirdspace.

Many of the participants described how attention is managed internally with reference to focus, distraction, emotional regulation, and attempts to balance cognitive load. For example, Nova shared that without knitting, she finds it hard to rest or focus, often multitasking ineffectively. She described her internal state as “lost” without the regulatory effect of craft, indicating that her mental equilibrium is disrupted when she lacks a structured, soothing activity. This was something Rae agreed with. She described her mind as “constantly going,” reflecting an internal attention state of hyperactivity where her thoughts are rapid, persistent, and sometimes overwhelming. She also felt that her artistic practice, which involves designing fabrics and creating products, acted as a focusing mechanism. Rae stated: ‘It’s therapeutic... I love looking at them all... I’m surrounded by stuff I like.’

Once again this reinforces the suggestion that creative engagement was a way to regulate and stabilise her attention state, resulting in an immersive creative environment. Rae goes on to describe how she is in her studio

every day, which is where she runs her business from even though she doesn't make much money from it, stating that it “keeps [her] sane”. This reflects a sustained, focused engagement with her craft which is in contrast to the struggles she experiences with website updates or admin tasks. Entering Flow-Thirdspace requires intense monotropic focus which is not possible during tasks that involve the switching of attention resulting in overload and sensory distress.

The ability to focus intensely on creative work, often termed hyperfocus, has been noted as a key neurodivergent strength (Heasman et.al. 2024; Robdale, 2024; Gutte, 2025). Aster captured this concept in her phrase ‘to hyperfocus on it’ when describing the intense attentional states, she achieved to manage the difficulty of switching tasks between her studies and the external expectations of being a mother. The powerful cognitive state that allows Aster to “lose herself” in the work was also discussed by Violet. Violet describes crochet as a “repetitive fixated interest” that aligns with her sensory-seeking autistic traits and explains that once she knows what she is doing, she enters a flow state, where the repetitive motion of crochet becomes soothing and productive. Violet’s hyperfocus acts as a distraction which leads to tangible outcomes, like making a blanket which she and her son use as a ‘weighted cocoon for sensory comfort.’ She stated:

It’s that repetitive fixated interest, but with this repetitive fixated interest, you get a result out of it. And I’ve not really had a productive stim like that [...] Literally my head space can go from busy and all to calm and quiet and I can feel my heart rate slowing down [...] That’s nervous system regulation. You get it through this. (Interview 1, 24 January 2023)

Aster's and Violet's experiences align with monotropism discussed previously. In contrast to the fragmented attention demanded by the attention economy, Violet's account of crochet reveals a monotropic mode of engagement, one that privileges deep, sustained focus on a single channel of interest. Monotropism, as theorised by Murray, Lesser, and Lawson (2005), describes a cognitive style common in autistic individuals, where attention is intensely directed toward a narrow field. Rather than a deficit, Violet's experience reframes her "productive stim" as a source of regulation, agency, and meaning. Her immersion in the rhythm and repetition of stitching helps to regulate her nervous system. It provides her with a way to leave trails and wander lines through dissociative states, as a tactile record of survival. Entry into a flow state therefore does not require complex planning. Sensory-based repetitive tasks encourage monotropic focus of the tactile nature of the yarn leading to a deeply immersive state that counters external overwhelm.

Violet's self-regulation resonates with Deligny's (1980/2015) concept that 'the process is the meaning,' where significance lies in the act of doing rather than the finished product. For Violet, the therapeutic and transformative power does not lie in what she makes, but in how it is made. Keys to this is the embodied experience gained through the texture of the yarn, the weight of the blanket and the rhythm of the hook. Her non-verbal, sensory mode of being, offers a space to resist the demand for productivity and outcome but is not without the pressures that compel to be productive. However, it remains a form of embodied attention that reclaims agency through slowness, repetition, and care despite the pitfalls discussed in section 4.4.1.

These examples demonstrate how monotropic attention can be viewed as both neurodivergent strength and an attentional counter-narrative. The slow process of crafting challenges dominant narratives that equate value with speed, visibility, and output by suggesting instead that meaning can

be found in the margins, in the stitch, in the pause. In contrast to the 'Flatlands' which represent a one-dimensional space steeped in productivity, speed, and external validation, Violet's experience of crochet is a counter-practice, defined by its slowness, sensory engagement, and internal regulation. Her experience aligns with Thirdspace theory (Soja, 1996), where physical crafting space (crafting) and healing mental/emotional space converge to form a lived, transformative experience. In the following quote, Violet rejects linear time and productivity metrics by embracing the cyclical embodied quality of time achieved by crocheting: 'It's just the progress of, OK, I started this. I know it's six months old. So what? There would be a time where I beat myself up for that. The dress will be done when the dress is done.'

In the case of Violet, the slowness of craft and the deep attention it fosters offers a deliberate rejection of the hustle and superficiality of an achievement focused society. The practice of slowness is supported by Berg & Seeber's (2016) critique of neoliberal systems that ignore the value inherent in the process. The psychological effects of craft, such as a slowing heart rate and reduced anxiety, are supported by Corkhill et al., (2013). Violet's experience is a clear example of how harnessing monotropic attention allows the self to be understood by decentring intentional thought and focusing on embodied regulation. Ultimately, harnessing monotropic attention through the repetitive, sensory rhythm of craft provides a cognitive bridge. The shifting of attention away from external fracture and into a focused activity makes a flow state possible. The deep, immersive quality of attention is essential for entering the psychological state of flow, which will be the focus of my subsequent analysis section.

5.4 Flow



Figure 59 Swimming through Silence Quilt Block, Autumn 2023

I begin this section on the deep immersive nature of creative flow with an uncomfortable silence. I argue that navigating 'unmentionable' and silenced stories of trauma and invalidation, is one of the main reasons to retreat into the embodied, non-verbal sanctuary of the crafting process. Flow in this context, offers more than an escape by functioning as a tool for engaging with the most difficult aspects of our lives. It provides a mechanism that allows us to 'swim through silence' without drowning.

As I progressed through my data collection, uncomfortable silences started to haunt me, and my own experiences have resurfaced in response to the

distress of others. Whilst lived experience is of value in empathising with people, silenced stories provoked an embodied emotional response as I approached and recoiled from engaging with my data. I needed to find a way to navigate this process. Silence, as a subtheme, became apparent almost immediately in the research process. There are often hidden stories behind silences. Ahmed's *Complaint!* (2021) provides one explanation in documenting abuses of power encountered during complaints warning of the consequences of breaking silence. Fivush & Pasupathi (2019) describe how our identities are constructed through the narratives we tell about ourselves. These stories can be supported by social interactions but also contested or invalidated. What is not being said or is prevented from being shared is still a part of our identity. This concept appears in Goffman's work on stigma (1963) and in the theory of dramaturgy (1959), which provides a person with a public facing mask for 'discreditable identities'.

I found these unspoken stories challenging, especially when obscured by uncomfortable silences. I knew silences would be there, because this was one of the reasons that I had undertaken this enormous task of writing a PhD thesis, to highlight the silences and provide a space for the impact of these silences on people's lives to be explored. The *Swimming Through Silence Quilt Block* (Figure 59) is an example of how the emotion work of the research process was addressed using material coding. As I swam, I was processing not only my own history, but the unspeakable stories my participants had shared or left hanging in the silences between words, such as the transcript Tate later chose to withdraw. To navigate this, the fabrics used to stitch this block were deliberately selected to counter negative emotions. I used a dress that no longer represented who I am, the swallows in flight fabric from my 2013 bike makeover and scraps from happier times, materials imbued with my own memories of seeking the light in moments of darkness. By using these specific, comforting textiles, including fabric donated by my dear friend Nat, to construct the water and the tears, the material offered a sanctuary for the themes we could not

safely speak aloud. It allowed me to acknowledge the profound resonance between my life and theirs, using the Flow-Thirdspace to actively stitch a lifeboat, not to dwell in the nightmare.

Rae describes how her creative process is deeply entwined with her personal experiences of loss and grief, often without her initially realising it. When discussing her fabric designs, she shares:

It's called Peter and June and it's about my grandma and grandpa called Peter and June, and they were everything to me like. I'm going to cry thinking about it [...] All my lovely memories from childhood are literally just with them. I was very close to them. They're really creative. So, my granddad spent all of his time, woodworking or with animals, and my grandma was always knitting or sewing or drawing [...] So, I designed a fabric based on them. Of all my lovely memories. (Interview 1, 17 March 2023)

She goes on to say: "Without realising it, now you've made me realise that's what I do... I've got snippets of these lovely memories, I guess. And I make them all into my fabric." This moment was evocative because Rae was visibly moved, and an uncomfortable silence hangs in the air, as she processes the emotion. The grief and love for her grandparents are not spoken about in her daily life, but they are woven into her creative work. The story behind the fabric too emotional for ordinary conversation but finds expression through her art. Rae's response provides an example of how the unmentionable surfaces without us being consciously aware of it. These deeply personal emotions are not triggered through direct discussions about grief but instead are reflected in the 'why' of our creative praxis.

As I faced the daunting task of analysing the data I had collected, I wondered why I was procrastinating so much. Every time I tried to engage with the interview transcripts, I felt a sense of panic and then it dawned on me. Not only was I saddened and moved by their stories, as stories like Rae's were so relatable but I was terrified about misinterpreting or misrepresenting what I had been told. I was paralysed by the fear of causing my participants harm or distress.

Van der Kolk (2014) makes connections between traumatic experiences and somatic symptoms. I started to suffer headaches and sickness if I tried to engage with the data. Each participant had disclosed something that triggered an emotional response in me. In Leigh & Brown's (2021) approach to data analysis through embodied inquiry, they highlight the importance of observing these physical responses to what we are researching; 'hotspots' that present as a challenge emotionally. This is where a relevant aspect is being noted by your body. I turned to reflective writing to think about how memories were triggered by hearing these stories, August 2023.

To start with I noticed the mental fog, and I just seemed to have less patience than before... and I was having all these accidents... dropping things, walking into stuff, forgetting where I had put stuff...and there was this rage that would bubble up from nowhere. I was noticing all these aches and pains... like my body was protesting at all the stress inflicted on it over these past years. My inner voice kept screaming 'you are not who you used to be.' Sometimes it feels as if my life was stolen. I have always struggled to cope with the pressures of being a working mum, buckled under the expectations of society and at my lowest point, instead of support, I had everything I valued, everything that defined my

identity, ripped from under me and I was left with tears and physical ailments... like a reminder of how my body has kept the score. It didn't occur to me that it could be an ADHD fuelled early perimenopause triggered by chemo. I didn't realise I would relive these emotions each time a participant touched on the topic of shifting identities and that my body would respond each time I tried to suppress the rising emotions. (Field notes reflection, 4 August 2024)

Over 31 days from the 1st – 31st August 2023, I set aside time to explore the silences using a combination of embodied inquiry (Leigh & Brown, 2021), narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2012), creative methods (Kara, 2020) and reflexive journalling (Brown, 2023). I read key texts about the relevance of silence and swam each day to provide me with a silent space to think, free from the distractions of a busy family home during the summer holidays. Narratives are how we can make sense of the world (Freeman & Meretoja, 2023). I made field notes and interpreted the concepts I encountered in a quilt block. *Swimming Through Silence* (Figure 59), is a record of this process, with the swimming pool background representing the overwhelming cognitive landscape of the research itself.

As I swam, I felt the deep immersion in my thoughts, my breathing synchronised with each stroke, time dissolved. I challenged my thoughts and worked through how to present these. Each day, after I had swum, I reflected on what connections between thoughts had emerged. I made observations about my immediate surroundings in the swimming pool, interactions with the external environment and the influence of my internal dialogue which were then translated into stitch. I repeated this routine until I understood how my own experience was intertwined with those of my participants. *Swimming Through Silence Quilt Block* (Figure 59)

shows this immersion as a pool filled with tears instead of water. These tears, cried by my self-portrait, create a disorienting 'Alice in Wonderland' effect. To represent the invalidation that fuelled my historical silences, I stitched the word 'nevermind' shorthand for 'nevermind that emotional rubbish, get on with your work'.

My immersive, almost transcendent state of making is an example of Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow where the repetitive, rhythmic act of stitching this dilemma and the metaphorical act of swimming resulted in an example of the complexity of a Flow-Thirdspace. The process enabled me to access an immersive state required to process these sticking points.

Building on the abstracted and psychological definition, I argue that flow is entangled with the space. It is the subjective feeling of entering Deligny's (1980/2015) Arachnean network, a concept interpreted by Milton (2016) as a fundamental mode of neurodivergent thought. Milton (2016) views the non-linear, sensory 'wander lines' as a valid way of being which opposes typical expectations of attention and achievement. Entering this state is a way of losing the self, but also it is about allowing for its re-integration through an embodied praxis that is deeply authentic. Next, I explore three core components of this lived experience: immersion and altered time, relief from self-consciousness, and the distinctive nature of autotelic engagement.

5.4.1 Immersion and altered time: "I'm just letting it happen"

The profound sense of flow states allows participants to inhabit a moment that is detached from the relentless pace of imposed external pressures. Juno describes crafting, especially her daily pinch pot practice, as a tactile extension of the body, where the mind and hands work together in a way that bypasses conscious thought. She elaborated by

saying: “I’m trying not to think about what I’m doing, which is actually really, really hard... I’m just letting it happen.” Juno’s avoidance of planning allowed her to enter a state, where time and self-awareness dissolve. She compares this to meditation, which she finds difficult due to ADHD, but said: “Crafting and making is the closest I’ll get to that... it’s meditative.” Building on the previous discussion, craft potentially offers a unique pathway into flow, where traditional mindfulness practices may not be accessible. Juno describes entering a state where the pot “makes itself”: “It was about June where it occurred to me that, oh, I hadn’t taken any notice of what I just made... my hands made it. I didn’t.” She compares her praxis to childlike creativity and describes how she could eventually make pots without looking or thinking. Her intense, embodied engagement and automaticity bypass the self-critical planning mind.

Sky also described experiencing craft as deeply immersive, explaining she often lost track of time during manual tasks like carding, spinning, and weaving; somatic activities associated with natural fibres (Bianco, 2024). Their rhythmic and repetitive qualities foster meditative states supporting the findings of Wellesley-Smith (2015) and Matthews (2016). The embodiment and oneness with the materials result in meaning created by the focus on the process rather than the outcome or expression. Sky states: “There’s just a rhythm to it, which is soothing... even if it’s not something which I’m able to take kind of like creative joy in when I’m feeling really bad.” The rhythm and whole-body alignment described by Sky, indicate a temporal shift, which is a key element of flow, as discussed by Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990).

Ash expanded on this concept by describing crafting as deeply absorbing, especially during repetitive tasks like knitting or sewing straight seams. She explained: “If I’m knitting something that has a repetitive pattern... it’s like it clears the cobwebs away.” Ash described the embodied state of flow, as “a clearing of mental space” and noted how the activity becomes all-

encompassing. Lampitt Adey (2018) found that many knitters described their experience as a delicate balance between the complexity of the task and their perceived ability to complete it. Finding a balance is crucial for flow in that when a knitter is fully absorbed in the rhythm of the stitches, time seems to dissolve, and self-consciousness fades. The repetitive, tactile nature of knitting supports this immersion, especially when the pattern is just challenging enough to require attention but not so difficult as to cause frustration. Ash explains: “I just want to sit there and knit or whatever project I'm doing... I stopped eating. I stopped sleeping.”

Flow states demonstrate the power of these temporal shifts where the maker can harness the physical reality of the activity (Firstspace) and use craft to synchronise the body's normal rhythms with the actions of the body resulting in a fully immersive Flow-Thirdspace. Ash's way of being is more than an altered state as the practice of crafting creates a new reality, which is so powerful that it temporarily overrides the basic physiological needs of the physical Firstspace, for example, the need for food and sleep. It is a significant re-prioritisation of being, in which the pull of creative engagement momentarily outweighs the body's usual rhythms and requirements.

5.4.2 Relief from Self-consciousness: “A clearing somehow”

Within the immersive Flow-Thirdspace I am describing, the constant self-monitoring and external judgment of the 'saturated self' (Gergen, 1991) can be temporarily suspended, creating what Ash called a “clearing” for authentic, un-self-conscious being. Juno's reflections on crafting without overthinking were key when discussing her 365-day pinch pot project. Her project was about escaping perfectionism. She learnt to be led by the intuitiveness of making pots, even if she didn't initially like the resulting product, indicating a release from self-judgment.

Our first interview occurred four months into Juno's challenge to make a pot a day for a year. A pinch pot is made by taking a small lump of clay and only using the hands to pinch and shape the material into a pot. It was her way of critiquing what she called "capital A Art", employing Perry's (2015) *Playing to the Gallery* as her entry point. Her critique of the 'gallery' and the performance of societal expectations within these hierarchical institutional spaces echoes the RA case study from Chapter 4 (section 4.5). Juno challenges self-consciousness with the rhetorical question: "Is that more authentic, that thing I made without thinking about it, or the thing I have in my mind that I'd like to make?"

Juno's question connects to the central argument of Laing's (1965) *Divided Self*. Where Juno speaks of the "thing I have in my mind", she is focused on the product made as a performance by the unembodied self, whereas the "thing I made without thinking" emerges from the authentic, embodied self, made accessible by the flow state. She explores how unplanned making reveals aspects of self that may be hidden or suppressed and how craft can quieten the inner critic, allowing for more authentic expression. Juno's journey is marked by a conscious rejection of perfectionism and external validation driven by how being "good at art" became a constraint, stifling risk-taking and creativity. The pinch pot project allowed her to let go of judgment, including her own, and she was surprised by the reaction of others: "Some of the ones that I hated, were the favourites of people at the exhibition."

Sky described how she saw crafting as a mental escape providing relief from intrusive or negative thought patterns, especially those associated with anxiety and depression. She found that craft was separate from thinking and processing, an escape from her overly active neurodivergent thoughts. Sky's experience provides a counter-argument to a utopian perspective of craft, revealing that the core mechanism for her sense of

relief was not necessarily related to 'art' or aesthetics. A more important aspect was the innate nature of embodied, physical activity. When feeling completely overwhelmed, her preference was not for complex creative projects but for the elemental, manual work of gardening or digging; activities that do not require planning or cognitive effort. Davies (2018) describes the fundamental importance of simply 'working with the hands' and argues that the rhythmic, haptic engagement of manual work is a form of non-verbal thinking; a pathway to re-establishing a sense of competence and selfhood, separate from the demands of creative expression or intellectual labour. The physical nature of these activities allows Sky to step away from her "bully voice" of self-criticism. She explains: "It's a way of still being active and being in my body but not like whirring round at things all the time."

Sky's need for an embodied, non-verbal process extends beyond quiet, grounding activities to more energetic and expressive forms of emotional regulation in how she uses music to process emotions like anger.

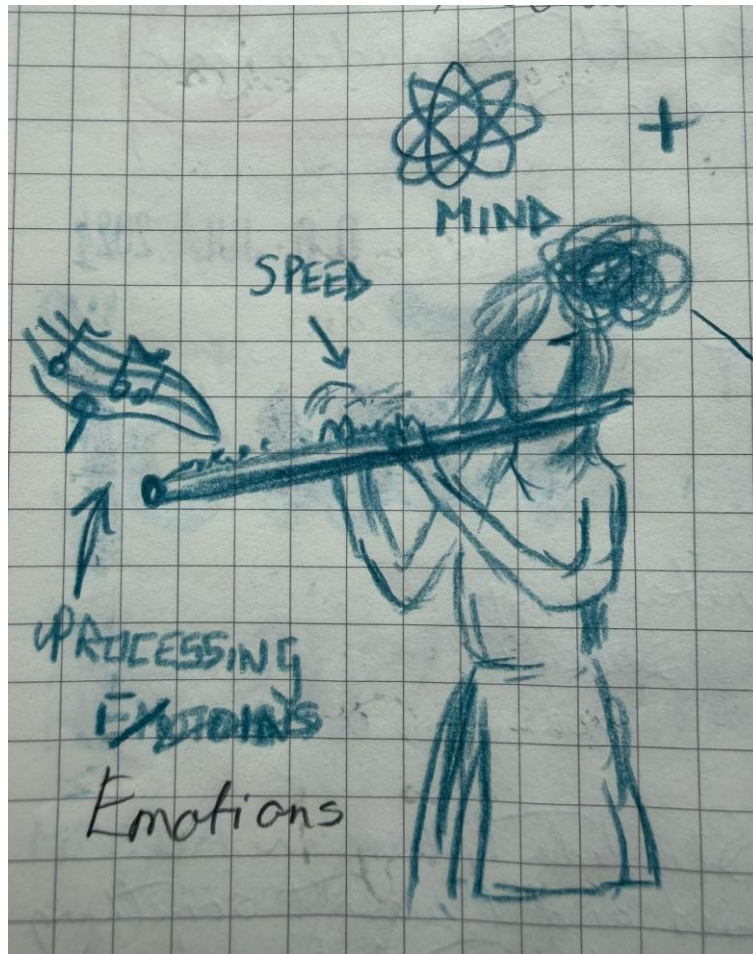


Figure 60 Field note sketch from Sky's interview, 6 July 2024

My field note sketch (Figure 60) depicts Sky playing the flute, her mind represented as a chaotic scribble of overwhelm. The act of playing, driven by the speed of the hands, transforms Sky's internal chaos into music which is explicitly labelled as 'processing emotions', not as expressing them. Sky described the process:

I play the flute and actually playing very fast music on the flute is generally what I would do when angry. If I'm gonna make something about anger, it would be more the fact of how I was

feeling and how my body was because of that is then reflected in what I have made. (Interview 2, 23 June 2023)

Sky is using hyperfocus to deliberately override a dysregulated nervous system. The “very fast music” is the audible equivalent of the ‘SPEED’ noted in my sketch, as a physical, energetic release that matches the intensity of the anger. Her final sentence reveals “how my body was”, highlighting the influence the physical body has on her process and is embedded within the final piece. The results, whether it is music or a textile object, are symbols of anger and a traceable ‘line of flight’ created by the process of working through the emotions. Where the ‘line of flight’ for my *Cast No. 3 Quilt Block* (Section 5.2.2.) was a slow, measured escape from physical confinement and pain, Sky’s is a fierce, energetic flight powered by emotion. However, both these ‘lines of flight’ reinforce Davies’ (2018) argument about the primacy of ‘working with the hands’ (or in this case, the hands and breath) and demonstrates that flow states are not always calm or meditative.

Other participants also reflected on how craft offers a release from self-monitoring, enabling a more embodied and present experience. Ash felt that craft offered a mental space that contrasts with her usual introspection and overthinking, which is captured in her quote: “I have a tendency to mull over things and overanalyse [...] but when I’m making something, it empties and opens up a clearing somehow.” Ash’s “clearing” metaphor encapsulates the mental relief and escape from self-conscious rumination that crafting offers. It allows her to be present without the burden of excessive internal dialogue, providing the mental and emotional space in which to be free from the clutter of self-conscious rumination and spiralling thoughts. Therefore, it is within the “clearing” that a space is

created for each part of the self to coexist without judgment and the process of re-integration and synthesis of the self can begin.

5.4.3 Autotelic experience: “There’s something about being in a creative space”

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of the craft-induced flow state is its autotelic nature, where the experience is its own reward. A focus on process over product is a direct refusal to conform to the achievement-based motivations of a capitalist system that defines value solely through outcomes and commodification. Juno’s commitment to making one pot a day was driven by a process where the product was secondary: autotelic engagement, where the act of making is intrinsically rewarding. By observing the evolution of self through craft, Juno repeatedly emphasised that the process was the point, not the product. She confirmed: “It wasn’t about discipline... it was part of the ritual of the day.”

Juno’s commitment to her daily pinch pot ritual valued the ‘microscopic event’ over the ‘hegemony of the signifier,’ to use the terms of Deleuze & Guattari (1980/2013). The systemic dominance of the final product over the human process dictates that an activity is only ‘productive’ if it results in a legible and marketable outcome. Juno’s pots could easily be commodified and become a representation of the systems that require them to be judged, exhibited, or sold. The act of making, however, is a private, embodied, material encounter that finds its meaning in the immediate sensations of the process itself. When Juno describes how “my hands made it. I didn’t,” she is articulating a mode of being where the non-verbal, affective body takes precedence over the conscious, planning self. The sensory and repetitive nature of the task was a gateway from the chaotic mental state influenced by external demands. It was a significant re-prioritisation of experience. She explained that even the broken or

“ugly” pots were kept and displayed, reinforcing that value lies in the making, not in aesthetic perfection or marketability. The sheer volume of this daily practice, captured in a photograph of a table laden with her 365 pots (Figure 61), provides a stunning visual articulation to this commitment. The collection is presented as a raw, honest archive of the 'microscopic events' instead of a curated exhibition of 'best works,' reinforcing the concept that the value lies in the cumulative act of making, not in any single, perfected outcome.



Figure 61 Photo of Juno's 365 pinch pots

Sky's relationship with craft is deeply autotelic as her joy comes from doing, not necessarily completing or showcasing. She describes how even when feeling depressed and unable to feel positive emotions, the mechanical nature of craft offers comfort. Crafting is used to process

emotions indirectly, to exist alongside them in a non-verbal, non-analytical way. Sky explains this distinction between doing, thinking and talking:

It is an escape I suppose and it's something which I can engage with... I can think about it and I can write about it and I can talk about it, but that's very separate from the doing of it. (Interview 2, 23 June 2023)

Sky's crafting is not representational of an achieved outcome, reinforcing that the value lies in the making and not in symbolic meaning or external validation. Similarly, Ash emphasises that crafting is a rewarding process in itself, not just a means to an end: "There's something about being in a creative space that wakes me up... completely different from reading."

Each of these perspectives shows that the act of making can be just as important as the finished product. The process was therapeutic and meaningful, reinforcing the autotelic nature of craft. In a world that demands that hobbies become a 'side hustle' and the monetisation of all potential productive skills, choosing to make something for no reason other than the act of making is a powerful rejection of the 'one-dimensional' imperative of an achievement-driven society. The use of these immersive states to navigate significant emotional transitions, such as loss and grief will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

5.5 Flow-Thirdspace

This final section explores three key aspects of craft as embodied practice. I will argue that participants encounter Flow-Thirdspace as a haptic reality experienced by feeling the space through the hands, body, sensory and

nervous system. The everyday wholeness and connectedness with the self provides neurodivergent individuals with a direct contrast to the performed saturated self and disembodied nature of the 'Flatlands' where screens, abstract pressures and alienation from one's own body have become so ingrained that burnout is ubiquitous and normalised.

In the previous sections, craft, especially knitting, was portrayed as a therapeutic, regulating, and focusing tool. In this section I will use the 'Granny Square' as a central artefact for exploring the sensory (colour, tactility, tensility and olfactorily) nature of fibre arts and the rhythmic nature of the embodied space. The granny square is a classic crochet symbol of ordinary everyday practice, to which the theory of 'tracing wander lines' as a radical and gendered political act can be applied. As Violet clearly illustrates when describing how crochet addresses her sensory seeking needs:

From a sensory seeking perspective, crochet, it's been amazing. I put it lightly because it's that repetitive motion and once you know what you're doing, you end up flowing with that repetitive fixated interest. But with this repetitive fixated interest, you get a result out of it... It was so amazing [...] me and my son, we actually use it as like a weighted blanket. And you can cocoon inside of it [...] sometimes, like when your mental health is bad, you don't really think you can do anything or that you're worth anything and all of a sudden, it's like I made this and we feel safe in this [...] It soothes my nervous system. It was incredible. My head space can go from busy and all calm and quiet and I can feel my heart rate slowing down. (Interview 1, 24 January 2023)

5.5.1 The Humble Granny Square as a Political Act



Figure 62 Granny Square Quilt Block

The humble granny square represents an ordinary but powerful act of political resistance. Although it is marked each year on Granny Square Day (15 August), the square's real significance comes from its iconic place in the crafting community as a form that resists polish, perfection, and the performance of social capital. The granny square is often where people start their crafting journey because of its simplicity, which helps democratise textiles. With a little patience and some practice, a granny square can be made in a short amount of time using up readily available

scraps of yarn. The focus on using what we have already at hand makes them symbolic of resistance against hyper-consumerism and instant gratification. My nine square block (Figure 62) was made from the leftovers from a cardigan I made for my daughter, whom I have since taught to crochet herself.



Figure 63 My daughter in her crochet cardigan, September 2022

Many of my participants were taught to crochet by their grandmothers and mothers, me included. Therefore, the granny square acts as a tribute to their often invisible and undocumented skills. Social media and beauty standards frequently try to manipulate women into believing that getting old is the equivalent of social death. The granny square is vibrant evidence

of life outside of trends and obsession with youth. My granny square proudly takes its place at the heart of my PhD quilt, defying patriarchal confines that relegate it to the bottom of the art-craft hierarchy. It radiates the value of domestic labour and frequently finds itself in blankets telling stories of joy, grief, resistance and solidarity. The granny square evokes an era where individuals grew up without their identity being influenced by the Internet and social media micro-trends. The granny square encapsulates the ethos of my project in its valuing and using what you have, not trying to fill the hollow void created by shallow living with consumerism. They stand for thrift, community, craft and care. The humble granny square has been belittled by all the highfaluting textile arts but stands out in my quilt as representing what it means to live a valuable life.

5.5.2 Embodied Presence: Craft as an Anchor Against Dissociation

The metaphor of being ‘washed away’ in a sea of overwhelming obligations, expectations and configurations of the self was expressed by Tate, Violet and Sol resulting in their challenges with emotional regulation and identity disintegration. Vercillo (2012) documents how her own experience of emotional distress and suicidal crisis led her to choose crochet as an act of survival. It offered her structure, purpose and a way to re-engage with life through tactile connections with the materiality of yarn.

Tate, a PhD student in her early 20s, described finding herself ‘stuck’ on a word for 20 minutes, unable to read or rest when overwhelmed by stress or anxiety. She also experienced dissociation and linked this to periods of self-doubt and external pressures, such as difficult supervisions. While reading was usually an immersive escape, in these moments it failed to

anchor her. Tate's experience illustrates why feelings of being 'washed away' result in the need for anchors, like craft and creative expression. Gergen's (1991) concept of the 'saturated self' is valuable here in understanding that when an individual becomes overwhelmed and cognitive anchors fail, flow achieved through intense focus is helpful because of its pre-lingual quality, a core component of an Arachnean network. It offers a cohesion of mind and body by engaging both simultaneously.

Violet described crochet as a "lifeline" during periods of severe mental health crisis and dissociation, especially following trauma. She explained that the repetitive, sensory nature of crochet provided her with a tangible sense of security and a way to regulate her nervous system when reality felt fragmented and overwhelming. Crochet was more than a hobby for Violet in these destabilising times. She described it as a necessity, a way to "cocoon" herself and her son, offering both physical comfort and a reminder of her own agency and worth. The act of making, even in small steps, helped her rebuild psychological capacity and provided visible, tactile evidence of progress when daily functioning felt impossible. Crochet was also a social anchor, enabling her to connect with others in communal spaces, build trust, and gradually share more of her identity. She described this process as a set of 'stepping stones' out of isolation. She shared the following insight:

My first ever blanket came from clinging onto crochet like a lifeboat [...] as this tapestry got bigger and bigger and bigger, so did my psychological capacity [...] When I was in dissociative spots especially, it was like leaving trails. There were pompoms everywhere one day [...] These were my stepping stones when I couldn't even wash the dishes. It was building the blocks to capacity

and having a visual and tactile reminder [...] I have been using these as my ground. This is reality because my reality's been fragmented. This is reality. You can feel it. You can touch it. You can smell it. What else can you make with it? What else can you bring into reality? (Interview 1, 24 January 2023)

Violet captured how materiality and internal space grow together through the physical progress of her blanket alongside an increase in her “psychological capacity”. Her “trails” and “stepping stones” align with Deligny’s (1980/2015) ‘wander lines’ in the way that they create a physical path out of the distress and trauma. By stating “This is reality. You can feel it”, she is describing an embodied rejection of a fragmented and unreal emotional states where she was disconnected from who she believed she was. Finally, she expressed optimism and hope by questioning, “What else can you bring into reality?” signalling a shift from craft as survival to craft as generative agency. While Violet’s reflections reveal how craft functions as a lifeline following moments of acute crisis, Sol’s experience demonstrates how this same mechanism is used as a daily, preventative anchor against the “wallowing” of digital passivity: “Crocheting has helped me not lay in bed and just watch stupid YouTube videos for hours and hours and hours... It’s sort of meditative.” Sol chose the haptic reality of the Firstspace (the yarn, the hook) over the disembodied, passive consumption of the digital content. Her active and generative “meditative” state, contrasting with the ‘self-pity’ of inaction.

Sol also demonstrates how versatile the mechanism is for regulating emotional states, including high-energy ones like hypomania: “Woodworking when I’m hypomanic is a really good one for me because it requires a lot of energy and hyperfocus [...] That has helped keep me out of trouble many times.” Sol’s perspective adds further nuance to the concept of Flow-Thirdspace. The rhythmic, forceful nature of

woodworking can match and channel intense energy, in a similar way to the anger of Sky's flute playing which transforms it from a potentially destructive force into a creative and grounding one. Therefore, craft should not be viewed as a simplistic flattened 'utopia' but more as a practical, adaptable tool.

5.5.3 Synthesis and Re-integration: Making the Self Whole

To conclude, I reiterate how the tangible outcomes of craft help to rebuild a sense of purpose and counter the fragmented, 'useless' feeling of the 'saturated self'. This is where participants bring together the act of making individual pieces and the act of assembling them. Once again, Sol has captured this in her comment about the tiny crocheted stuffed creatures referred to as amigurumi: "At least you finished this amigurumi [...] It makes me feel like I did something productive." Unlike Sky and Juno's focus on the process, it is Sol's creations which challenge the internalised voices of the failure. Her finished objects are proof of existence, purpose, and capability. Her making represents a 'microscopic event' that upsets the internalised ableism and set against feelings of worthlessness.

Rose offers yet another facet of the purpose experienced through making, with her focus on progressing from making a single object (granny square) to creating a coherent whole (granny square blanket): "I have developed a little system that works for me. I'll sort them out, stack them up and then start to join them in strips."

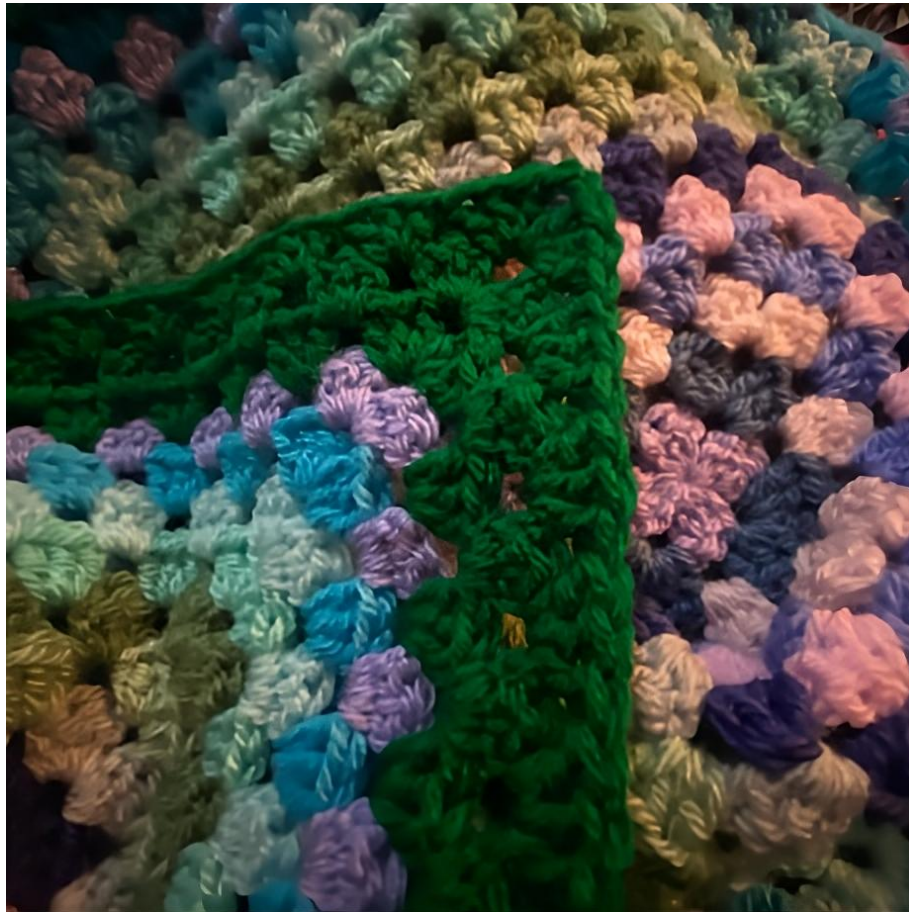


Figure 64 Photo of one of Rose's blankets

She takes the fragmented pieces (the individual squares) and, through a deliberate, systematic process, works to develop a unified whole. Her process reflects a material enactment of healing the 'divided self' (Laing, 1965) where she is stitching her world back together:

Yeah. When you've completed it and all the ends have gone and it's just there and it's square and you can add it and all the rest of it, it takes on a new life. And I have developed a little system that works for me [...] it's a combination of the needle and the hook. (Interview 1, 9 March 2024)

In this section I have described the journey from the symbolic power of the Granny Square to the phenomenological experiences of presence, regulation, and re-integration of the self within a space created by the process of crafting. Individual moments of release from the demand to perform and optimise coalesce into coping mechanisms that support a sustained mode of being. Sol's quote demonstrates how accessing Flow-Thirdspace through craft as an everyday practice is her lived reality: "I spend 99% of my time in my room crocheting and listening to audiobooks [...] If I'm not working on school or work, then I'm crocheting or working on some other kind of project." Craft as a way of being exemplifies a valuable, unflattened existence, a reality created and sustained stitch by stitch, day by day, granny square by granny square, in the refusal to be dominated by a world of spectacle.

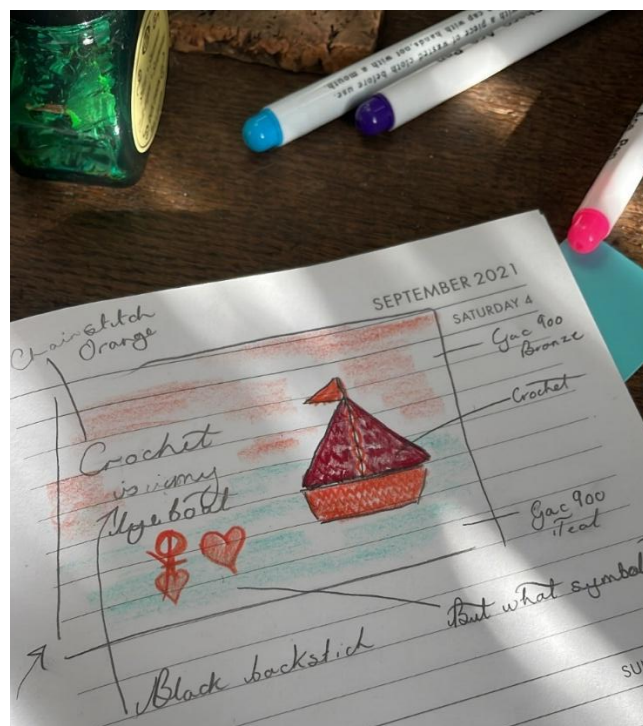


Figure 65 Crochet is my lifeboat sketch, September 2021

5.6 Conclusion

In Chapter 5 I looked at how neurodivergent adults describe their experiences while participating in craft, their lived reality of an embodied Flow-Thirdspace. I have argued that the phenomenological experience of crafting constitutes a subversive form of embodied praxis. My analysis began by defining the 'Flatlands' through a neo-Marxist lens connecting Marcuse's (1964/2013) critique of one-dimensional society to Soja's (1996) spatial theory as a way of framing alienation as an externally imposed system of disembodiment. I then theorised craft as resistance. Using Milton's (2016) interpretation of Deligny (1980/2015), I reframed monotropic focus as a meaningful Arachnean network and not as a deficit. Craft is a way of tracing neurodivergent 'wander lines' through the world, reminiscent of Violet's pompom trails.

To directly answer my second research question, the data reveals exactly how neurodivergent adults subjectively experience these cognitive states. Initially, participants experience their baseline attention as constantly fractured and overwhelmed under the cognitive load of societal demands. However, through craft, they are able to harness their natural capacity for monotropism (hyperfocus) to regulate this overwhelm. Second, flow is described by participants as physiological relief. They describe flow as a 'clearing' of mental space, where time distortion occurs, physiological needs are temporarily overridden, and the hands take over from the self-critical mind. Finally, the relationship between attention and flow is inherently causal and spatial. Sensory-based attention provides an entry point, resulting in the immersive state of flow. Together, they generate a lived, material Flow-Thirdspace which acts as a 'lifeboat' where the saturated self is re-integrated and anchored.

However, theory only provides scaffolding; the real insights are found in what the participants said. Before moving on to Chapter 6, which explores the impact of craft, I reiterate that Flow-Thirdspace is far from a utopian solution or a happy ending. It does not erase all struggle or address systemic failures. As Sol and Violet made very clear, it does not eliminate any of their daily obstacles. It is, instead, a way of living with complexity, contradiction, and authenticity. Finally, no one articulated the paradox of this unflattened reality more perfectly than Laine, who rejected simplistic narratives in favour of something messier, but real.

It's not like a story book [...] That is like, oh, and then the end, that was the end of all the trials and tribulations [...] sometimes it's like, there's that song that is on TikTok... 'I like this little life' [...] it sort of talks about how it's like, 'I'm a little bit stressed, a little bit happy and a little bit, this, that and the other'... that's really accurate. (Interview 3, 7 May 2024)

Laine's reflection gets to the heart of what I am claiming crafted Flow-Thirdspace is. Her rejection of the 'story book' ending and 'restitution narrative' described by Frank (1995) where neurodivergent individuals 'recover' from their challenges and 'normality' is the goal. The way in which she embraces being 'a little bit stressed, a little bit happy' demonstrates acceptance of an unflattened identity, where she is able to hold complexity alongside contradiction without collapsing. Her final statement about the song lyric, 'I think I like this little life' signals the microscopic revolution of self-acceptance. This stands in stark contrast to the performative self-improvement culture critiqued by Gill (2023), where presence is constantly curated for an external gaze.

Laine and the granny square recognise that life is not about grand spectacle or 'quest journeys' (Frank, 1995). Instead, my participants are

attempting to accept a life lived on its own terms, one made meaningful through the small, tangible acts of making. Laine's 'liking this little life' demonstrates an active state of ownership of her own well-being and capacity to live with whatever will be. Through the immersive, sensory engagement of flow, I have demonstrated how participants create an escape from the disembodiment pressures of the contemporary society. I define this newly produced site of resistance as the Flow-Thirdspace. This concept transforms a psychological state, into a socio-spatial practice where fractured attention is countered by monotropic focus, and where the self is tangibly re-integrated, stitch by stitch. In the next chapter I will focus on outcomes relating to well-being, coping and elements of transformational agency.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that flow is experienced differently than the traditional psychological model suggests and is more than 'optimal experience'. Neurodivergent flow functions as a regulatory mechanism. The data discussed reveals that monotropism and hyperfocus are deployed to construct an embodied Flow-Thirdspace, where fractured attention is anchored, the 'inner critic' is silenced through sensory engagement, and the nervous system is repaired.

Show and Tell No. 6 *Settle*



Figure 66 Veiled Settle Quilt Block

The ethics of research and anonymity are addressed by my sixth biographical interlude. The PhD Quilt is a tangible document, designed to be interactive and responsive. It is a dynamic collection of reflections, artefacts, conversations, negotiations, and ongoing collaborations. The importance of this has never been clearer to me than in the evolution of the *Settle Quilt Block*, a collaboration with Tate.

After I finished stitching Tate's moving poem into a quilt block, I shared the images with her. This step was a valuable part of my methodology because

it offered a chance for feedback, evaluation, and ensures the final piece is a true collaboration. Tate's response was complementary, but also incredibly insightful and honest. She raised two central concerns about the ethics and implications of sharing personal stories in research. First, she shared that she did not like the feeling of her words becoming detached from her, of her authorship being lost. She wrote: "...don't know how much I like the idea of feeling like my words have become attributable to someone else (even if I like and trust you to use them well)?" Second, she highlighted the complex, evolving nature of our lives and relationships. The pseudonym Tate is connected to other, harder parts of her story shared in our interviews. She expressed unease about her poem, of which she was proud, being tangled up with those past difficulties.

I did not view these as problems, and I was really pleased that she had shared her concerns. The process, of working toward a place where the individual feels satisfied and represented, is central to my methodology and the reason for undertaking a PhD. It represents what I am trying to achieve in unflattening the reality of co-produced, ethical research. Her feedback allowed me to reflect on the sources of inspiration for creating the quilt, particularly the *AIDS Memorial Quilts*. I remembered a panel I had seen at the exhibition in June 2025 (Figure 67) where a panel had been added over the textile work, creating a layer of privacy and interaction. The process of reflecting on the dilemma resulted in an idea about how I could conceal her poem and a creative solution emerged from our dialogue.

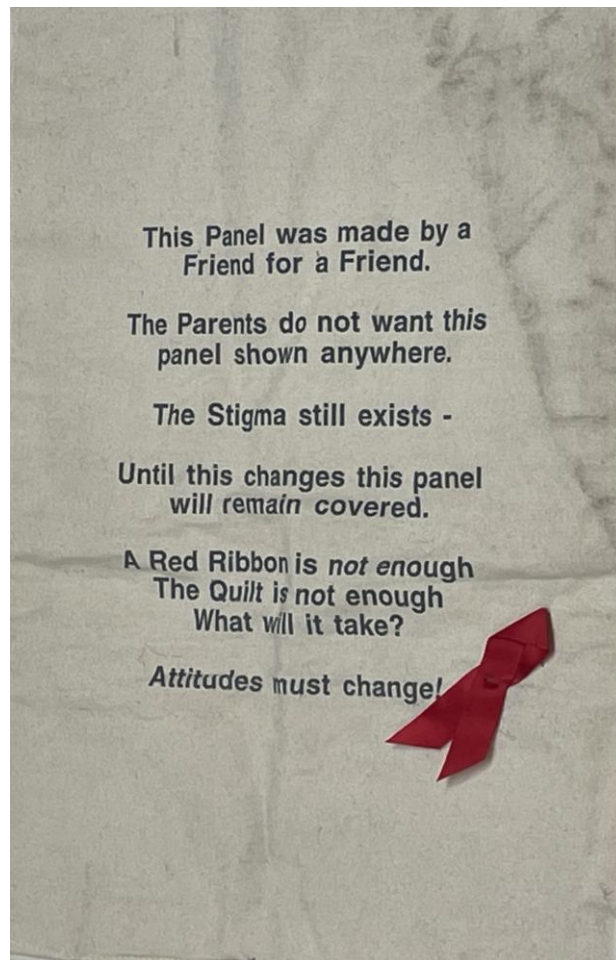


Figure 67 Field notes photo of AIDS UK Quilt Panel. Photos by author, 12 June 2025

The *Settle Quilt Block* (Figure 66) has an additional layer of plastic lace fabric that veils the poem. Two small cut-outs allow the title, 'Settle', and the spirit level to remain visible, hinting at the story beneath. When seen in person a viewer can physically lift the veil to read the full poem. For online sharing, the veil will remain in place, respecting the story's need for privacy and the writer's right to determine when and who can access these words. My recent visit to the Tate Modern to see the *AIDS Quilt UK* unexpectedly echoed the pseudonym I had already chosen, Tate, in early 2024. I had not been sure how to represent her poem in the quilt but having seen so many of the AIDS quilts that were simply written in pen, I decided that this would be perfect as writing is her talent. The decision to attach a tiny spirit level

was inspired by the AIDS quilts, which often include meaningful personal objects. The spirit level signifies the settling of emotions through creative expression mirroring the erratic heartbeat waves of the quilting that finally settles at the end of the block. Embedded in the veil is a stitched reference to the AIDS Quilt's challenge to entrenched attitudes and power structures.

The evolution of this quilt block was a transformative lesson about balancing ownership over creative content and the ethics of anonymisation. As I made tough decisions about what data to leave out of my thesis, this experience with Tate reminded me that the most important data is often found in the process itself. My PhD is as much about developing a methodology of care, trust, and creative negotiation as it is about the final themes. It is about learning when to speak, when to listen, and when to create a veil that cautions the reader to approach with intention and respect. Co-production was key in finding a way to lift the veil on hidden stories, together, whilst preserving the integrity of the individual contribution and the sensitivities of the personal stories.



Figure 68 Detail of Settle Quilt Block

Chapter 6: The 'So What?' - Well-being and Coping

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse the outcomes, effects, and consequences of crafting on participants' lives. I approached this by exploring how craft functions as a tool for coping with adversity, enhancing the capacity to engage and connect, leading to the long-term personal transformation and agency discussed in Chapter 7. Women see messages everywhere suggesting that they can and should, overcome their mental health challenges by developing confidence and self-love (Orgad & Gill, 2022), but these challenges are often framed as deficits in the individual rather than the broader sociological landscape.

Placing the responsibility on the individual to optimise themselves through being productive and achieving aspirational goals links back to Chapter 4. Section 4.4.2 addressed the societal influences on identity construction captured by the imperatives of the *You Should... Quilt Block* (Section 4.4.2.). The concept of the 'optimised self' as outlined by Han (2015a) and the social construction of gender roles (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983; Butler, 1990; Chesler, 1972/2018) are significant in the pressures which contribute to burnout. This is underscored by the idea of difference being framed as deficit within the medical model of disability. By examining these outcomes, this chapter addresses my third research question, explicitly mapping the ways in which crafting, and its associated flow states, influence the mental well-being of neurodivergent adults.

Chapters 4 and 5 established how the embodied praxis of craft, constructs a tangible Flow-Thirdspace of resistance. It provides respite from being 'broken' and performing the perfect optimised self. Within the context of Orgad & Gill's (2022) 'confidence culture', well-being has been weaponised as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1997) and a means for neoliberal ideologies to relentlessly psychologise systemic distress (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Building on this foundational argument, I answer the crucial 'so what?' question by analysing the outcomes and objects created in that space.

The outcomes of craft are structured in this chapter as the two main themes of: well-being and coping. My participant's crafting is based on meaningful, interest-based, political acts of unflattening instead of personal achievements that can then be optimised for a return to productivity. In the slow, inwardly focused reality of their self-crafted Flow-Thirdspace, participants engage in activities that encourage reflection and flow states. It is a space to reclaim co-opted commodified concepts of well-being, reflecting the perspective of Wright Mills (1959), that their personal experiences of distress are more broadly connected to wider public issues of social and epistemic injustice.

In Section 6.2, I challenge the individualistic performance of self-care by theorising unflattened well-being as a relational, and fundamentally social practice, evidenced through acts of making-for-others and participatory sense-making. Next, in Section 6.3, I reconceptualise coping as more than a concept of 'resilience' by framing it as a praxis of navigation. Here, the analysis of my participants' 'microscopic events' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2013) and their unfinished objects reveal a sustainable, process-

oriented defiance of the achievement society's demand for linear progress. Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate that the 'so what?' of craft is more than a flattened therapeutic ideal by critiquing the co-option of mindfulness I introduced in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5.2).

6.2 Theme 1: Well-being

Frances (2013), Rose (2018), and Purser (2019) all questioned why the concept of well-being itself has been commodified and for whose benefit. In the contextual landscape of the literature review (Section 2.2), I discussed how the concept of 'normal' is socially constructed and often weaponised through psychiatric frameworks to regulate behaviour and identity. By revisiting these critiques of well-being and 'normal', crafting is positioned here as a way to reclaim agency, challenge dominant narratives around mental health and productivity, and construct identities based on authentic 'being' rather than performance. By resisting the neoliberal concept of idealised well-being, my exploration shifts towards understanding whether craft supports states of situated agency.

6.2.1 Emotional Regulation

Violet's story provides case study for understanding emotional regulation as an embodied practice and frames craft as a way of 'being-with'. Violet is a single mother who experienced a traumatic event in 2023, resulting in a severe mental health crisis that culminated in a suicide attempt and a period of psychosis. She was subsequently admitted to a secure psychiatric facility, where she spent five weeks receiving intensive care. This period

marked a rupture in her reality, one she describes as: “the most real thing I’ve ever seen, whilst not being real.”

Her journey was influenced by the therapeutic nature of craft and art which she felt gave her the self-confidence to re-engage with the social world. Crochet became a “lifeboat” which she viewed as a “somatic tool” for nervous system regulation, emotional grounding, and reconnection with self and others. Violet spoke of crochet as a “security blanket”, a way to manage sensory overwhelm and social anxiety, and a bridge to communal spaces and support she would have otherwise found inaccessible. Violet’s reflections offer insight into the lived experience of trauma, the complexity of reclaiming an ordinary life, the power of creative practices to support emotional regulation and identity reconstruction. Her story is shared here with her full consent, and with deep respect for her courage, insight, and generosity in contributing to this research.

Her use of crochet is a counter-narrative to the disembodied and performative ‘wellness’ critiqued by Orgad and Gill (2022). Performing and conforming to gendered expectations of being on top of everything for an external gaze, resulted in a fracturing of the self. This mirrors the experiences of Aster (Section 4.4.4.) who also struggled with the pressures of idealised mothering. The intensity of their struggles is illustrated in Figure 69.

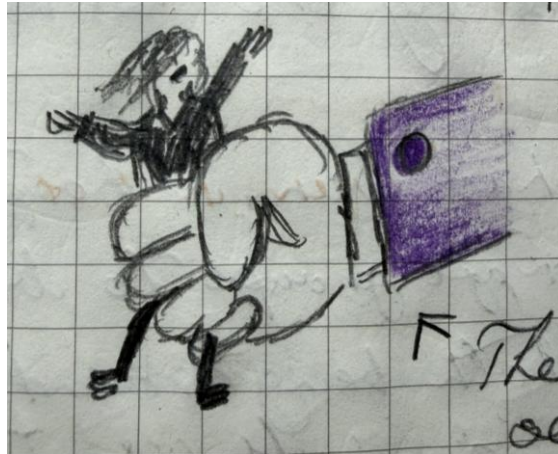


Figure 69 Field note sketch from 15th July 2024 illustrating how Violet described the physical sensation of pressure

Violet found that using her hands created calm from within. This distinction is crucial, as she explains that craft entered her life as a tool for survival. “I didn’t start this as a hobby,” she states plainly; “This started for me as a necessity because I was struggling with reality.” The innate nature of craft drove her to develop a deeply skilled practice of self-regulation. Instead of relying on abstract affirmations and external validation, she taught herself to focus on the process-based feedback loop between her hands, her tools and her nervous system. By analysing the mechanisms of her praxis, it is possible to identify three key elements: the rhythmic action of the craft as a regulatory process, the resulting crafted object as a grounding anchor, and the subsequent integration of this practice into a wider self-awareness. It is the subsequent integration of self-awareness with regulatory sensory-based movement that demonstrates how the crafted Flow-Thirdspace produces a form of well-being that is meaningful to Violet and therefore of value.

The primary element of Violet’s crafting is the rhythmic, repetitive motion of crochet itself, which Violet has come to understand as a highly effective

form of “stimming”. Stimming refers to self-stimulatory behaviours such as rocking, hand-flapping, or repeating sounds, that help regulate sensory input, express emotion, or support focus, especially for autistic people. She describes a distinct physiological shift that occurs during making, a process she identifies as self-directed somatic work in the following quote:

“Literally my head space can go from busy and all form calm and quiet and I can feel my heart rate slowing down [...] I’ve learned that that’s nervous system regulation.” Her description reframes stimming as a sophisticated technique for modulating sensory and emotional states and not a behavioural deficit. The “calm and quiet” she achieves is a reality, a grounded Flow-Thirdspace that contrasts the disembodied well-being solutions offered by the false realities of social media. Her embodied process was crucial to her survival during periods of intense dissociation and emotional turbulence. She states: “Crochet for me... was like leaving trails. There were pompoms everywhere one day. Like when did I do this? It’s like you did it. You did it even when you were really, really ill.”

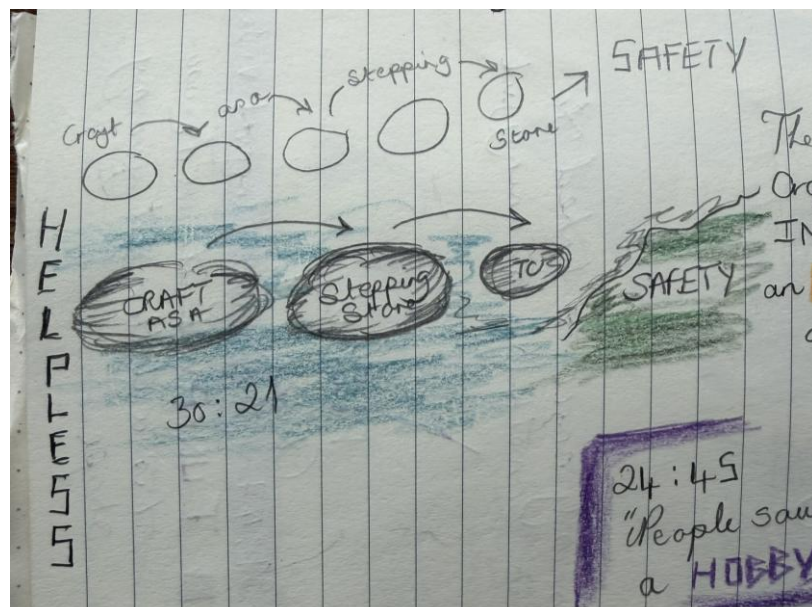


Figure 70 Field notes sketch of Violet describing craft as a stepping stone to safety, 23 February 2024

The pompoms were proof of her own continuity and agency, tangible evidence of the self, persisting through trauma. Violet's act of creating calm, of finding a grounded state through hands-on engagement, mirrors the phenomenon explored in Chapter 5 through the *Settle Quilt Block* (Figure 66). Where previously I discussed the process of settling the nervous system through making, Violet's account reveals the physical outcomes of that process, visible to her as a trail of objects that map her journey. Her pompoms are the material 'so what' of her crafting, providing a deep sense of having achieved a state of being "calm and quiet" in a world that demands constant performance. They show her that small acts of inward reflection wound into the pauses of each pompom are enough.

Sky shared a contrasting idea in describing the comfort she found when able to "tick these stupid things off my to do list." Sky's list is the opposite of Violet's crafted steppingstones. Violet's pompoms were made in a flow state, capturing moments of genuine emotional regulation where she was at one with the activity, Sky's list is a series of tasks to be rushed through in order to quickly return to being a productive member of the workforce. Although ticking a task provides comfort, it also functions as a counter argument against 'neoliberal self-care discourse', revealing how lack of autonomy and creativity leads to alienation. Her 'self-care to do list' slowly erodes every aspect of autonomy. It reflects the pressure to perform a work orientated role and the influence of Han's (2015a) self-exploitation under the surveillance of managerialism, a concept rooted in disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) and amplified in the digital age (Zuboff, 2023).

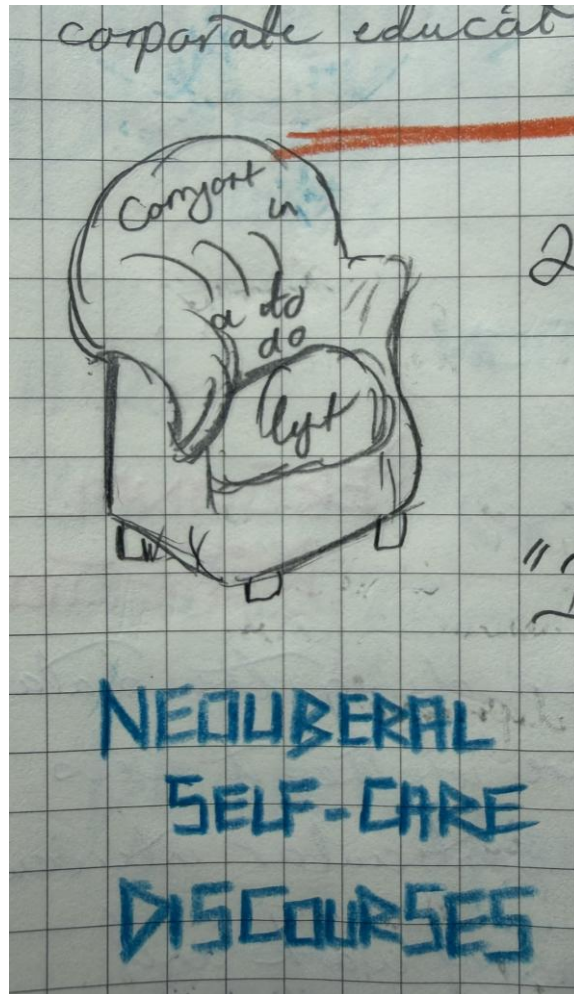


Figure 71 Field notes sketch of Sky's comfort in a 'Neoliberal self-care to do list', 4 June 2024

Craft, offers more than the process of making because the crafted objects remain as durable tools for continued regulation and spatial negotiation. Violet's pompoms function as visual anchors, allowing her to carry the safety of the Flow-Thirdspace with her into the often-hostile environments of the performance society. She speaks of her work as a grounding tool by invoking a cinematic metaphor: "It's such a great grounder. It's like something out of Inception where they use the little tools to keep them grounded in reality." Where the characters in the film use a spinning top to differentiate dream from reality, Violet uses the texture, weight, and even

scent of her crochet to anchor herself in the present as a multi-sensory defence against dissociative episodes. The function of the pompoms is overtly political when she deploys craft to reshape social space. By bringing her crochet into communal settings, like her yoga classes and crochet is a 'safety blanket' that acts as a buffer, allowing her to participate in social life on her own terms.

6.2.2 Sense of Purpose & Hope: "Pompoms are my steppingstones to safety"

In the following section, I develop the idea sensory regulation to demonstrate how crafting practices can offer a sense of purpose and hope, particularly during periods of emotional difficulty. To support this concept, I will return to Rana's contribution (Section 4.4.2). Rana's *Mossy Moments Project* exemplifies how engaging in tactile making whilst connecting to nature can foster emotional regulation and a renewed sense of usefulness.

Rana's project began as a personal response to depression during the COVID-19 lockdowns which coincided with her first experience of being away at university without the support from her family. During her third year, Rana was significantly affected by burnout and isolation. She described how her university studio was actually her bedroom, meaning there was no separation between work and rest. Living with other textile students intensified this, as she could not escape the pressure of her course. She explained that:

I went home early that semester and I didn't go back until first week of April. So, I went back home, like end of November and I came back in April because I just was not well at all [...] Also during

that time as well was when I was put on antidepressants. (Interview 1, 5 January 2023)

However, she would force herself to go on daily walks, noticing and documenting moss and lichen. These small, textured organisms were a source of intrigue and comfort: “It just kind of intrigued me in a time where not a lot was intriguing me,” she stated. Rana created a visual diary, combining photographs, colour palettes, and diary entries. This process evolved into textile samples and eventually a tactile book:

Every time I went, I saw like another bit of moss or another bit of lichen that interested me [...] I did a little colour palette from there and diary entries at the same time. And then from there I started drawing and then from the drawings I started making. (Interview 1, 5 January 2023)

The textures and colours of moss, particularly green, played a considerable role in Rana’s emotional regulation:

There is something about green, isn’t there? It has that association with nature... I did a whole section on colour therapy and how green is good for colour therapy [...] calming effects. Working with something soft was really lovely all the time. (Interview 1, 5 January 2023)



Figure 72 Image of Rana's fabric book with textile sample and colour coordinated list of emotions

Rana's sensory engagement was made explicit in the construction of her tactile book (see Figure 72). The book, which consisted of a collection of samples, was used as an analytical tool to understand her inner emotional world. On one page, she created a 'Key of Mood Colours', assigning a specific-coloured bead to emotional states ranging from 'Happy' (yellow) and 'Productive' (green) to 'Tired' (dark blue) and 'Sad' (black). Where self-care checklists are simple and involve performative wellness, Rana's key created space for her complex emotional reality. Her book is a Flow-Thirdspace that acknowledges the full spectrum of her experience, allowing her to order and understand her inner world her own system, not one imposed upon her.

Rana's work was inspired by Japanese philosophy, including Komorebi, glimmers of harmony between the mind and body, which will be revisited

in Chapter 8. It signified a settling of the anxiety associated with achievement and striving for unobtainable perfection, perpetuated by competitive environment of academia. These brief moments of light and texture were symbolic of hope and emotional clarity. Just as Violet described crochet as her lifeboat in the previous section, Rana described her crafting as a lifeline: “It gives me a reason to get up...Craft can help you not only be creative but also forget about the world for a little while.” She also spoke about knitting a blanket during her time at university, describing it as a form of emotional detox. She stated: “Mentally this has been the best project because it provided me with a much-needed respite from the world.”

Her reflections echo Violet’s description of crochet as a lifeboat and her pompoms as steppingstones to safety, situating Flow-Thirdspace between the harsh realities of the physical struggles of daily life and the conceptualisation of this strain as individualised deficit. Both participants found a way to navigate emotional turbulence, through craft. It allowed them to feel useful, and to look forward to making. Each of these creative outlets allowed acceptance to permeate despite the challenges. Rana’s story illustrates how crafting can be a form of emotional survival, an act of ‘crafting hope’ through texture, colour, and connection with nature. Her ‘mossy moments’ meant much more to her than aesthetic explorations relating to her studies. They constitute emotional anchors, offering a sense of purpose in a time of uncertainty. These glimmers of hope shone through the branches of the collective narratives of my participants. Rana's story demonstrates that hope is not a passive abstract feeling, because there is a tangible outcome of her creative, emotional work.

6.2.3 Self-Esteem & Confidence: “I made this”

The previous two sections have established how important craft is as a process and hands-on self-directed practice for regulating the nervous system and finding purpose. While confidence culture demands a performative and often fragile self-esteem based on external achievement, crafted Flow-Thirdspace offers an alternative route to self-worth. Having explained how craft enables participants to find internal calm (Violet) and external meaning (Rana), in this section I now examine how this cumulative practice builds self-esteem grounded in one’s own competence.

The development of self-esteem is complex and multifaceted. Orgad & Gill (2022) disclose that they too, despite being established feminist academics, find themselves ensconced in a complicated entanglement of power and identity that surrounds confidence. Their disclosure clearly situates confidence as gendered. With this in mind, we return to the story of Onyx, whose ‘lean out’ approach discussed in Section 4.4.3. offered a direct, craft-based refusal of the ‘lean in’ conformity famously advocated by Sandberg (2013). Onyx’s deliberate act of stepping away from performative making highlights the crucial distinction she makes between the feelings of competence from her finished objects and the struggle for external confidence. While Onyx clearly expressed pride in her finished objects and a growing sense of competence from building new skills, her story also revealed a consistent tension between this feeling of competency and the struggle to achieve confidence. In her first interview she stated:

I’ve always struggled with confidence, especially in work and study environments. I didn’t know I was autistic back then, and I just thought I was failing [...] Therapy didn’t help me much. I often felt

misunderstood. But with craft, I can express myself without needing to explain everything in words. (Interview 1, 21 December 2022)

Her long-standing challenges with self-esteem, particularly related to her autism diagnosis and societal expectations, were recurring themes in both the crafted artefacts she shared and the conversations around the concepts she was expressing. She explained how she found art and craft to be more authentic forms of expression and emotional processing, suggesting that they offered her an 'answer' that therapy could not provide. Crafting provided a Flow-Thirdspace for Onyx to express thoughts and emotions freely, without the constraints of verbal communication. The autonomy and self-confidence this gave her was significant as she noted that many concepts related to autism are not easily translated to her native language of German, which affects how she understands and communicates her identity.

In her initial interview in December 2022, she explained her hopes for what she might get out of the project which reflected a search for autonomy in self-understanding rather than performance of confidence. She talked of the counter-narrative she hoped she could cultivate:

Art has always been a way for me to communicate. It's a kind of answer. I hope this project helps me understand myself better [...] I've felt angry about how autism is portrayed, especially by so-called experts. That anger is exhausting, but it's also valid. Maybe through craft I can explore that anger and where it comes from. I think my self-esteem is tied up with how I've been taught to behave, especially as a woman. I was taught not to be angry, not to

be loud. But I'm learning that it's okay to feel things deeply.

(Interview 1, 21 December 2022)



Figure 73 Mixed media stitched collage contribution by Onyx

By the end of the project, Onyx described craft as transformative and deeply personal. It developed into more than a creative activity for her, because of the space it provided to process emotions, explore identity, and build confidence. In her final interview (April 2024), she once again emphasised that crafting allowed her to express what words could not, and that the act of stitching itself was grounding and therapeutic. This was particularly related to her understanding of herself through the lens of her late diagnosis of autism and the artefacts she had made which facilitated our discussion.

The first piece (Figure 73) is a mixed media stitched collage including two photographs: Onyx as an adult and as a child, with the adult figure

wrapping a piece of blanket around the child. She described this as an act of care and reconciliation with her past self. She had initially planned to just stitch the two images of herself side by side but during the process of making the piece and reflecting on what she was attempting to express, she felt sorry for the child version of herself and added the blanket as a gesture of comfort and protection. She explained:

This is me as a child and this is me now. I wanted to embrace my child and cover her with a blanket. It was an act of feeling in this moment I felt pity for her still [...] I found this fabric which is very soft and it was instantly a cover. I must admit that this is something that I couldn't do before [...] I let flow in the moment what comes up. The stitching was very real. It was tough [...] I was very careful and sad again. It was helpful because now I don't only have the thought but also the picture. The big difference is that I'm much more self-confident now [...] I see myself as weird and useful. People don't have to love me [...] It's made for me, for myself and I like it. (Interview 2, 19 April 2024)

Initially, she disliked hand-stitching, but over time this transformed into a cherished practice. The final image she sent me (Figure 74) captures how she felt about her self-esteem and identity at the end of the project.



Figure 74 'Fantastically Autistic' Sunset embroidery by Onyx, 19 April 2024

She described the work in her own words, emphasising the importance of texture and layered meaning:

The writing means 'fantastically autistic' and plays on my strong sensory happiness I may feel watching a sunset. It was difficult because I wanted the horizon to be the most important part, but finally I was happy with it. The colours don't matter to me as strongly as the texture. The clouds and the soft red sun are velvet, the yellow sky is a cool cotton. That's more important to me than the colour, although I imagined an actual sky. I don't know if you can see it but there are also small sparkling pearls at the end of the sun's rays. I love sparkling. (Interview 2, 19 April 2024)

Other participants spoke of what creativity gave them. Hollis described how becoming an artist had provided a space to exist, and Parker found creative expression transformed their self-perception. The experiences of participants like Hollis, Parker, and Nova demonstrate that we do need confidence, we need to know that we can do things, that we can take control of our lives and that we have some autonomy and power over what happens. Not in the individualistic, career-driven sense Sandberg (2013) advances in *Lean In*, but as a way of being active rather than passive in how we approach mental health. If knitting a couple of rows of a jumper every day helps us connect with our sense of self-worth, as described by Nova, then we need to ensure that we make time to do that.

6.2.4 Relational Repair and Connection: “It was a way of saying I’m sorry. I do love you.”

In these previous subsections I have given examples of how engaging in craft offers an individual a means of regulation and forging connection. It offers a challenge to the isolating individualistic perspectives of well-being. As Orgad and Gill (2022) argue, the dominant neoliberal response to social and economic ‘injuries’ is to redirect focus inward, urging the individual to ‘work on the self’ and cultivate confidence. This approach ignores the structural injustices, such as poverty or lack of social support, that cause the harm in the first place. Their argument builds on the Foucauldian concept of ‘technologies of the self,’ where personal responsibility is paramount. This imperative for perpetual self-transformation is also critiqued by McGee (2005) in her book, *Self-Help, Inc.*, where she describes the creation of the ‘belaboured self’, an individual trapped in an endless project of self-improvement. This culture leads to a ‘re-privatisation’ of personal problems, effectively isolating the individual and framing their

struggles, such as loneliness or disconnection, as personal failings to be solved alone (McGee, 2005).

Instead of just retreating inward, participants engage in a craft praxis which has relational, outward-facing elements, and allows space for mending and building social bonds. This is illustrated in Juno's act of creating a culturally significant blanket for her dying father which will be discussed in depth in section 6.3. Making demonstrates how acts of private self-care can also represent relational repair, weaving memory, heritage, and care.

A connective craft-based approach takes many forms. Violet took her crochet to a yoga class to help with engagement. Here craft acted as a social scaffold, creating a safe, mediated space that allowed her to participate in a community on her own terms. It was an alternative to typical social interactions that she finds draining. Similarly, Rana's *Mossy Moments Project* fosters a deep connection with the natural world, whilst activities like blanket-making re-establish and re-enforce familial bonds, demonstrating that this relational work exists outside of the immediate crafting circle. These diverse acts of making-as-connection can be understood through Millar & Kettle's (2024) concept of 'Relational Entanglement.' Their everyday making and relational repair is a political act because it resists the re-privatisation of distress by creating networks of care between materials, techniques, meaning and makers. It demonstrates that the most meaningful response to the isolating 'injuries' of well-being discourse is to stitch oneself back into the social fabric, through shared interest, thoughtful gifts, and connecting with supportive community to prevent retreating further into the 'belaboured self'.

These forms of relational praxis were not limited to interpersonal dynamic; connection with the natural world also facilitated repair, grounding, and belonging. Ash's botanical studies involved in depth investigations into the qualities of the plants and flowers she incorporated into her crafting. The natural world was also a repeated theme in Rae's fabric designs. In her second interview, Sky spoke about a regenerative, circular relationship between textiles, land, animals, and people. Since she started spinning raw fleece, she's become much more aware of the *materiality* of textiles and had connected with others who shared her values. She explained: "It's the part of like a, the regenerative textiles movement [...] the idea that it should be it comes from plants and animals and but then it should be composted as well then it's part of that cycle." Sky's perspective expands the idea of relational connection from human relationships into ecological and material ones, positioning craft as part of a wider cycle of care. Other participants described smaller scale but similarly meaningful engagements with the natural world. Sage held onto the creative aspects of her life through combining her walks with her child collecting leaves and then using these to express herself (Figure 75).



Figure 75 Sage's stitched leaves

While these ecological connections ground the maker in the wider environment, this exploration of well-being through connection culminates in its most outwardly social form, craft as relational repair. This is where self-directed well-being extends outwards to mend and strengthen social bonds. This is illustrated by Aster's story, whose fraught relationship with her mother over differing expectations of gendered roles was a key theme in Chapter 4 (Section 4.4.4.). In response, she crocheted a blanket made of squares for her mum during this difficult period in her life. Aster explained her intentions:

I crocheted lots of squares and it took me a really long time to do it, but yeah, I gave that to her [her mum], it was like a little apology. Just to say, sort of, you know, I do love you. And I am thinking about you. I've just got so much going on, you know. (Interview 2, 16 April 2024)

Crafting was used as emotional support and a way to express love and apology. She felt she had neglected her parents while dealing with personal upheaval, and the blanket was intended as a symbolic gesture of reconnection and care. It was also a way to cope with emotional struggles and to communicate feelings that were hard to express verbally. Aster elaborated on the regulatory nature of engagement in crochet by saying: "At times when I was really struggling with my emotions, the crafts really helped me to lose myself in it and work through it all." As an act of reconciliation, Aster's granny square blanket for her mother echoed the tradition of crocheted blankets as emotionally significant objects. As established in Chapter 5, the granny square is an evocative symbol, often associated with domesticity, tradition, and a heritage of gendered making employed to ease tension between them. In making this blanket as a gift, Aster was engaging in a complex translation of her own feelings and empathy for her mother's experiences. She took a traditional form, one that represented her mother's world, and remade it in her own language of colour and texture, offering it back as a gesture of understanding of the gendered world in which her mother had grown up and love that endured between them.



Figure 76 Aster's granny square blanket, exemplifying the use of traditional craft forms for contemporary acts of relational repair and generational connection.

Aster's blanket (Figure 76) embodies this reconciliation. The vibrant, autumnal colour palette reflects a connection to nature, a significant aspect of Aster's own aesthetic and identity. Her generational mending through craft resonates deeply with my autoethnographic practice. The quilt I made for my own mother for Christmas 2024 served a similar purpose: to bridge unspoken gaps and communicate care in a physical, non-verbal form that was able to bypass our histories of difference. These

blankets are meaningful because they are archives of past rifts in relationships, stitched with the intention of repair.

Furthermore, these objects act as a perfect bridge from the theme of well-being to that of coping. A blanket is an object of comfort, warmth, and protection. It is something one turns to in times of cold, sadness, or vulnerability. While the making of handmade blankets for others is a clear expression of relational connection, their function as solace links directly to the next outcome. Having established how craft helps to build a space around states of being, I now turn to explore how it functions as a sustaining practice for navigating periods of adversity, difficulty, and crisis, as a tool for coping. Drawing on Deleuze & Guattari (1980/2013), I frame coping as an ongoing, embodied praxis of navigation where a series of 'microscopic events' and the creation of small 'lines of flight' allow for sustainable movement through, rather than a victory over, adversity. A clean, linear journey of recovery is not the experience that my participants described, instead each person shared messy, complex, and deeply personal processes of finding ways to continue.



Figure 77 Autoethnographic field note, December 2024. Mum's quilt on my work desk, illustrating the integration of craft into the 'messiness and complexity of life' and resisting the polished perfectionism of online craft aesthetics

Cvetkovich's (2012) 'utopia of ordinary habit' is encapsulated in the scene above (Figure 77). Social media often situates craft in a curated perpetually

unrealistic ideal, where aesthetic is just another performance of effortless productivity. Instead, this image depicts the reality of my crafted Flow-Thirdspace which is a cluttered, lived-in desk where the labour of the PhD, the tools of making, the demands of self-care (the workout video on screen), and the products of emotional work (the quilt) all coexist. My space is a deliberate rejection of the polished perfectionism of the influencer inspired and monetised posts. The quilt sits where I left it when I had to go and cook dinner. It is a vibrant object of comfort and achievement draped over my keyboard, that is never going to be displayed in a pristine gallery, but it does soften the hard edges of the desk, physically mediating the demands of the screen.

Flow-Thirdspaces do not allow an individual to fully escape from life, instead the focus is on the integration of sustaining practices into the tangled fabric of the everyday. The quilt in this image is a work in progress, a reminder of competence and provides an anchor in a space of cognitive demand. Beautiful, coherent things can be created amidst chaos and exist as tools to support emotional. In the following section I will now explore the specific ways in which this praxis unfolds, examining how participants use craft to cope with burnout and societal pressure, to navigate neurodivergent challenges, and to process grief and loss.

6.2.5 Crochet is my Lifeboat Quilt Block



Figure 78 Crochet is my Lifeboat Quilt Block, December 2025

One of the ethical dilemmas I encountered throughout the analysis, was the fracturing and reduction of individuals stories into data points. Each participant entwined emotions with their stories demonstrating an integral link between mind and body. They described how it felt when they engaged in craft and what it felt like to reach moments of emotional and psychological distress. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion (2005) described how her grief came in waves which distorted her perception of time and reality, a state that many of the participants stories reflected. The

tension between fragmentation and lived emotional complexity shaped how I approached the *Crochet is my Lifeboat Quilt Block*, in how it holds the non-linear, wave-like nature of participants' experiences without reducing them to categories. The block is structured around a diagonal descent from overwhelm to refuge, with counter currents of resistance and care running through it. The everyday textures of emotions created non-linear meaning-making process, for example how Violet's trail of pompoms weave their way through the barriers that life puts in the way of projects. Their path from the faceless internalised ableism hidden beneath a bejewelled façade (top centre), run parallel with the downward spiral creating a visual representation of the complexity of coexisting emotions.

The block echoes the constructed nature of narrative and how these stories shape the participants' experience. It was a way to hold the fullness of participants' emotional worlds without reducing them to extractable data. The images were taken from the generative scribing and sketch note hybrid approach I used for my analysis of the interviews with Sky, Oakley and Violet discussed in Chapter 5. However, the original idea for the block came from discussion with Violet before I started data collection when she first heard about my PhD from which I crocheted a lifeboat (Figure 79).



Figure 79 Crocheted lifeboat, December 2021

I wanted the image of the lifeboat to express the grief and hope that people had shared with me. The disappointment of not being able to conform to the pressures of achievement society weighed heavily on the minds of my participants and was felt through embodiment of failure. As Han (2015a) argues, burnout emerges from the internalisation of achievement imperatives; in this context, the participants' turn toward craft can be read as a micro-political act of resistance. In the top left-hand corner of Figure 78, a faceless alienated figure peers into a mirror only to see their reflection slowly disappearing. Sky's mind, filled with anger, finds a way to process emotions through playing the flute whilst Violet's body gripped by social validation and perfectionism before falling into a downward spiral until finally landing on a blanket made from the cut-out squares from *The Finished Blanket Quilt Block* (Figure 91).

However, under the watchful gaze of Oakley's Blythe doll's eyes, there is opportunity, in the form of her mental health toolbox (discussed in the conclusion of Chapter 7) which radiates golden 'lines of flight' through the block. These golden threads run through the problem of the 'Flatlands' in the top left of the block where the medical model flattens neurodivergent experience. Craft is illustrated by the mental health toolbox with the trail of pompoms represent the mechanism of flow and escape via the lifeboat. The monotropic attention facilitated by craft counters the fragmented, hyper-stimulated attentional economy of late capitalism, offering a form of resistance grounded in sustained, embodied focus. Finally, the golden thread is woven into the word 'resistance' at the centre of the block to symbolise a place where makers slow down, refuse to sell and focus on the process over outcome, ultimately rejecting neoliberal capitalism.

The making of this block occurred during one of my many 'lifequakes' (Feiler, 2020) requiring me to find refuge in craft as I weathered the stormy seas of life. As ever, the light returned to my life and on this occasion coincided with the winter solstice. Whilst I physically wove the golden threads into the block, between the 21st – 28th December 2025, the final days of my uncle's life, I felt the hope and meaning expressed by my participants as a shared Flow-Thirdspace. When my uncle finally passed away from cancer on 29th December 2025, I found space for the grief in the slow-paced cross stitches of the date. It allowed me the time and space to refuse to 'get over' his loss, a directive that characterises both neoliberal time and the expected timelines of grief.

6.3 Theme 2: Coping

Having established how craft can contribute to emotional and relational states of being, I now explore its role in navigating adversity. This literature

often frames craft through its therapeutic applications in contexts like occupational health (Pöllänen, 2009; All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017), its parallels with mindfulness (Matthews, 2016; Mayne, 2018), and its role in managing life transitions and adversity (Nargi, 2008; Andrew, 2017). While these authors widely documented the capacity of craft to act as a coping tool in the general population, the data presented here reveals a much more complex reality for neurodivergent makers.

However, as also discussed previously (section 3.5.2), these frameworks are not without their critical limitations, particularly the risk of 'McMindfulness' where such practices are co-opted into the neoliberal project of self-optimisation (Purser, 2019). It was, in fact, using craft personally as a coping mechanism when I lost a child that led me on this journey, reframing what was diagnosed as depression into a complex process of grieving and narrative reconstruction. My autoethnographic starting point, grounded in the physical act of making, reveals a depth of experience that has more layers than generalised concepts of coping.



Figure 80 Reflections Quilt Block, June 2023

My personal story of coping with mothering is stitched into the *Reflections Quilt Block* (Figure 80). It is an incredibly personal piece which captures the intersection of parenting, identity, and loss, recurrent themes in my interviews with participants. Many of these interviews were with mothers who described specific stages of caring and coping that are labour and emotionally intensive. Sage's isolation following the birth of her daughter in lockdown, Aster's heartbreaking decision to send her son to live with his dad and Onyx's perceived failure to manage work alongside her parenting responsibilities, were all relatable everyday experiences. In reflecting on my own struggles as a mother, I translated my narrative into the *Reflections Quilt Block* which compresses 16 years as the custodian of the

school uniform. It marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. The block is made from my son's final pair of school trousers, a material steeped in the daily conflicts of conformity and comfort alongside shimmering reflective squares that symbolise the paradox of maternal labour, so frequently based on outcomes leaving the process unseen. The block is a record of coping as an ongoing, layered process. The tubes stuffed with our beloved dog's fur are a literal and symbolic thread of grief, care, and remembrance embedded in the fabric, creating a raised textured effect. The result is a textile tribute to the trials and tribulation of those years, with each stitch illustrating the frustration, love, and transformation.

My engagement with craft as a tool for processing grief and navigating a significant identity shift reveals the limitations of external subjective perspectives which focus on traits/symptoms. It highlights the need to listen closely to the specific ways in which craft praxis is mobilised by individuals to manage the distinct pressures they face. To explore this in depth, in the following sections I will build on my autoethnographic foundation to analyse coping through three distinct but interconnected lenses. First, I will explore coping with burnout and societal pressures (6.3.1); second, navigating neurodivergent-specific challenges (6.3.2); and finally, I will return to the theme of processing grief, trauma, and loss (6.3.3.)

6.3.1 Coping with Burnout / Societal Pressure.

The first example of a participant using craft as a coping mechanism is from Indigo. Indigo is a nonbinary autistic doctoral graduate in anthropology based in the United States. They offered a compelling narrative about how craft, specifically knitting, functions as a deliberate and effective response to burnout, societal pressure, and mental health challenges. Indigo began knitting just before starting graduate school and was taught by a housemate. Knitting accompanied them to classes, meetings, and field sites, as a way to process the world and engage socially. They describe it as a form of stimming, similar to Violet's crocheting and a special interest, aligning with autistic sensory and attentional needs. Indigo explained: "Knitting sort of felt like part of how I interacted with the world around me, part of how I processed things."

Knitting was also the primary method for their anthropological research. Indigo found that knitting sparked conversations and eased social interactions, especially during fieldwork at a senior citizens' centre. This led them to explore knitting as a research method, similar to my approach of challenging traditional text-heavy academic norms. Indigo speaks openly about their experiences with ADHD, anxiety, and bipolar disorder where knitting acts as a grounding activity that helps manage these conditions: "Knitting keeps me from fidgeting and picking at my cuticles. It's definitely been a coping strategy." During the early pandemic, knitting was a way to manage uncertainty and emotional overwhelm: "I remember... not really having anything to do and just knitting row after row even though I knew I would tear it out... just to calm down and focus."

The repetitive, tactile process offered a sense of control and the ability to undo mistakes, something not always possible in other areas of life. Knitting subsequently became an important part of Indigo's identity: "I would identify myself as a knitter. It's part of how I present myself to others." They wear their handknits regularly, have stopped buying store-bought jumpers, and display their handmade socks as both functional items and art. The act of making and wearing is viewed by Indigo as resistance against consumer culture and productivity norms. Their research also reflects this ethos. Indigo collaborates with autistic self-advocates to design knitting patterns that represent their special interests, combining craft with community and co-creation. Knitting offers Indigo a way to slow down and unplug from the demands of academia and societal expectations. It provides a rhythm and focus, that contrasts with the pressure to constantly produce and perform: "It's nice to see what I've accomplished [...] the different techniques and colours side by side."

The visual and tactile record of progress contrasts to the often-invisible labour of academic work. Indigo's story illustrates how craft can be a powerful antidote to burnout and societal pressure. For Indigo knitting, is clearly a method, a coping strategy, and a form of resistance reflecting Violet's experience of craft as a multi-dimensional strategy for emotional regulation and connection discussed in Section 6.2.1.

6.3.2 Coping with Neurodivergent Challenges

The next example describes the experiences of Ash, a Swedish academic whose research combines the history of ideas with material culture, particularly botanical collecting and textiles. Her intellectual pursuits are carefully intertwined with her personal experiences of neurodivergence,

including narcolepsy and the overlapping traits of ADHD. Ash is a lifelong maker, immersed in craft practices from childhood, shaped by her family's tradition of textile work, woodworking, and creative improvisation. It is because of the diversity of her skills and the link to the natural world that I chose the pseudonym, Ash, after the ash tree, long associated with resilience, healing, and the weaving of Nordic and Celtic traditions. Its deep roots and branching forms beautifully reflect Ash's own entanglement of intellectual inquiry, neurodivergent experience, and generative craft. As discussed in Section 4.4.4., her motivation for contributing to this study was her recent diagnosis of narcolepsy and the long process of understanding its implications. Her concerns relate to how the overlap with ADHD symptoms and the challenges of executive function, routine, and motivation, combined with the unpredictable nature of narcolepsy, make coping with daily life difficult. She explained that:

I need a lot of routine [...] at the moment I have no routine [...] something I find sort of fundamentally, existentially difficult [...] There's this thing called an MSLT, which is a sleep test [...] I got this hypersomnia diagnosis that doesn't really function as a diagnosis.
(Interview 1, 10 January 2023)

Ash went on to describe how crafting provides a unique state of engagement that alleviates anxiety, invigorates her, and even helps her stay awake: "Crafting gives me energy it's engaging. Day-to-day activity can be exhausting, and yet the crafting... is invigorating." Ash's reflections on identity, artistry, and the tension between being a "maker" and being seen as an "artist" also reflect the broader themes of neurodivergent creativity, gendered knowledge, and non-traditional expertise discussed in Section

3.4.3. In her interview she posed the poignant question: “What does it mean to make things and what’s the status of it [craft]?”

Ash gave one possible answer in her subsequent reflections about craft scaffolding executive function. She described how patterns and repetitive tasks help her manage the overwhelm of decision-making and task-switching: “Executive functions [...] it’s hard to portion them out [...] switching of tasks is a problem. Knitting something with a repetitive pattern [...] it clears the cobwebs away.” Just as written instructions provide structure for the mind, the repetitive motion of knitting provides a predictable sensory input that can reduce overload, while the act of having something to do with her hands provides a physical anchor in situations where she is anxious. In addition, craft is presented as structure, predictability, and mental clarity. This links to Section 2.2.1., where differences in executive function among neurodivergent individuals are discussed in relation to attention, hypervigilance, and sensory processing (Mareva et al., 2024). The predictable framework provided by craft activities, such as knitting, can therefore reduce the cognitive load associated with decision-making and task-switching which are two core challenges of executive dysfunction (Lampitt Adey, 2018).

This also connects with the theory discussed in Section 2.3, specifically Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) concept of flow and the literature on hyperfocus and monotropism discussed in Section 2.2.5 (Murray, Lesser & Lawson, 2005; Rapaport et al., 2024). Craft offers interest-based, repetitive tasks that can help neurodivergent individuals harness attention in ways that feel both manageable and empowering. Ash’s uses craft as a coping mechanism that supports executive functioning through rhythm, repetition, and embodied engagement demonstrating the multifaceted

role of craft in navigating and unflattening perceptions of neurodivergent challenges.

Similar to the experiences of Violet in Section 6.2.1. who used crochet as an anchor and Indigo from the previous section 6.3.1 who described knitting as grounding, craft provides sensory regulation, executive function support, and emotional grounding for Ash. The capacity for sensory and social regulation, supported by the predictable rhythm of yarn crafting (knitting and crochet) alongside the use of hands as an anchor, were particularly helpful for navigating social interactions, an area often fraught with anxiety for neurodivergent individuals.

Craft as a type of stimming, while effective in some respects, is not without issues. Ash shared a moment early in her relationship where her ex-boyfriend misinterpreted her knitting as antisocial behaviour. While he was reading a book and she was knitting, he assumed she was disengaged. However, Ash explained that although her hands were busy, her mind was present, clarifying that knitting was not a barrier to connection but rather a way to be socially and mentally engaged. This incident is a micro-example of epistemic injustices, that can accumulate over time and will be explored further in the analysis of the *I know better than you Quilt Block* (see Section 7.3). Ash's own account of her internal state was dismissed in favour of a normative assumption about what 'paying attention' looks like. Ash did not feel knitting was a barrier to connection, but scaffold that made social presence possible. Her example reveals a central tension where the tools they use to cope can be misread by the outside world as a sign of disconnection.

To reiterate, the stories of Violet, Indigo and Ash can be used to illustrate how craft provides a social anchor because it is something to do with one's hands that allows presence without pressure, but it does not eliminate challenges to conform. Challenges with social relationships persists as both complex and dynamic. Ash's 'boyfriend breakup jumper' narrative illustrates how crafting helped her process emotional transitions and loss. She described what happened after the breakup with her long-term boyfriend:

I knitted and knitted [...] a vest, a scarf, wrist warmers [...] I think the whole thing would have gone a lot worse in terms of mental health if I hadn't had [crafting]. Crafting has been a way of processing loss for sure. (Interview 1, 10 January 2023)

Here, the knitting is a form of non-verbal storytelling and emotional processing. Each stitch represents a 'microscopic event' that helped her work through the grief, transforming abstract pain into an archive of emotional labour. The resulting objects (a vest, a scarf, wrist warmers) were acts of personal craftivism, slow and deliberate protests against the expectation to simply 'get over' the loss.

Ash's experience illustrates how craft, through its capacity for self-directed engagement, can facilitate flow states and how it can be a powerful means of supporting executive functioning and emotional regulation. This is reflected in the literature on flow (Holdsworth, 2021; Csíkszentmihályi's, 1990) and provides neurodivergent crafters with essential strategies for managing overwhelming emotional states. However, as noted in the introduction to Chapter 6, it is crucial to distinguish this authentic, self-directed praxis from the co-opted concepts of flow within neoliberal self-help discourse. For makers like Ash, flow is more than a tool for optimising

productivity. It has evolved into a genuinely personal strategy for navigating a world of societal pressures and gendered expectations.

6.3.3 Coping with Grief, Trauma & Loss

Finally for the theme of coping, I will present the most emotionally charged example; crafting as a unique and embodied way to navigate grief, trauma, and loss. As explored in Chapter 3, textile practices have historically been used as tools for resistance, remembrance, and healing, providing structure, rhythm, and sensory engagement during times of emotional upheaval (Matthews, 2016; Kirketerp, 2024; Letherby, 2021). The previous section discussed how the repetitive and tactile nature of craft can facilitate flow states (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), offering respite from the overwhelming demands of Han's (2015a) 'Burnout Society'. Throughout the thesis I have provided evidence for my argument that crafting creates a Flow-Thirdspace where individuals can process complex emotions, assert agency, and reconstruct identity outside of dominant or pathologising narratives. Whether through quilting, knitting, or stitching, the act of making provides a slow meditative space for reflection and emotional expression, particularly when verbal articulation is difficult or inaccessible. Grief, trauma and loss are inevitable aspects of life, and the following examples detail the use of craft when navigating these layered states and complex situations.

Juno's story exemplifies how crafting is memorial practice and a way to process grief. This involved the mending of Goffman's (1959) 'spoiled identity' shaped by diagnoses that she had attracted over her life, resulting in difficult relationships and unresolved emotions. Reflecting on her estranged relationship with her father, she described crocheting a red

blanket with a white cross, symbolic of the Swiss flag, during his final days: “He couldn’t be an asshole anymore because he was dying. So, like, for the first time in my life, he was not at me [...] so I started making this blanket,” she recalled, realising the emotional significance as she recounted the story.

The blanket, which was buried with him, was her way of expressing care and reconciliation, especially since it was made by his bedside, in those moments when verbal communication was no longer possible. The process of making allowed Juno to work through painful memories, reclaim agency over her narrative, and express the emotions she had previously suppressed. As with the textile artist, Jenni Dean who documented the final days of her mother’s life in delicate life-sized stitched portraits entitled *Dementia Darnings* (Figure 81) crafting served as a coping mechanism, an embodied form of resistance against the emotional silencing often experienced in grief. Juno’s story relates back to the therapeutic and transformative potential of textile practices discussed in Chapter 3, where making was discussed as a means of stitching together fragmented identities and creating space for healing.



Figure 81 Dementia Darnings by Jenni Dean. Photo taken by author, Norwich Cathedral, March 2023

Rose's journey into crafting blankets also began during an emotionally challenging period in her life. After her husband became seriously ill and was undergoing chemotherapy, Rose found herself sitting at his bedside, needing something to occupy her hands and soothe her mind. She picked up a crochet hook and discovered she could quickly make a granny square whilst he napped. Although this was a simple act, it developed into an essential source of comfort and purpose combating her feelings of helplessness. Crafting was a way for Rose to process grief and trauma. It was not only her husband's illness that she was struggling with but also the loss of her mother and her own health challenges. The repetitive, meditative nature of crochet offered structure and emotional release. But

more importantly, the blankets she made took on a spiritual significance. Rose is a Christian and describes her blankets as 'prayer blankets'. She often does not know who they are for, when she begins, but as she finishes each one, someone in need, seems to appear: "I do talk to the Lord about these blankets as I'm making them [...] As I finish one, there seems to be somebody there that I know needs it."

Rose shared a story about a woman she met by chance, who had just been diagnosed with cancer and felt compelled to give her a blanket she had just completed. The woman was overwhelmed with emotion and subsequently took the blanket with her to every treatment session. Another blanket found its way to a grieving widower, who declared it was so precious that he wanted it buried with him. These poignant moments illustrate how crafting can be a form of emotional and spiritual care for both the maker, and the recipient, binding them through an unspoken connection. Rose sees her blankets as acts of love, connection, and healing. She stated: "Craft is a connection, although you may do it in isolation, it's about a connection."

Rose's reflection brings me to the heart of this research. To honour the depth of these stories of grief and trauma, from Juno, from Rose, and from my own experience, I now turn the lens inwards and acknowledge the emotional impact of this work.

As I sit here taking a deep breath, watching the leaves fall and the sunny October shift to the darkness of November, my thoughts turn to my son Jack and what would have been his 16th birthday. Knowing the pain of losing a loved one and having crafted through those difficult days is what

makes me an insider researcher. To analyse these narratives from a detached, academic position would be to replicate the flattening and disembodiment logic that I am trying to resist. Therefore, what follows is a necessary shift in voice. My autoethnographic reflection on the process of holding and then sharing these stories is about methodological transparency, and how that process intersects with the collective trauma of a project like the *Grenfell Memorial Quilt*. This shift should not be seen as a departure from the analysis, but a deepening of it and an acknowledgement that in research concerning grief, a researcher's own positionality is a crucial piece of the data.



Figure 82 Grenfell Tower Quilt Block, June 2023

It is not unusual to experience doubt during a PhD; however, my turning point arrived in the summer of 2023, during the making of the *Grenfell Tower Quilt Block* (Figure 82). My workshops had not unfolded as I had hoped, and I began to question whether my research would work out. A PhD is a massive undertaking, five years dedicated to understanding complex, often painful concepts like identity, mental health, and social injustice. In conversation with an academic peer, I learned that every member of their cohort had experienced mental health challenges during their PhD. This was both sobering and strangely validating.

However, doubt, I have come to realise is part of the process, even when it does feel like a derailment. Reflecting on why I am doing this work, and how I am doing it, is essential. Constantly analysing that process, including its challenges, as a form of methodological transparency, is an aspect that has guided my approach. Craftivism, with its inherent slowness, invites reflection and deep thinking. But when the subject matter is as emotionally charged, as the Grenfell Tower tragedy, that slowness can also amplify the weight of grief.

From the moment I encountered the *Grenfell Memorial Quilt* in person, in February 2023, I felt a profound alignment with my research. Seeing the panels and meeting Tuesday Greenidge, the founder, was transformative. We were both using creativity to engage with difficult emotions and tackle systemic injustice. The *Grenfell Memorial Quilt* is an ongoing project, constructed through workshops, personal and group contributions making it an act of collective care, stitched protest, and a visual demand for accountability.

The tragedy of Grenfell, where seventy-two people died in what many describe as a preventable fire (Apps, 2022) is incomprehensible. The everyday act of going to bed in one's home, expecting safety, was shattered forever. The morning after the fire marked a rupture in countless lives. I listened to many stories about the fire's impact, when I attended a workshop as part of my field work and each one was heartbreaking, however many narratives remain hidden because they are too painful to share or are unknown, perishing with the individual.

Throughout the research I have asked myself: What impact will my PhD have? What gap is it addressing? Will it make a difference? These questions are familiar companions to anyone doing emotionally engaged research; they are the 'so what?'. But a line from Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* has offered me reassurance: 'The poor tend to become invisible, and the problem of injustice no longer presents itself as it does elsewhere' (Lasch, 1979: 220).

The Grenfell Memorial Quilt is a direct response to that invisibility, one that is inherently racialised and classed. It aimed to wrap the Tower in quilted care, making systemic injustice visible through fabric, thread, and collective memory for the 10th anniversary on 14th June 2027. However, from September 2025 the slow process of dismantling the tower began. It is the concept of visibility, that is mirrored in my research, too, in my aim of amplifying lived experience and interrogating how identity and mental health are shaped by social structures. I acknowledge that racial and classed dimensions are a limitation of my research. However, every stitch, every word, every shared sentiment is a refusal to forget that life and death are dictated by systemic racism and socio-economic inequality. This

break away from convention is my way of saying: “You mattered. You still matter.”

Whether stitched in private reconciliation for a dying father, crocheted as a prayer for a stranger, or quilted collectively to demand justice for the dead, the textile practices I have presented reveal that coping is not about returning to normal. Coping involves caring about what has happened, to who, why and what the consequences are. The stitched tributes by Juno, Rose and all the makers who have engaged in memorial textiles express a deliberate record of remembrance, an insistence on connection in the face of loss, and physical evidence that even in the painful depths of grief, it is possible to make something that matters.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have mapped the lived reality of how neurodivergent adults use craft to navigate the friction of the ‘Burnout Society’. Through the stories of Indigo, Ash, Violet, and others, I have argued that coping is not a passive state of endurance, nor is it a linear journey toward a medicalised notion of ‘recovery.’ Craft is an active, embodied praxis. It can be through the cognitive scaffolding of knitting, the rhythmic regulation of woodworking, or the creation of ‘lifeboats’ during trauma. Craft provides anchors necessary to survive a world that fractures attention and saturates the self. Therefore, in answer to my third research question, the data reveals that participation in craft and associated flow states influences well-being by providing a reliable, embodied praxis for coping with the systemic adversity of the ‘Burnout Society’.

However, while these strategies offer essential relief and a Flow-Thirdspace of refuge, they operate largely within the constraints of the existing system. Coping allows the individual to withstand the pressure, but it does not necessarily dismantle the machinery creating that pressure. As Laine observed, life is not a storybook with a neat ending; it is a complex negotiation of stress and joy. To move out of a survival zone, we must confront the structures that demand such intense coping in the first place. We must examine what happens when the pressure to perform becomes unsustainable, and when the promise of 'great expectations' is revealed to be a just another version of conformity. The following biographical interlude visualises the impact of institutional structures, bridging the gap between the internal work of coping and the external work of claiming agency and transformation. To understand why such intense regulation is necessary, we must look at the structure itself. *The Ivory Tower Quilt Block* illustrates the precarious, metric-obsessed system that demands this constant battle for survival.

Show and Tell No. 7 *The Ivory Tower*



Figure 83 *The Ivory Tower Quilt Block, September 2025*

Before moving on to the final themes of transformation and agency, my seventh biographical interlude returns to my PhD journey and the context in which my thesis has been written. I will highlight the relevance of Show and Tell biographical interludes that are situated between the Chapters alongside analysis of *The Ivory Tower Quilt Block* (Figure 83). Throughout the thesis the purpose of these Show and Tell interludes have been to remind the reader about the importance of context and positionality of the researcher. In the early stages of this research, I stitched a personal reminder, *The Truth Quilt Block* (Figure 9). In doing so, I committed to a

research practice that valued uncertainty over metrics and lived experience over hierarchical expertise. I argued that 'truth' is not a singular, objective commodity to be extracted by an expert, but a complex, multi-layered reality constructed by those living with challenges.

I promised not to 'chase answers' described in Show and Tell No. 4. and instead prioritised the voices of those often silenced by professional discourse. However, maintaining this ethical stance within the 'Ivory Tower' has been a constant battle. The institution demands certainty, outputs, and impact, often at the expense of the slow, messy, and uncertain work of true co-production. The development of my academic skills has been built on rocky ground. Firstly, my gendered sense of not being heard entangled in a web of epistemic injustice has meant I have been constantly navigating my own turbulent seas. This has involved contending with the emotion work required to put aside these challenges in order to continue on the path to the conclusion of 5 years of research.

I started my PhD in the final lockdown of the COVID-19 Pandemic, in May 2021, a period some have described as a 'lifequake' (Feiler, 2020) for the crumbling Ivory Tower. The instability was global and institutional. Secondly, I refer back to Show and Tell 2 *Solidarity Quilt Block* and the precarious 'liquid' situation the higher education sector has experienced over my study programme. My own experience at the University of Kent was reflected in the discussions with participants about their academic situations, indicative of sector-wide instability. I started my PhD in the Tizard Centre which has recently been swallowed by the psychology department. I changed the focus of my study to sociology under the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR) in September 2021, a school that has slowly been eroded, with departments closing and prominent academics leaving, reflecting the wider dismantling of critical

social science faculties in the UK. Its eventual rebranding to the unfortunate acronym SSS (School of Social Science) provides a material example of this backdrop of precarity and the ‘death of academia’ (Fleming, 2021) that influenced the creation of the *Ivory Tower Quilt Block*.

The *Ivory Tower Quilt Block* is based on the traditional design of Trade Union Banners discussed in Chapter 2. Specifically, it references the *May Day Banner* shown in Figure 84, and the shifting societal values from the collectivist rituals of the past, like the Maypole dancing of the May Bank Holiday (Labour Day), to the individualistic, competitive environment the academy now represents. This shift is substantial. The banner symbolises a move away from workers' rights and towards the relentless work I have witnessed in academia, where emails sent late into the night are normalised and working on weekends is valorised. In my textile re-imagining of the banner, I have removed ‘The Workers Union’ from the top of the original design because there is no longer an overall union of workers in this competitive individualistic environment. I have also edited ‘Women Workers’ to ‘Diverse Academics’ to represent the inclusion of all

the neurodivergent individuals who have contributed to the construction of my PhD Quilt and its analogy with Flow-Thirdspace.



Figure 84 "Women Workers" banner, The Workers' Union, c.1913.

Fabric of Protest Workshop, People's History Museum, April 2022

The materiality of the block acts as a critique of the neoliberal university. In place of the Union title, I have stitched a torrent of brass shield beads. These represent the 'golden shower' of metrics such as publications, grant bids, and impact factors, which have become measurements of success and self-worth, replacing the focus on genuine learning and discovery of knowledge. In this environment, the academic is transformed into Han's (2015a) 'achievement-subject,' forced to endlessly optimise their output for institutional gain, inevitably paving the way to burnout.

Deep within the tower, the cogs are made from a broken can opener. This choice of material reflects the progressive hollowing-out of quality identified by Doctorow (2025) and the planned obsolescence (Slade, 2006) that underscore consumer society. It links directly to the 'McDonaldization' of higher education (Ritzer, 1993/2013) and the 'McMindfulness' (Purser, 2019) used to patch over structural cracks. The internal mechanism is broken, even if the tower still stands.

Furthermore, the hidden vines, stitched in white thread on white fabric, represent the failed attempt to sell off university land for a 2,000-home development in a bid to reduce the university's debt (BBC News, 2024). This local event is symptomatic of the broader neoliberal commodification of higher education, where physical campuses are liquidated to manage institutional financial crises. This suggests that the natural environment was valued more by local residents than the predicament of the cash-strapped university. It foreshadows the inevitability that, eventually, crumbling institutional buildings, like the asylums of the past, are reclaimed by nature. Despite the crumbling walls and the broken cogs, there is resistance. I have left the final quote from the original banner: 'The old order changeth yielding place to new'. This is kept in the hope that the conclusion of my thesis will contribute to that change, towards the acceptance of creative methods, the valuing of lived experience, and collaborative approaches to mental health research.

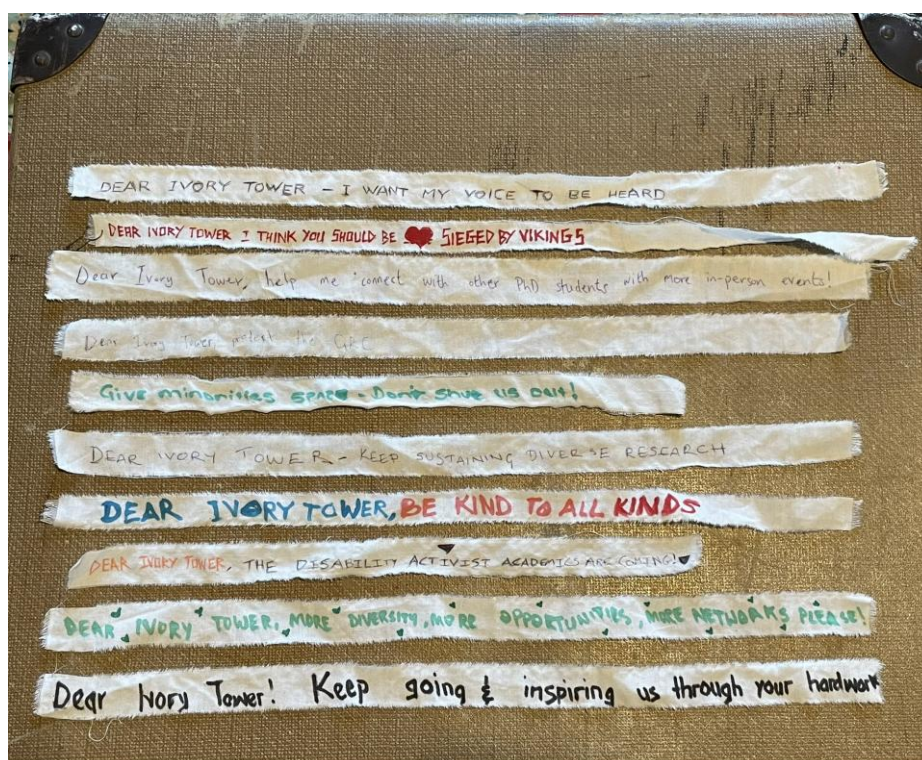


Figure 85 Dear Ivory Tower... prompt responses, June 2025

Attached to the *Ivory Tower Quilt Block*, in the final PhD Quilt are the hopes and dreams of the researchers who have engaged with this block in workshops and conferences (Figure 85). Written on the ribbons flowing from the tower are their responses to the prompt 'Dear Ivory Tower...'. These ribbons suggest that while the structure may be falling, the people within are building something new in its shadow: a collective Flow-Thirdspace of their own which could be used to wrap and support the crumbling institutional structures. This is akin to the memorial quilt wrapping Grenfell Tower with care, discussed in Chapter 6, offering support to the crumbling structures of our time. As a final tribute to the traditions of banners, I submitted my thesis on May Day, 4th May 2026.

Chapter 7: Transformation and Agency

7.1 The 'Great Refusal'

Transformation and agency form the concluding outcome of my research and constitute a rejection of Frank's (1995) 'restitution narrative'. This is often the dominant story presented by the medical model and society, where health is restored and normal life resumed. Instead, choosing not to return to the status quo despite the societal pressures that flatten opposition into a compliant, one-dimensional existence, aligns with Marcuse's (1964/2013) concept of the 'Great Refusal'. In Flow-Thirdspace, the crafter is neither the self-optimised, polished, confident neoliberal product of Han's (2015a) achievement society, nor the compliant subject of Foucault's (1997) technology of the self. The transformation discussed by my participants is about self-directed narrative reconstruction and sovereignty. Therefore, I will start with an autoethnographic account of my own journey from the depths of despair to where I am now, having transformed my emotional turmoil into a PhD quilt and thesis.

7.2 Narrative Reconstruction: Mending the Self

The act of mending the self requires a shift in how we view the gaps in our lives. Unlike the medicalised recovery, which attempts to hide the damage, as with the visible repair movement (a collective that repairs worn clothes as an act of resistance to fast fashion) I argue that the break is an essential part of the story. Artists like Celia Pym (2022) demonstrate that mending

does not need to be invisible; instead, the repair can celebrate the history of the object and the labour of the maker. Visible mending is based on the traditional Japanese practices of Kintsugi (repairing of broken pottery with a lacquer mixed with gold powder) and Sashiko (visible, functional embroidery used to mend and strengthen worn textiles). Both practices are about finding a strength in imperfections by celebrating the history of an object rather than concealing it. I have come to see that the ‘holes’ in my own narrative, the initial rip in the school shirt or the moth-eaten holes in my final quilt block (Show and Tell No.9 *Let the Moss Grow*), are far from deficits and signs of failure. These are sites of transformation, opportunities for new growth and part of my own ‘golden joinery’ (the translation of Kintsugi). By applying the ethos of visible repair, these holes, fractures and the patchwork nature of my work are essential qualities. They are the places where agency and connections can take root, proving that we can be scarred and complete at the same time.

The act of ‘mending the self’ is a process of intense narrative reconstruction and resistance against a consumerist culture. McRobbie (2009) shows how contemporary culture constructs individuals as lacking or incomplete, inviting them to purchase the means of self-repair. This builds on Marcuse’s (1964/2013) notion of ‘false needs’, where consumerism manufactures the sense that we are broken by creating a problem to be addressed by their solution. As suggested by Broderick (2022) autism diagnoses are an essential part of the behaviour interventions industry. For identity to be reconstructed, we must first understand the self as a social and storied creation. Mead’s (1934/2015) foundational work, *Mind, Self, and Society*, argues that the ‘self’ emerges through social interaction and we come to know ourselves through the reflected appraisals of others. The social self is then given coherence and meaning through the stories we tell. Ricœur (1984) views identity as fundamentally a narrative one, conceptualised as a constantly evolving

story that we construct to make sense of the temporal, fragmented nature of our existence.

Johnstone & Boyle's (2018) *The Power Threat Meaning Framework* (PTMF), provides a lens of re-storying which opposes quick fixes or self- help hacks being sold to us through individualised, market-driven 'solutions' (McRobbie, 2009). Johnstone & Boyle (2018) insist that we need to understand our personal narratives as responses to the operations of power, the threats we face, and the social meanings available to us. Bringing Mead (1934/2015), Ricœur (1984), and the PTMF (2018) together, allows these crafting stories to reflect personal history and interactions with power structures. It creates a framework for opposing the pathologising gaze of others, by actively re-storying the self in response to the power, threats, and meanings that have shaped it. This conflict is materialised in the *Power Quilt Block* (Figure 8), first introduced in Chapter 2. The block depicts the tension between the authoritative medical 'expert' and the maker's own book entitled 'My Story' which appears again falling from the standardised output shoot of the 'Ivory Tower' in Show and Tell No.8 *Goat Expectations*. By visualising the struggle to transition from a constrained object to a subject with agency, both quilt blocks represent dissent against the institutional silencing described by the PTMF (2018). They capture the moment where the maker refuses to have their lived experience overwritten by a diagnostic label.



Figure 86 Embroidered Sawdust Heart Self-Portrait, 2018

My stitched self-portrait, the Sawdust Heart (Figure 86), captures my realisation that I needed to stop looking for quick fixes for perceived deficits and start the slow process of mending my story. My perspective was heavily coloured by the medicalised labels I had accumulated: ADHD, Asperger's, PTSD, Complex PTSD, and the unspoken weight of the 'Me Too' movement. While these diagnostic terms offered a framework, I found they ultimately represented a 'false need' for easy answers and a way to name the reason for feeling distressed without addressing the 'ugly truths' of my history (Section 7.3). These 'one-dimensional' products focused on 'What was wrong with me?', but they could not answer 'What has happened to me?' More importantly, they did not provide the space and time to contest these labels and imperatives of 'fixing'. Reclaiming autonomy and narrative sovereignty requires a slow process of mending which can be traced back to my childhood in a family of makers. It was here in my personal background and because of the childhood I was

privileged to have experienced, that I gained the resources that determined my ability to weather the stormy seas of life.

I was born in 1970, at a time of transition from traditional social roles toward greater individualism, into a life carefully created, constructed and directed by my maker parents. I grew up in front of the camera as the subject of this handmade life. My dad enjoyed amateur photography and film making and was employed as an aeronautical engineer. My grandad spent time as a carpenter on film sets at Pinewood and Shepperton Studios and my grandma was a seamstress, well known for her tailored suits. My grandad, dad and mum drafted the blueprints and built our home and then when I was born, my mum (Figure 87) became a 'homemaker'. Being born into a family that had the time, resources and skills to build their own world meant I inherited a 'toolbox' for constructing my own sanctuaries in the future.



Figure 87 My mum, shortly after the building of our bungalow was completed in 1969

My grandmother (Figure 88) had always wanted a girl, and I was the first grandchild. I was dressed in and received great admiration for the handmade clothes the women of my family sewed, knitted and crocheted.

From the age of three, I learnt to express my emotions in a pleasant manner through ballet, constructing my identity through the eyes of an audience.



Figure 88 In our garden with my grandma, 1971

And right from the beginning, it seemed apparent, without even trying, I did not conform to the expectations. My first dissent was refusing to eat or sleep which apparently frayed everyone's nerves. In the 1970s autism and ADHD would never have been a consideration and so I internalised my ongoing indiscretions and attributed them to character faults, obstinance and wilful defiance. Milton (2013) argues that the pathologising of behaviours considered deviations from social expectations, potentially risks discouraging self-advocacy. My experience has been that a patriarchal society has significantly increased the medicalisation of my lived experience, confounded by epistemic injustice. The concerns that my mother expressed in the early 1970s relating to my high energy levels to the family doctor were dismissed as something I would simply grow out of. She was advised to keep me busy because I was clearly 'a lively little thing'.



Figure 89 Me, in the crochet hat and jacket made by my mum for my auntie's wedding, 1972

It was my disregard for conforming to the gendered social and behavioural expectations that got me into the most trouble and the misinterpretation of this had a devastating impact on my physical, emotional and psychological health.



Figure 90 Me dressing up to perform, December 1974

In order to cope, I lost myself in the flow and escapism of dance and art. With my natural affiliation for self-expression, love of dressing up and

dance lessons, performing came naturally to me. Years later, it was not until I was unable to manage the increased pressures of being a working mother that the cracks really started to become obvious. Confounded by grief and the long-term consequences of misdiagnosed early menopause, triggered by chemotherapy following cancerous regrowth in damaged uterine tissue after losing a child, I felt the crumbling façade fall away.

I am sharing my childhood here, because this is where my survival tools were forged; it provides context for what followed. Years of being treated for depression with antidepressants and believing there was something wrong with me rather than receiving appropriate care, led to suicidal ideation. For seven years, my challenges were framed by the medicalised premise of a chemical imbalance, with the 'prognosis' of a lifelong dependency on the pharmaceutical industry. This narrative not only obscured the root causes of my distress but deepened a sense of hopelessness, as I came to believe that recovery was impossible. Having grown up being taught that I could make whatever I needed, this freedom influenced my homemade handcrafted way of coping with life.

When I lost a baby in November 2009, I sought solace in craft. In the days after losing Jack, I sewed together four of the knitted squares forming a blanket for him to be wrapped in for his funeral. These are the moments, the painful details, that no one ever shares, a spoiled identity beyond the stigma associated with other discreditable personal possibilities. This was one of my many encounters with disenfranchised grief. I continued to knit the blanket for my then three-year-old son and began documenting my making through a blog. He took this blanket everywhere with him, it was a daily reminder of the splintering of mothering, and I learnt to live my new role as someone who had lost a child. I still required ongoing surgical

intervention for the physical trauma of the pregnancy and had CBT to help me rewrite the script and prepare for the daily performance of the school run. I started mending my life, knitting socks, sewing quilts and refashioning clothes as a distraction to steer the performance towards conversations I could cope with and had rehearsed. I found myself again in the making, in understanding how identity is socially constructed and gendered but most importantly I realised that I could reconstruct my own narrative using the skills and strategies I already had developed in childhood.

The connection between creativity, long-term griefwork, and identity is a recurring theme in auto/biographical research. Letherby (2021) explores how creative practices, such as a paint-by-numbers still life, act as an alternative way of responding to miscarriage and bereavement. Furthermore, Letherby (2022) demonstrates how the auto/biographical storying of such profound loss is rarely a finite event; rather, it is a continuous, evolving process of sense-making that spans decades. Similarly, Holdsworth (2021) demonstrates the value of channelling emotional states into making... As with Letherby (2021; 2022) and Holdsworth (2021), I found that 'mending my life' through the physical labour of knitting and sewing allowed me the space and time to process the ongoing loss of my idealised self.

Therefore, an apt place to describe personal narratives, is to start where we are now, at the end of that journey and then reflect back on why I was in the position of having a story to tell through this thesis. This assumes that the story telling conventions of a start, middle and end are going to be the most helpful structure to follow. However, throughout these chapters I have demonstrated what happens when the layers of the story fall outside

of this expectation of neat linear narratives. At points those structures start to unravel and disintegrate. Some have parts that crumble and fall away. This is why my personal story comes here at the end of my transformation, from hopeless to hopeful, because it was not possible to write it before I analysed the stories I had collected from my participants.



Figure 91 *The Finished Blanket Quilt Block, December 2022*

Ghosts of unlive d lives, of stories untold and secrets are stitched into *The Finished Blanket Quilt Block* (Figure 91). This block is the result of the *Material Evidence and Affective Responses Workshop* at the Templeman Library, University of Kent (December 2022). The workshop was based on the *Artists Book: Prescriptions* which is part of the special collections held at the Templeman. I chose to focus on a response to No.85 *The Unfinished*

Blanket by Erin K. Schmidt which takes the form of a crochet book telling the story of her miscarriage and the medical procedures that followed. Sometimes grief defines identity and, in that moment, where my own loss was so raw, I wanted to represent this fault line as permanent thread. In the quilt block this a red thread that varies in thickness and construction but runs throughout the block and is repeated as an element in other sections of the PhD Quilt. Although the story and the blanket are finished in one sense, in another, there is no start or end. Nothing is ever truly finished nor exists in isolation. Everything is influenced by what has gone before and what is yet to follow. Each quilt block of my PhD Quilt is part of a more complex story, linking other stories and reflecting human existence. As demonstrated in the stories of Juno and Rose (section 6.3.3.) blankets allow grief to be woven into the fabric of the never-ending story of life followed by death followed by life. The outcomes are objects that rewrite these personal stories, by integrating difficult experiences. Through making it is possible to see oneself as irrepressible through the durability and functionality of an enduring object like a blanket.

7.3 From Silencing to Solidarity: *Daisies Quilt Block*

Having explored the personal work of narrative reconstruction in *The Finished Blanket Quilt Block* (Figure 91), in this section I now examine the next step in transformation, a shift from individual mending to collective agency. I will develop my argument that no story is ever finished, that societal and environmental factors influence mental health and are therefore key to understanding lived experiences. This is captured in the collaborative *Daisies Quilt Block* (Figure 95).

The daisy is the central metaphor for this transformation. Due to its commonness, it encapsulates the everyday, almost invisible, nature of the epistemic injustice that neurodivergent people can face, where their distress is either dismissed or misread as a form of gendered mental illness. Dismissal of difference is an endemic feature of Han's (2015a) achievement society, embedded into a culture that relentlessly pursues the extraordinary and demands the eradication of any imperfection in its quest for a perfect, uniform surface, much like the pursuit of a flawless lawn. The daisy represents a textured friction by refusing to be mown into a standardised flattened ideal.

However, focusing on the visible surface ignores the real source of the daisy's power which can be found in its network of roots as with the groves of aspen and birch trees. I once again use this metaphor of a subterranean system here as an illustration of Deleuze & Guattari's (1980/2013) rhizome discussed in Chapter 5. Rhizomic growth is analogous to the way neurodivergent people, mown down by the pressures of the normative and performative world, somehow find connection in the refuge of making and creatively expressive Flow-Thirdspace. Through the sharing of stories and shared making, they build their own adaptable networks of support, proving that, like the daisy, they can continue to exist and flourish.

Even so, this cannot be achieved by conforming to hostile conditions and requires interconnected spaces of support within existing structures. The *Daisies Quilt Block*, therefore, presents evidence of a material map of that rhizomic, flexible network. In the rewriting of personal narratives, Hollis, Romy and I, take back control and demand opportunities for choice through shared making. This is where experiences of being silenced can shift, and makers can act and connect through the process of making. The

collective nature of the *Daisies Quilt Block* is also reflected in its physical components. For example, I used embroidery thread hand-dyed by Rose, a participant who was once a pioneer in the craft business world. Her own story is one of transformation through adversity. Following the series of health crises and her husband's near-fatal misdiagnosis, Rose chose to close her thriving business to focus on health and family. This “terrible wrench” was, as she states, “quite right”, because she chose to prioritise human life over professional capital. By using Rose's thread to cross-stitch Hollis's words, the block embodies a micro-example of rhizomic connection, where the fragments of one maker's life support the narrative reconstruction of another. The process is illustrated in Figures 92 - 95.

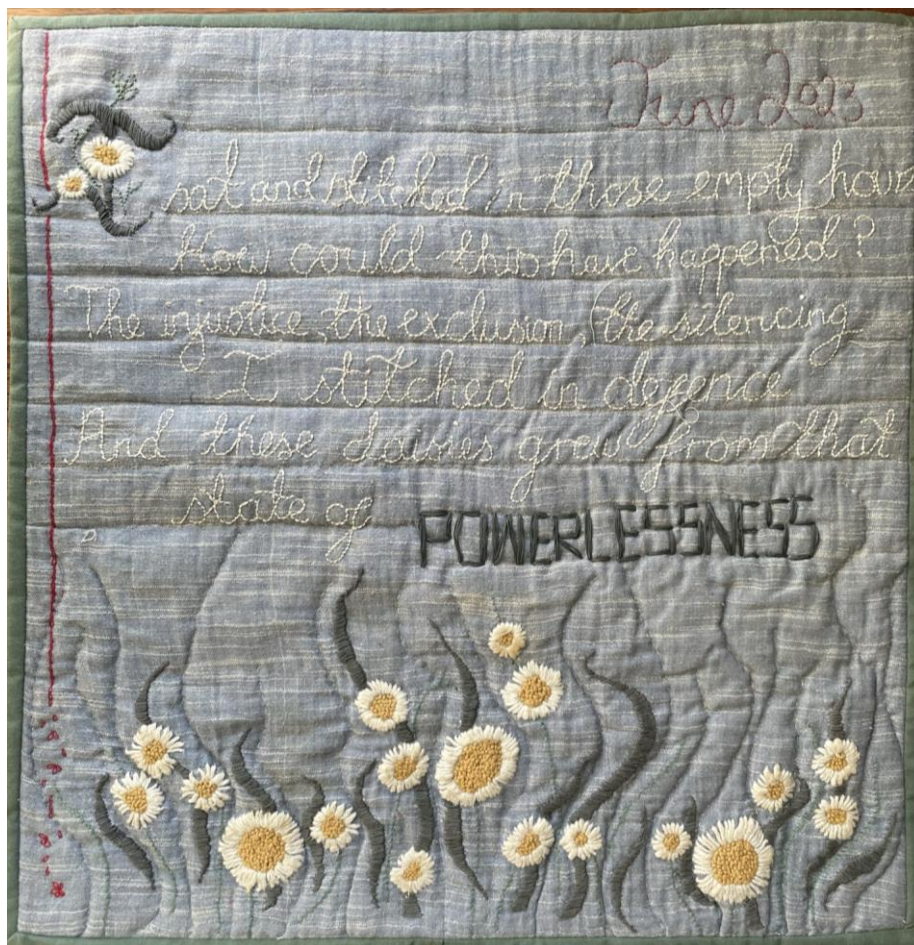


Figure 92 Foundational layer of the *Daisies Quilt Block*, June 2023.

Figure 92 documents my part of the story, represented as a page from a diary with the harsh red line of the margin disintegrating into tiny flowers. It reads, 'I sat and stitched in those empty hours. How could this have happened? The injustice, the exclusion, the silencing. I stitched in defence, and these daisies grew from that state of POWERLESSNESS.'

My story is the starting point for using symbolic images to capture a history that was too contentious to put into words; a technique that acts as an ethical veil. The project began with daisies I embroidered onto a dress during a period of isolation and exclusion. I felt powerless in a situation where my narrative was being standardised by a 'false need' for someone in power to be a saviour. This performative 'kindness' functioned as a form of narrative theft and a social mechanism designed to maintain institutional authority rather than provide genuine support. In this dynamic, the 'helper' dominates the story as the main character, and the person in distress is transformed into a 'problem to be managed' (Ahmed, 2021). The centring of a 'helper's' response is a classic example of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) Once I started the PhD, I deconstructed the dress and transformed it into a quilt block to capture the aesthetic of a journal page. Here, an ugly truth is hidden behind the prettiness of embroidered flowers, while my feelings of powerlessness are spelled out in large, bold capital letters. The theme of having one's own distress co-opted and centred by a 'helper' was clearly echoed in the stories shared by Hollis

and Romy, which follow.



Figure 93 Cross stitching Hollis's quote in embroidery thread dyed by Rose, August 2025

Hollis's contribution describes how a 'helper's' narrative was used to overwrite her lived reality in the story and quote she shared. In her book, *Handywoman*, Davies' (2018) describes the emotion work imposed on her in the management of other people's responses to her stroke. It resulted in the focus being pulled away from her needs and onto the management of the 'helper's' feelings. Hollis had attended a workshop and requested some reasonable accommodations which had been refused. She has a deep sensory connection with colour and had requested to work in a different palette. However, the facilitator had planned a standardised, 'one-size-fits-all' product and was not prepared to make any changes. By focusing the final outcome, those in authority are satisfying a personal 'false need' for a uniform result at the expense of Hollis's enjoyment in the process. As a result, Hollis felt so uncomfortable that she left and was subsequently informed that this had caused upset. The quote in Figure 93 captures

institution authority was subsequently centred over her lived experience: 'You do realise that you offended them because you wouldn't let them 'rescue' you.'

By refusing to be rescued, Hollis performed the same 'Great Refusal' as I had done in questioning the diagnostic labels with my Sawdust Heart (Figure 86). We are asking for changes in the external environment that respect our individuality. By stitching her words, I am performing the 'gift of listening' (Han, 2015b) that the facilitator refused. We reject the performative social fix of outcome-based intervention by moving towards the slow crafting of counter-narratives. Where my story and Hollis's focus on specific interactions, Romy's piece expresses the pervasive, systemic ableism that runs through crafting spaces. Responding to the prompt 'You Should...', Romy recycled a quilt and layered it with the contradictory and silencing phrases so often directed at disabled makers. She explains the creative process below:

So, I started by brainstorming all the things that I heard, and I've tweaked them a little bit to fit the 'You Should' or 'You Shouldn't' format. So, some of them are specific to craft like 'You should keep politics out of quilting'. But I also have, 'You should mind your own business' and 'You should feel welcome (even when you're not).'

(Interview 2, 30 May 2024)



Figure 94 Detail of Romy's "You Should" Quilt Block

Some of the other phrases include: 'You should justify the way you make', 'You should accept what you're given', 'You should be patient with the pace of change', and 'You shouldn't make us feel bad'. Romy's phrases articulate the unspoken pressure Hollis felt to accept the workshop as-is in the previous example and the blame placed upon her for causing the facilitator 'upset'. Epistemic injustice explicitly ties the three stories together.

Romy also described how she had included times when she had been given contradictory advice like: 'You should speak up for your needs and shouldn't make it all about you or you should accept the way things are.' A double bind, where one is told to be autonomous yet punished for asserting needs, is the defining feature of the 'problem person' dynamic described by Ahmed (2021). Romy repurposed a deconstructed 'churn dash' quilt which is a modern version of a traditional pattern often found in quilting magazines. Designers provide a formulaic approach to making that

mirrors the inflexible, outcome-focused mindset seen in Hollis's workshop experience. The circular quilting design is technically challenging, enabling the maker to practice machine sewing skills or demonstrate competence. Romy's version of the block does not eliminate common faults like puckering and catching the fabric as material evidence of these unrealistic expectations. She then used a transparent fabric called organza to cover this base quilt and wrote the phrases directly onto the organza with a permanent marker. Romy described how she used the materials to embody her feelings about ableism in crafting spaces, for example the layers of organza and printed words, to demonstrate how permeable ableism can be and how omnipresent it is, even within her own thought processes. Her aim was to illustrate how every day ableism is glossed over but aspects of what has been said get imprinted or internalised, impacting on how an individual feels next time they enter those spaces.



Figure 95 The final layered Daisies Quilt Block, August 2025

The final *Daisies Quilt Block* (Figure 95) combines these three narratives into a single crafted Flow-Thirdspace, where the physical layering of fabric and text mirrors the conceptual layering of our shared realities. It transforms our individual moments of silencing into a collective of voices, evidence that 'ugly truths' that demand to be heard lie beneath the beautiful, crafted surface. Craft is therefore used here as a counter-tactic in situations where words become unsafe and when speaking out loud marks the individual as the 'problem'. It is a way to document the complaint and bear witness to the harm without being further harmed. This approach was also evident in the material protection developed in the 'Ethics of the Veil' (Section 3.5.2) and echoes the political symbolism used in Chilean Arpilleras discussed in the literature review (Section 2.4.4.)



Figure 96 I know better than you Quilt Block

The *I know better than you Quilt Block* (Figure 96) is another collaboration made from a collection of responses to the question 'Have you ever experienced a time when someone else thinks they know better than you do about your own lived experience?' Like the *Daisies Quilt Block*, this piece also acts as a material veil through its coded protection for the stories where experiences of academic silencing are frequently overwritten by institutional authority. In each case those in positions of power (teachers, medical professionals) are observed invalidating the expert by lived experience perspective. When a person in power believes they 'know better,' they risk weaponising perceived expertise to silence dissent. In my data collection, this was most violently expressed in the use of psychological assessments to determine a person's 'fitness to speak' during a conflict. By reducing a complex history of structural friction to a 'psychological deficit,' the institution performs a disciplinary flattening. The assessment is used as a strategy for reframing dissent as dysfunction and effectively pathologising their voice so that their 'ugly truths' (Ahmed, 2021) can be safely ignored by power structures.

When a person believes they already know better, they only listen to a tiny fraction of the whole story. In situations shaped by many interacting factors, anyone who positions themselves as more knowledgeable or authoritative can slip into narrative compression by reducing the complexity to what fits their preconceived, narrow perspective, and flattening the nuances that only emerge through genuine listening. Through interviewing and analysing lived experiences, I learned that listening is central to any interpersonal interaction. Yet it is also something many people seldom experience, often encountering responses that fall short of genuine attentiveness. Some of those voices are not heard, even if the words are spoken. The *I know better than you Quilt Block* captured how it felt to listen to and reflect on those painful experiences of invalidation. I was doing something, recording the stories, making them visible and

stitching these words into the quilt created a visual account of documentary mending, capturing 'truths' that authoritarian power had attempted to erase.

Understanding the significance of epistemological injustice in the lived experiences of neurodivergent crafters was only truly possible by facing my own hidden stories. In a social media culture that encourages a narcissistic outlook and a 'share-all' consumerist hack for validation (McGee, 2005), the slow process of looking inwards acts as a restorative practice. Facing these accounts required significant emotion work. Much of this reflection is captured in the PhD quilt, however I have never wanted it to be about me. This is where the conflict has remained, trying to separate the threads of my own story from that of my participants.

7.4 Finding Voice: Reasonable Adjustments

The shift from collective coping to public expression links individual struggles to systemic issues, actively expressed by neurodivergent individuals navigating workplace exclusion. Many of my participants referenced ongoing struggles with employment, where disclosure remains a contentious choice. As Timimi (2025) argues, a diagnosis can often cause harm in the form of structural violence. While some disclose to request reasonable adjustments, many choose concealment out of a fear of discrimination or bullying (Romualdez et al., 2021). The dilemma highlights the focus on productivity within a capitalist society, where the dichotomy between public and private identity leaves individuals with little autonomy. While the COVID-19 pandemic saw the implementation of flexible working policies, society has rapidly reverted to the 'old way' of working. This return to 'normality' has been driven by a rise in managerialism, where there is a reliance on bureaucratic processes that prioritise homogenisation

and standardisation at the expense of employee well-being (Skinner et al., 2021).

Oakley talked in depth about her experiences at work. Not long before our first interview, she described how she had landed herself her 'dream job', however by our third interview she had decided to leave. She had expected her employer to be more understanding and empathic about her support needs due to the nature of the services they provided but unfortunately this was not the case. Oakley's stream of consciousness quote about the pressures of office life captures the mounting anxiety that neurodivergent individuals feel when faced with the uncertainty, the forever shifting goal posts and the 'liquid' nature of authoritarian systems:

I worked in an overcrowded open plan space... I mean it was so noisy and everybody else's computer would be going ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping all day and the clock... I don't know where we get our clocks from, but they are the loudest ticking clocks!!! So, you've also got people talking in Teams meetings or on the phone or discussing other stuff and I find it quite hard to filter that stuff out. It is impossible for me to focus on the administrative tasks without being constantly distracted or interrupted. [...] Every couple of weeks their expectations would change. [...] But even when we are at home...and don't get me wrong, I understand office hours, but when we're working from home it's still in reality 8:00 until 4:00 because every day the seniors would send around a Teams message saying 'Good morning' and then there was an expectation that everybody else would reply 'morning' to show that you were at your desk at 8:00 am. In the end stuff like that started to build up, as well as I wasn't doing the job that I thought I was

going to do... eventually I had no choice. (Interview 3, 10 August 2023)

Oakley's experience illustrates Ahmed's (2021) how making a complaint about injustice often transforms the complainant into the problem. To ask for reasonable adjustments is to find oneself caught in the mechanics of a non-compliant system. In doing so, you become the 'problem,' and your history is transformed into an HR file. Lived experiences subsequently become a one-dimensional archive of corporate jargon and pathologised deficits designed to justify administrative control. This is the ultimate structural violence. To understand the true, embodied weight of becoming 'the problem,' I must now turn to my own experience. The *Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Block* (Figure 97) is my critique of standardised recording. It is a coded complaint that allows the story to be hidden in the layers of fabric, protecting me as the maker from further harm while providing material evidence of a truth that the HR file attempts to erase.

When I broke my foot in the middle of my PhD, I collapsed. Being unable to walk or work or engage in my life as I had previously, gave me hour-upon-hour to reflect on why this occurred. I eventually settled on burnout as a general explanation that covered the complexities of my situation but was easy enough for others to understand and relate to. Burnout has become endemic in society (Maslach et al., 2001), a modern phenomenon captured in the following quote from Han's (2015a) *The Burnout Society*:

The exhausted, depressive achievement-subject grinds itself down, so to speak. It is tired, exhausted by itself, and at war with itself. Entirely incapable of stepping outwards, of standing outside itself,

are relying on the other, on the world, it locks its jaws on itself.;
Paradoxically, this leads the self to hollow and empty out. It wears
out in a rat race it runs against itself. (Han, 2015: 42)

The autumn term of 2023, prior to my complete physical and emotional fracturing was fraught with what Bauman (2006) describes as 'liquid fear'. 'Liquid fear' and fragility of belonging are something that I recognised in many of my participants. There was a time when I felt sharpness and suspension, when I woke each morning in tears. A slow accumulation of events made me feel disposable. I feared I was misunderstood, and actively misread as exaggerating, as lying, as unstable and a risk. I feared suspension, exclusion, the loss of work, of home and of the self. I feared breaking down in public, feared the shame of visibility, feared the silence of isolation. I feared that the world would be better off without me and then hated myself for thinking it.

My pervasive fear was not something I was able to define at the time so it was not a fear I could name and confront. It was liquid, like something shapeless, ambient, seeping into every corner of my life. A fear that cast a shadow over me throughout this research. It followed a previous rupture in my understanding of who I was and was already entangled with a diagnosis of complex PTSD. It was reignited by institutional shifts, by the abrupt withdrawal of remote working and the relentless churn of new targets, new systems, new academic years. My fear was a visceral experience of alienation attached to Weber's (1904-1905/2001) 'iron cage' of rationalised bureaucracy. It feared being cast aside in a system that demanded my presence but denied care and the crushing realisation that I did not matter.

And yet, in the midst of this, I once again retreated to a Flow-Thirdspace. It did not offer a definitive solution, but it did provide respite from my pervasive fears. Craft created a place where my attention could be re-centred and presence could be reclaimed without succumbing to my own downward spiral. In stitching, mending, and making, I found a way to hold myself together both literally and metaphorically. Flow-Thirdspace did not erase my fears, but it did offer a form of being-with them through engagement with materials and with the fragments of myself that still mattered.

My autoethnographic block, *Reasonable Adjustments* (Figure 97) was the result of a reflection I wrote which uses the protective metaphor 'Can't see the wood for the trees'. Here, institutional authority cannot see my extensive holistic, lived knowledge because they are focused on pathologising the individual 'trees' and responding with a 'one size fits all' approach. The block captures the dismissal of lived experience expertise as an act of epistemic injustice and structural violence, where corporate well-being language is weaponised and any disagreement is seen as defiant and unprofessional. *The Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Block* allows my protest to become a physical coded version of the complaint it was never possible to make, allowing the story to be hidden in the physical layers.

Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Block is a stitched articulation of liquid fear as an embodied response to the institutional violence of systems. Specifically, the stitched numbers '3-2-4' expose the violent arithmetic of managerialism, in which relational labour is cut to make space for administrative control. However, over this, I embroidered mushrooms and silver birch trees representational of rhizomic resistance. The stitched declaration, 'We are all slaves of the PATRIARCHY' transforms my private

harm into public critique, lifting the veil and naming the systemic forces that underpin experiences whilst protecting the individual details from scrutiny. Through craft, I have expressed what cannot safely be said aloud. It represents stories of individuals who refuse to be silenced, to be broken by systemic violence and as a reclamation of voice through thread. It allows me to exist in the safety of Flow-Thirdspace, tethered by the subterranean web of threads beneath the surface.



Figure 97 Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Block

7.5 Conclusion: Craft as a 'Toolbox for Living'

In this chapter I have used examples of how my participants use craft for transformation and agency despite their challenges and in the broader sense, as a 'toolbox for living'. I have provided evidence of how craft enables individuals to gain autonomy and responsibility for their own state of being and redirect distressing emotions into producing meaningful artefacts such as blankets imbued with relational connections. I conclude by positioning craft as a means of transforming pathologising externally imposed narratives such as diagnosis of deficits and perceptions of mental illness into political statements of re-authorisation. These outcomes represent unflattened acts of resistance reflected in the increasingly sculptural nature of the quilt blocks. By taking these tools from the toolbox and reordering them, individuals can reframe shifting identities. I argue that this process stands in direct opposition to the neoliberal outcomes of well-being and the consumerist demand for self-optimisation.

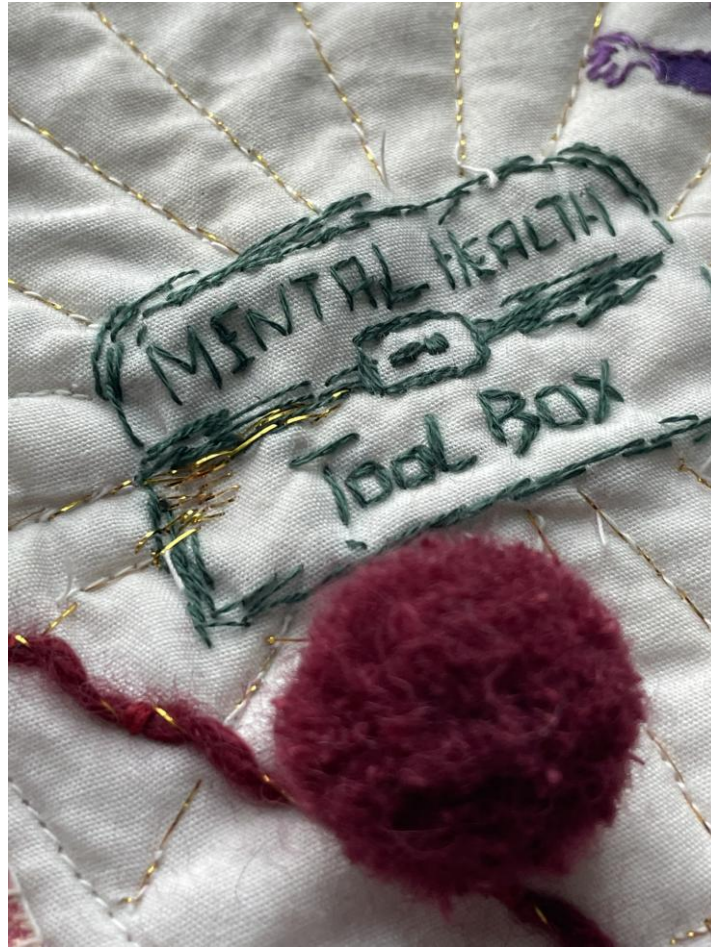


Figure 98 Mental Health toolbox leaking golden thread

It is important to note here, as I approach the end of the analysis section and prepare to draw conclusions, the generosity of my participants who gave hours of their time in support of the use of craft for living with those challenging times and understanding identity. Several participants contributed throughout the data collection and the analysis. In line with Hesse-Biber & Leavy's (2011) emphasis on reciprocity and co-construction of meaning, I deliberately avoided flattening the participant's narrative into fragmented snippets. Instead, I have preserved the depth and complexity of their lived experience. For this final case study, I return to Oakley and her interpretation of *Five Steps to Mental Wellbeing* (NHS, n.d.) because her story genuinely, embodies how craft praxis transforms a sterile concept of well-being into a meaningful 'toolbox for living.' *Five Steps to Mental Wellbeing* (NHS, n.d.) is a public health model that risks co-option as a

quintessential 'Flatlands' concept. It often functions as a one-dimensional consumerist 'hack' due to its generic checklist format, designed for performative mental health and corporate confidence; a one-size-fits-all checklist for performative mental health (Davies, 2015).

Through the development of our relationship over 3 years, I came to understand how Oakley's 'mental health toolbox' is a multidimensional crafted, lived experience of the five elements and is deeper and more authentic than the framework suggests. By grounding the abstract concepts in haptic, self-directed practice, Oakley transforms them from external commands ('You should...') into potential internal resources ('I could...'). Oakley's approach is based on five elements: give, connect, take notice, be active and keep learning, each of which Oakley has demonstrated are valuable aspects of her own mental health toolbox. Key to this transformation is the physical act of sharing tools and workshops. For Oakley, activities such as decorating tea lights or winding pompoms with others are grounded in relational repair rather than transactional interactions. She observed that as individuals were winding the pompoms, in one of her workshops, the conversation flowed naturally because of the shared activity. In this context, the craft acts as a 'third object' to mediate social interaction. It provides a bridge for side-by-side connection that reduces the cognitive load of face-to-face performance.



Figure 99 Trail of pom-poms from Crochet is my Lifeboat Quilt Block

As Newport (2019) argues, contemporary digital environments are designed without natural stopping cues, encouraging an endless drift of attention. In contrast, the slowness and boundedness of crafting practices create their own rituals of closure, enabling a deep, monotropic focus that resists both the infinite scroll of social media and the creep of uncontained workloads. This is evident in Oakley's use of Lego kits to sort and compile

bricks by colour. She explains that she loves the process of sorting and filing because it truly 'floats her boat'. By organising the chaos of the bricks, she creates a sense of control and completion that contrast against relentless flow of information. This is a more authentic form of tactile engagement than commodified 'McMindfulness' (Purser, 2019); it aligns with Han's (2023) defence of rituals as symbolic techniques for making oneself at home in the world. Similarly, her engagement with community projects, such as contributing red pompoms to an art installation as a memorial to people who died during the pandemic, reclaims activity from the gym-culture imperative of self-optimisation.

Oakley's pompoms are micro-events evidencing human existence in the way they function as a form of soft activism that makes collective grief visible in a public space. In practice, the concept of the mental health toolbox, is not something that can be simply applied as a solution because it lacks the capacity to address any of the historical, environmental or systemic factors. The toolbox metaphor works because it implies maintenance, instead of cure. Tools are picked up and put down as needed creating a life that is maintained daily through the employment of rituals as 'stabilising anchors' (Han, 2023).

Yet still, there were times when her interest in crafting was not helpful, for example when her job became overwhelming and unsustainable, demonstrating that the toolbox is not a magic fix. It is incapable of erasing systemic pressures or difficult circumstances. This is evident in Oakley's reflection on her previous employment. It is essential to acknowledge struggle and context are intrinsically linked, as Oakley explains:

When I was in my last job before I switched to this job, I wasn't enjoying it, so my sort of interest in all things dipped a lot [...]
Without the sort of solid time scales and deadlines, stuff slides really easily [...] there's always competing things. (Interview 3, 10 August 2023)

While the toolbox is a useful practical metaphor, it does not fully capture the experiential quality of Flow-Thirdspace. I therefore propose a shift from the practical approach of a toolbox to the more poetic Komorebi. The image of sunlight filtering through the trees captures the essence of the crafted Flow-Thirdspace in a way that my academic writing fails to do. It offers the fluttering light of hope filtering through the branches of life. I suggest that craft is about finding fleeting, beautiful moments of clarity and peace within the dense, often dark, canopy of life's challenges. Komorebi encapsulates the non-solution idea in the gentle, hopeful image.

The concluding 'so what?' of craft, the core purpose of the toolbox, the central meaning of Komorebi, is that it enables Heidegger's (1927/1962) 'Dasein', an authentic 'being-in-the-world'. In the crafted Flow-Thirdspace I have constructed through my research, the maker is not performing, not producing, not optimising, not becoming a product. They are slowly, simply, and resolutely being. This is the transcendent act of resistance in a world that demands constant doing and becoming. In conclusion, these analysis chapters have demonstrated how the craft praxis of neurodivergent makers builds a tangible Flow-Thirdspace allowing for the time and space to transform and reclaim narrative sovereignty.

Show and Tell No. 8 Goat Expectations



Figure 100 Goat Expectations Quilt Block

In this penultimate Show and Tell biographical interlude, entitled *Goat Expectations*, I have taken inspiration from Juno's final interview and reflections about the hierarchies in the creative world. I have chosen to integrate Grayson Perry's (2013) *Vanity of Small Differences*, Dr Seuss's (1990) *Oh the Places You'll Go* and a playful subversion of Dickens's (1861/2003) *Great Expectations*. *Goat Expectations Quilt Block* depicts my journey of narrative sovereignty through the postgraduate education system. Here, an idealistic PhD student enters an 'ivory tower' factory along a conveyor belt where relentless achievement culture, unhealthy overwork, and unrealistic expectations fracture their hopes and dreams,

leaving behind symbolic wounds. In trying to flatten too many facets of identity into the standardised academic sausage it explodes showering the 'LIFE IS NOT FLAT' mountains with a repeat of the image of 'My Story' from *Power Quilt Block*. In response, these tattered ideals are discarded into a PhD amnesty bucket before the figure set off to scale a rock face, climb to the top of a birch tree and lasso the mountains in search of genuine connection and emotional repair.

I have chosen to integrate this into the conclusion as it serves multiple roles. It summarises key findings by highlighting how crafting functions as a vehicle for self-reclamation and resistance. This is key within an achievement Society, (Han, 2015a) particularly in a climate where intelligence has become the ultimate social capital resulting in the demands of navigating the academic pressures. The narrative also reveals limitations in capturing the full complexity of an individual's personal issues and trying to squeeze them into a sausage. My aim is to highlight the implications of rethinking academic norms and suggest future research avenues that explore creative practices as opportunities to foster emotional resilience and authentic identity formation.

Juno is one of the participants that I had hoped to name alongside her 365-day pinch pot project. She is, after all, an academic who contacted me because she had heard about my research and was passionate about the value of craftivism, especially for neurodivergent individuals who struggle in institutional structures like universities. *Goat Expectations* is my response to the constraints and bureaucratic processes that have shaped my PhD experience, and mirrors Dickens's (1861/2003) exploration of the crushing weight of social climbing and lost illusions. It visualises Juno's concept of a stubborn, goat-like individual who refuses to conform.

In the centre I have reused the image from the *Ivory Tower Quilt Block*, but it has been rebranded. The McDonald's Golden Arches sit atop the battlements, a reference to Ritzer's (1993/2013) McDonaldization of Society as a system defined by efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. The figure on the left, in the same flowery trousers depicted in *Cast No. 3 Quilt Block*, is a self-portrait inspired by L.S. Lowry's *The Cripples* (1949, as cited in Spalding, 1987, p. 72). I represent the 'saturated self' (Gergen, 1991), battered by the 'Burnout Society', queueing to enter the machine. My 'Dreams' and 'Hopes' float in bubbles, about to be processed into standardised outputs.

On the right, the landscape shifts from the flat factory floor to the mountains. The peaks are carrying the words 'LIFE IS NOT FLAT', tying back to the central thesis argument of unflattening and my *How are you? Quilt Block*. Underneath the central figure an alternative route is stitched in white, a path leading away from the tower captioned 'Your Mountain is Waiting', a nod to Dr. Seuss. But in *Goat Expectations*, the mountain is not a metaphor for career success instead it is referring to the freedom to define one's own challenge. It represents the agency required to climb out of the 'Flatlands' and find a new vantage point. The new version of myself, a tiny and insignificant Lowry inspired matchstick figure has lassoed the mountains, and the red thread winds its way upwards.



Figure 101 Stitched Self Portrait Lassoing the Mountains

High on the tower, precariously balanced on a neoliberal university branded sausage, a figure attempts to hang a banner for 'Social Change', the red thread attached to his belt and secured to the Golden Arches in an attempt to topple them. A final act of resistance from within the crumbling estate, set against a backdrop based on Grayson Perry's (2013) *The Upper Class at Bay* from his *The Vanity of Small Differences* tapestry series. *The Upper Class at Bay* (Perry, 2023), which is a critique of the class structures and generational wealth that shore up these institutions, positions his

protagonist Tim Rakewell in a parody of Mr and Mrs Andrews in Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of the landed gentry.

When everything in life has been commodified and attention represents our final social capital resources being syphoned off to create false needs, it is the vanity of small differences that people are manipulated into thinking are the most important aspect of life. This connects directly back to Aspen and the Epistemological Injustice Quilt Block. As they commented, the institutional attitude of 'I know better than you' actually translates as 'I am better than you', the very foundation of neoliberalism. When intelligence becomes social capital, 'I am better than you because I am clever' becomes the new 'I am better than you because I am richer.'



Figure 102 Detail of the Golden Arches

Finally, in the bottom corner, the path leads to 'The Pines', a campsite discussed by Juno in her final interview. This foreshadows the final resting place of the thesis. We are leaving the stone and mortar of the tower for the organic chaos of the woods. We are heading towards Rana's moss.

Juno explains:

There's a bit of a rite of passage amongst the climbers here that you've got to live at the Pines... that's a campground at the bottom of the mount as they call it... they camp like for months on end or sometimes years...it sounds a bit feral, but it's not. It's just like what is the important stuff? It's not collecting houses and cars and investment properties and all that... I reckon it's one of the highest capita in all of Australia of people with PhD. Half of them live at the Pines, you know, like camping, because they do these PhDs. They either don't want to go into academia, a lot of science PhDs...or they can't get work...It's so difficult and it's such an intense demanding...emotional, even though we pretend that emotions don't exist, but they totally do. The emotional journey to do that kind of work, that in the process people go actually, I don't, I don't know. I don't want it. This is not the way to want to use my life and they get in vans and they come rock climbing. (Interview 2, 16 May 2024)

So now having discarded the expectations of the factory, dethroned corporatisation and moved some mountains, I now turn to the final synthesis of this journey.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

At its heart, my thesis is about the search for light within darkness and embodied practices of textured resistance against reduction and homogenisation. I argue that the flattening of human experience and the 'liquid' instability of contemporary society (Bauman, 2000) are two sides of the same coin; as institutions try to regain control of a liquid world, they flatten complex individuals into predictable data points. My research demonstrates how craft provides a Flow-Thirdspace that counters both, offering an anchor in the liquid and a textured resistance to the flat. My research demonstrates it is through immersive making-induced 'flow states' (Csíkszentmihályi's, 1990) that neurodivergent crafters gain access to 'Thirdspace' (Soja, 1996). By engaging in the slow, deliberate work of making, the crafter re-introduces depth, friction, and weight into an otherwise frictionless world. In response, I have evidenced how through qualitative research, creative and autoethnographic methods, craft provides a clearing for respite. By combining the dimensions of attention and spatiality, the resulting Flow-Thirdspace is the unflattened space, materialised in my PhD quilt, where power can be reclaimed.

The journey through my quilt blocks represents a material shift from institutional trauma to ecological re-integration. While the *Daisies* and *Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Blocks* document the period of systemic violence when my dissent was reframed as dysfunction, my final block, *Let the Moss Grow*, (Show and Tell No. 9) symbolises a restorying facilitated by the passage of time. By turning towards the metaphor of the mycelium and its subterranean network that connects and supports the birches, lichen,

and moss, I can allow the light to filter in through the trees. Flow-Thirdspace is a site where the individual can exist in symbiosis with their environment, provided they are granted the necessary time and space to be. This practice weaves together the threads of well-being, coping, and transformation, presenting an argument for craft as a foundational tool for sustainable living.

Before summarising the findings, it is necessary to reflect on the political tensions which exist between craft and craftivism, a distinction I have navigated throughout this work. As demonstrated, craftivism is frequently the public, outward-facing demand for social change (echoed in the AIDS Quilt or the Grenfell Memorial Quilt), while craft is more often the private, inward-facing regulation of the self (seen in Violet's pompoms or my own Finished Blanket). The political tensions arise when a neoliberal society demands that our private refuges must always be transformed into public, productive, or explicitly political commodities. While craftivism is a potential tool for challenging systemic injustice, the relentless pressure to politicise, perform, or monetise our coping mechanisms can inadvertently replicate the very burnout we seek to oppose. The point is that enjoying the process of private making can be enough in a world that demands constant productivity, whether that is seen by the individual as a political statement or not.

My research was driven by a desire to understand connections; people's connections to meaning, to material, and to each other. The 'Birch Grove' metaphor is significant because it represents how essential an ecosystem of connection is to our survival. We cannot stand alone. The individualistic pressure to seek perfection in order to alleviate the fear of failure is fundamentally unsustainable. As Priestley (1945/2001) warned, "We do not live alone in this world; we are members of one body, responsible for each other."

To bring the real stories people shared into the academy, however, requires engaging with its established structures. Pushing the boundaries

of what research can be sometimes means acknowledging the messiness but also where conformity is necessary to ensure those stories are heard and validated within the institution. I might have added some deep, uninterrupted academic transition here, but my puppy Marnie is barking, so as ever, my attention is pulled back to the present, and the messy reality of daily life continues. As Rose so eloquently stated in section 7.3, that is exactly as it should be. With that in mind, I now follow the conventions of the academy to formally answer the research questions that guided this study.

8.2 Summary of Findings: Answering the So What?

The following section summarises the key findings by addressing the research questions regarding motivation, attention, and the impact of craft on mental health. For some, the applied practice of crafting was a valuable mechanism for coping in a world that frequently erases their struggles. However, this does not mean that craft is inherently helpful for everyone. Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how neurodivergent makers survive the 'Flatlands' of contemporary society. In a world characterised by liquid instability and the relentless self-surveillance demanded by both the attention economy and the 'achievement society', it is increasingly difficult to resist passive compliance. The pressure to optimise ourselves leaves little room for error; the fear of failing, or of doing the 'wrong' thing, silences complex identities. It is the pervasive nature of these performative demands that leaves attention fractured and fragmented. However, the outcomes explored in Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate that craft is far more than a leisure activity. By prioritising process over product, as Milton (2014) advocates, my participants leave behind the binary of being 'broken' or 'recovered.' They produce a layered reality where the fear of judgment

is suspended, proving that one can be scarred, make mistakes, and be entirely whole at the same time.

By answering the three core research questions below, my thesis successfully achieves its original research aims: demonstrating how flow influences identity construction (Aim 1), how craftivism acts as a tool for resistance (Aim 2), and how these mechanisms support emotional regulation and well-being (Aim 3):

- Answering RQ1 (Identity & Motivation): The motivation to make is driven by a need for a space of resistance. Crafting is a practical process of meaning-making that allows individuals to push back against one-dimensional labels and safely explore, express, and reconstruct their unflattened, authentic identities away from societal pressures.
- Answering RQ2 (Attention & Flow): Participants described the feeling of making as an important regulatory mechanism. By harnessing deep focus and engaging in repetitive, sensory-based tasks, makers actively bypass the cognitive overload of the attention economy, entering a physical and mental escape that provides true, embodied presence.
- Answering RQ3 (Coping & Connection): Crafting acts as a 'toolbox for living.' It provides a reliable, embodied praxis for survival that helps us process grief, mend relational bonds, and reclaim narrative sovereignty over our own stories, rather than focusing on a medicalised idea of being 'fixed' or 'cured'.

While the participants in this study reflected on their adult experiences of burnout, their narratives reveal that the flattening of identity and the pressure of burnout are not exclusive to adulthood and clearly had developmental roots. As Han (2015a) suggests, the achievement-subject is

born into a system that prioritises efficiency over ‘being’, which raises an important question: when does burnout begin? This hollowing out often starts in early education, where neurodivergent children are frequently forced into a standardised performance of normality and compliance (Fisher, et al., 2025). If we recognise that the flattening begins in the classroom, then the Flow-Thirdspace is a preventative strategy to be implemented across the lifespan. By providing children with the time and space for self-directed, non-linear exploration (Gray, 2013), we allow for the development of a resilient, unflattened identity before the fractures of burnout can take hold.

My findings provide clear examples of how specific aspects of flow sustain motivation and challenge the individualistic models of coping. By engaging in craft, some participants moved from states of isolation and fractured attention to ones of textured well-being, where self-regulation was intrinsically linked to connection with the wider world. The concept of ‘doing something with your hands’ to ‘get out of your head’ expressed by Violet describes a shift in the entire nervous system when engaging with creativity. Similarly, Rana’s *Mossy Moments Project* (Section 6.2.2) translates her observation of the natural world into personal objects, creating a connection between her internal emotional state and the external environment. Violet’s use of crochet in yoga classes demonstrated how the material object can act as a social scaffold. Aster’s blanket for her mother created space for relational repair despite the differing gendered experiences. Similarly, Juno’s blanket for her dying father illustrates the profound capacity of craft to hold space for grief and reconciliation when words fail.

Having shown that well-being is relational, my findings challenge conventional ideas of resilience. The embodied nature of craft is

dependent on unique attentional states. My participants viewed their crafting as an ongoing, dynamic praxis of coping in direct opposition to 'grand narratives of recovery' (Frank, 1995). Through the lens of Deleuze & Guattari (1980/2013), coping is framed as a navigation of 'microscopic events' that ease the friction of daily life, not to 'fix' the self. By providing the cognitive scaffolding essential for executive function, this practice directly answers my second research question regarding attention and flow. It also supports previous findings by Lampitt Adey (2018) and Csíkszentmihályi (1990) that flow states are functional 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1997).

Unlike Foucault's 'punishment society' (Foucault, 1977), where power comes from the outside, or Han's (2015) 'self-surveillance' where we watch and push ourselves to succeed, flow is a 'functional technology' that we control. In answering my third research question about coping and well-being, craft is a practical tool for taking back our attention and our lives from a world that is always trying to define, measure and fix us. By guiding the maker through the 'liquid fear' (Bauman, 2006) of crisis, craft can counter the shapeless anxiety that seeps into every part of our lives, leaving us unsure where we belong.

Finally, my research addresses the long-term impact of this way of making by challenging the linear 'restitution narrative' (Frank, 1995), which suggests that the goal is to return to a former state of 'normality.' In answer to research question 3, my findings contest the social construction of 'normal'. Instead, craft facilitates a space for transformation which allows for a self-directed narrative reconstruction. This transformation is evident in Onyx's journey from feeling "weird and broken" to embracing an identity she described as "weird and useful" and "fantastically autistic." The move from the personal to the political is exemplified in the

collaborative *Daisies Quilt Block* (Section 7.3), which demonstrates how crafting against epistemic injustice profoundly influences mental health. By transforming individual experiences of silencing into a collective material record, it illustrates that makers are driven by a need to be heard on their own terms. Ultimately, these transformations demonstrate practical agency and how craft allows individuals to reclaim the tools of their own care.

8.3 The PhD Quilt: Method, Metaphor, and Collective Narrative

Having discussed the findings, I now turn to the tool that made my analysis possible. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that traditional academic structures illustrated by the *Ivory Tower Quilt Block* (Show and Tell No.7) can fail to hold the messy, non-linear reality of my participants' experiences. To counter this, I required a method that did not just describe the Flow-Thirdspace but physically created it. The PhD quilt was the space I created for collective analysis and is a visual representation of the thesis itself. It is a metaphorical and metaphysical Flow-Thirdspace where meaning is continually made, contested and remade through collaborative work and the interpretation of participants' contributions.

In the first part of this thesis, I employed Ricœur's *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977) to explore how metaphors constitute meaning. For Ricœur (1977), metaphors come alive when they generate new ways of seeing, as acts of semantic innovation that re-describe the world. This insight is the foundation of my central methodological claim that the PhD Quilt is a representation of data, a site for collective analysis and a visual

representation of the findings. This positioning challenges the traditional hierarchy of academic knowledge. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972/2008) argued 'seeing comes before words.' A written thesis forces the reader into a linear journey following one word after another, one argument following the next. My PhD Quilt disrupts linearity; it is grounded in Wittgenstein's (1921/1922) distinction between saying and showing. Wittgenstein (1921/1922) acknowledged the limits of language; he argued that the most profound aspects of human experience are 'ineffable' and cannot be captured in words.

The PhD Quilt takes unmentionable stories, the ineffable experience of flow, alongside the complex reality of identity, and reveals them through images and textile storytelling. I use language to explain the theory, but the quilt functions as a standalone entry point to my research. It allows the viewer to encounter the layers of identity through a material form that can be accessed independently of the academic text. The quilt presents the 'who,' the 'why,' and the 'how' simultaneously. The viewer sees the totality of Han's (2015a) 'Burnout Society' (the crumbling brick walls of *Forever Becoming* and *The Ivory Tower Quilt Blocks*) alongside the resistance (the recurring images of nature: mushrooms, birches and moss), in a single glance. It captures what De Jaegher & Preiser (2022) term 'participatory sense-making.' Here meaning is not fixed within my interpretation as the researcher but emerges in the dynamic interplay between bodies and materials which can be physically touched.

8.4 The Space Between



Figure 103 *The Space Between Quilt Block*, January 2026

My PhD quilt is stitched from the ‘messy’ fragments of life, school trousers, dog hair, worn bedsheets and precious legacies of past lives such as Rose’s hand dyed threads from her textile business. It shows how social reality is constructed through small acts of repair and the meaning woven into the layers of the quilt. To bridge the gap between this messy reality and the conclusion of this thesis, I created *The Space Between Quilt Block* (Figure 103) which is supported by an autoethnographic fieldnote in the following section.

January 2026: A Week in the Flow-Thirdspace

Saturday 10th January 2026

It was a Saturday just like any other, apart from the fact that it wasn't like any other Saturday because the first draft of my thesis was almost complete and sitting in my draft emails ready to send. There was no performative social media post seeking validation; only the sound of the sleeting rain and a hint of winter light creeping across the sky. I was existing in the space between the submission of the draft and the feedback, between the death of my uncle and his funeral. Thoughts and memories flashed and darted between disconnected moments of my life.

To navigate this wait, I turned again to craft. I needle-felted the word 'SPACE' by stabbing the wool fibres until they matted together to resemble a blanket of snow (Figure 103), a long arduous process that made my hand ache. It was a form of 'Wintering' (May, 2020), a necessary dormancy where the data lay quiet before the final full draft was tackled.

As I felted the fibres, I thought of restoration. I worked with my uncle for several years in his antique textile restoration business. We spent our days handling the fragile, frayed histories of other people's lives, making them whole again. He was the final link connecting me to my grandmother, who taught me to sew, my grandfather, who built the bungalow with my parents, that I grew up in and my dad who passed away in the early 1990s from the same cancer as my uncle had just died from. As I stitched 'We are the stories we tell ourselves' into the foundation of this block, I

realised I was performing an act of restoration on my own narrative. Visually, *The Space Between Quilt Block* maps the final synthesis of my theoretical framework. On the left side of the block, the dense field of French knots represents Soja's (1996) 'Firstspace': the material, physical 'dots' of experience, the hard points of my physical and emotional turmoil, and the clinical reality of data. Conversely, the loose, trailing ends on the right symbolise 'Secondspace', the liquid, ever-shifting diagnostic labels conceived by others. I used the felting needle to stab a 'SPACE' through this noise. The word sits between these two concepts as the Flow-Thirdspace, the lived site of 'Wintering' (May, 2020).

There was an initial uncertain, uncontrollable period of grief during 'lifequakes' (Feiler, 2020), followed by mourning and coming to terms with inevitable shifts in identity that occur. My uncle was no longer dying of cancer; he has now gone. He will not see my PhD quilt or speculate on what my grandma or dad would have thought of me completing a doctorate. I can no longer sit with him and belong to part of the stories he told.

My loss highlights the relevance of relational identity discussed in Section 4.3 and the *Collective Identity Quilt Block* (Figure 39). As established through Mead's (1934/2015) theory of the social self, we come to know ourselves through the reflected appraisals of others. When those who hold our history are gone, the self must be reconstructed. Ricœur's (1984) notion of narrative identity helps illuminate this further by suggesting that we are not just the authors of our own stories, but characters in the stories told by those we love. *The Space Between* reclaims those missing pieces of my story as they unravel from loved ones and with each reconstruction of the self.

In a final act of subversion, I reached for a different thread. Throughout this quilt, I have used a golden thread to symbolise expectations and performative validation. But there, in the winter of the PhD and the mourning of my uncle, gold felt too bright, too loud, somehow inappropriate. Instead, I chose a silvery-grey thread. It catches the light like the bark of a silver birch in winter with a subtle, enduring sheen. As I wrapped the running stitch creating a twisted three-dimensional line, binding my story with Rose's hand-dyed thread, I shifted away from the 'gold' of 'becoming' and towards the 'silver' of 'simply being'. This was my final rejection of the 'false need' for external validation.

In documenting this specific 'Week in January' (inspired by Ellis, 2024), I adopted a form of auto/biographical sociological fiction. The period of 'Wintering' (May, 2020), provides one final autoethnographic example of a 'microscopic event' where the self is reconstructed in the absence of external validation. Informed by Letherby's (2000; 2021) work on auto/biographical sociological fiction, I argue that the 'truth' of profound experiences like grief or the stories of others cannot be reduced to factual details. As Letherby (2003) suggests, capturing the nuanced 'texture' of these experiences necessitates a creative approach that acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and the power of the narrative voice. By stitching the tensions that persist in research, I have left my loose threads to be woven into future alternatives for production of knowledge and extending ways of doing research that do not extract or exploit data. Instead, my intention is to leave new possibilities for inhabiting the world and creates space for being.

8.5 Finding a space to be



Figure 104 Capturing Komorebi on a frosty morning dog walk, 4th January 2026

To conclude, I once again turn to the interplay of light and shadow found in a birch grove (Figure 104). The birch grove offers a theoretical alternative to the broader societal 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 1993/2013) of human experience. Ritzer's (1993/2013) framework describes a world obsessed with efficiency, calculability, and predictability, identified by Weber (1904-1905/2001) as an 'iron cage'. In today's 'iron cage', individuals are trapped by rationalised systems and bureaucratic rules that leave no space for autonomy or individuality. We are compelled to perform a standardised, one-dimensional version of ourselves, and even neurodivergent identities

are pulled into the same narrowing discourses and echo chambers. The metaphor of a birch grove, however, is a means of disrupting standardisation. By viewing participants through the lens of the birch, a coexistence of challenge and endurance represented in the luminous white bark and the darkness of the horizontal scars becomes possible. In a McDonaldized medical model, these dark markings are viewed as flaws or deficits to be fixed or eliminated for the sake of efficiency. However, for the tree, these scars are lenticels, essential for oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange which allow them to breathe. In presenting this framework, I argue that individuals can be scarred and complete simultaneously. It is against the background of an 'iron cage' that the creative, non-linear practices of my participants can be understood. By choosing to engage in the slow process-based making, they find a way to flow through a space outside the bars of the 'iron cage'.

My PhD journey has taught me that there was never any true silence; instead, there were simply people who did not want to hear what I had to say. I had trapped myself within the perceptions of others, yet in the grove, I have found a space to finally be heard by myself. I have moved away from the muffled scream of the spreadsheet from the *Excel Scream Quilt Block* (Figure 5) and into a world that shifts from season to season in response to the light. The Flow-Thirdspace is materialised in the reality of my own scars. The ten-centimetre surgical incision on my foot and the metalwork structure required to hold my metatarsals together are proof that perfection is an impossibility. I will always mourn the version of myself that existed before these fractures, yet I have chosen to 'lean out' from the trap of self-optimisation.

The value of my work lies in the definition of this new space: a contribution I have added to the world. The academy may remain hollowed out by

McDonaldization, increasingly focused on the 'lawn' and the 'sausage factory,' but I have found a different way to be present. Being held by these threads allows me to flow and fly. I am no longer trapped in the 'iron cage' because I have chosen to be part of the grove.

Earlier, I introduced the concept of Komorebi captured in Figure 104 which Rana described in depth in her interview about her *Mossy Moments Project* (Section 6.2.2). This image of dappled light filtering through the trees serves as the perfect visual metaphor for the craft-created Flow-Thirdspace. Han (2015a) argues that the 'achievement society' creates an epidemic of positivity, compelling individuals to eradicate all negativity in a relentless pursuit of happiness. Positioning oneself as part of a natural environment encapsulates the idea of 'not a solution,' and is itself a way of existing. Just as the pathways of support in the *Nothing About Us Without Us Quilt Block* (Figure 54) are wonky and do not meet, a birch tree in a dense grove must bend and twist its branches to find the sun. Non-linear growth is not a failure, but a successful adaptation to a difficult environment. It is a habitat where problems stop being problems; the environment and the story we tell change, rather than the individual needing to be 'fixed' or 'cured'. The birch does not apologise for not being one of Oakley's beloved oaks. By viewing participants through this lens, I suggest the helpful but limiting label of neurodivergence, needs to extend to acceptance that this is a way of being and not as an issue to be fixed. We are not perfect, and we do not need to be.

Finally, this metaphor shifts our understanding from the individual to the collective. Birches grow in groves. A collective existence challenges the hyper-individualism of the achievement-subject (Han, 2015a). It is here, in the birch grove metaphor I have created in my PhD Quilt, that the 'panopticon of self-surveillance' (Timimi, 2025) is diffused. Unlike the

harsh, exposed world of the achievement society, the flickering, dappled nature of Komorebi counters constant judgment. It allows space for negativity and shadow to exist, rejecting the idea that everything must be the same, one dimensional and positive.



Figure 105 Field notes photo Hampsted Woods, 21 July 2023

The picture I have painted of a place of homeostasis reflects Hollis's concept of finally being able to 'live in the water', finding a place to exist as she is. Like the birch finding the light, or the amphibian finding a place between drowning in the water or suffocating on land, the craft-created

Flow-Thirdspace stops the fight against one's own nature. I interviewed Hollis in a tree top café' July 2023 (Figure 105) about the meaning of creativity:

It feels like an enormous relief as if I was a frog that lived on land some of the time and in the water some of the time and finally, I can live in the water. I'm a non-[am]phibian but it's so complicated [...] And to do it all the time. It's too stressful you see. I went through difficult times at work [...] Burnout, financially, everything. I was in crisis thinking, how can I be normal? This whole thing that I'd had from childhood, from my parents' decision, 'Let's just get her to be normal and she will be okay.' I couldn't make it happen... I didn't. I didn't know how to be. I couldn't force myself anymore. I didn't feel I existed... I didn't. To me everything... I mean, everything was impossible. You know how everything always goes at once... I couldn't think my way out of being in this impossible place. I couldn't see past that moment, later in the day or next week or next year. How could I exist? I didn't practically have a way of living if you like. It was impossible for me to exist, but I had to...

Two years later it's not just optimism, in a way it's the opposite of optimism. This idea of the journey, having purpose...I have no idea... I can say I need to do the weave on the sculpture and I'm puzzling out the porcelain problems. I have ideas of things I want to make but I don't have a journey or signposts or all these things that people talked about. I'm actually very pleased now that I'm in a home, but even more ...a right to exist as who I am. (Interview 2, 21 July 2023)

8.6 Contributions to Knowledge

My thesis makes contributions in three distinct categories: theoretical, methodological, and practical. Across these areas, my research challenges the pathologisation of difference and offers a new framework for understanding the role of craft and creativity in navigating the pressures of the 'Burnout Society.'

8.6.1 Theoretical Contribution: The conceptualisation of Flow-Thirdspace

My primary theoretical contribution is the Flow-Thirdspace. This is a new way of understanding how neurodivergent people navigate burnout. My study advances the critique of neoliberal well-being by theorising an 'unflattened,' relational praxis. I have synthesised Soja's (1996) concept of 'Thirdspace' with the phenomenology of craft to identify a new socio-spatial reality for individuals whose sensory and attentional experiences fall outside normative expectations. This space allows the individual to experience their challenges as ordinary, inevitable parts of our complex existence and not as pathologies that need to be fixed.

I have developed this concept further by integrating theories of flow states (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). While traditionally associated with productivity, I argue that flow is a mechanism of existential grounding. Csíkszentmihályi (1990) defines flow as a psychological 'optimal experience'; my research repositions flow as a sociological phenomenon. Ultimately, my thesis advances existing literature by liberating 'flow' from its neoliberal associations with productivity and self-optimisation, redefining it instead as a spatial, sociological act of narrative sovereignty and resistance.

By framing flow sociologically rather than psychologically, the trauma of burnout is repositioned as systemic. Within a McDonaldized education system (Ritzer, 1993/2013), the neurodivergent child's inherent need for deep, rhythmic engagement is frequently treated as a deficit or failure to comply with standardised metrics. Restricting access to their Flow-Thirdspace results in the initial flattening of their experience. So, the trauma of burnout begins where an individual's agency over their own time and attention is captured by the 'iron cage' of institutional efficiency.

8.6.2 Methodological Contribution: Material Negotiation and the Ethics of the Veil

My methodological contribution uses the PhD Quilt to demonstrate how creative methods are tools for data collection and ethical negotiations. The quilt is a polyvocal archive that holds the stories, the physical labour, and the lives of my participants. It proves that the process of making is a form of analysis where findings are negotiated through material interaction rather than just extracted as text. This collaborative practice ensures that the research remains a shared record of lived experience. The *Settle Quilt Block* (Figure 107) is an example of how creative methods have been used in this way. In a more traditional text-based qualitative study, this might have resulted in the data being anonymised or redacted entirely. However, the flexibility of the PhD Quilt allowed for a material solution to an ethical problem. The added layer of plastic lace fabric allowed the poem to remain under Tate's control. Similarly, it was not possible to include Banned's stitched tirade, so instead I stitched her pseudonym in the same font and colour (Figure 106) as her original work.



Figure 106 Banned Cross Stitch Detail

Both veiling methods transform the quilt blocks into a methodological argument. They demonstrate that consent is dynamic and that a signature on a form at the start of a research relationship can be developed into an ongoing ethical material negotiation. It grants the participants the right to opacity and anonymity whilst acknowledging the relevance of their contribution. Finally, these examples of ‘participatory sense-making’ (De Jaegher & Preiser, 2022) illustrate how meaning is found in the interaction between bodies and materials. The Ethics of the Veil offers a new methodological framework for qualitative sociology. It proves that researchers do not have to choose between full, potentially harmful disclosure and complete silencing through redaction. By using material negotiation, we can protect the maker while keeping the political power of their complaint entirely intact. In a world defined by what Han (2015b) terms a ‘dictatorship of transparency,’ social media and the attention economy demand a level of disclosure that flattens human complexity. The

systemic pressure for total visibility erodes the private, unflattened space required for authentic being.



Figure 107 Settle Quilt Block, Unveiled

8.6.3 Practical and Social Contributions: Reclaiming Narrative Sovereignty

We exist in a pervasive surveillance culture, exposed to monitoring by institutional metrics, social media algorithms, and the constant, judging gaze of others. In this hyper-visible environment, fear of failing has become paralyzing. When every action is measured and 'mistakes' are publicly condemned, people are implicitly encouraged to disengage from the messy, risky business of real life. We retreat into passive consumption because it is safer than active creation. Within this context, the dramatic

increase in neurodivergent diagnoses takes on a new sociological meaning. In a society that demands the relentless performance of the 'optimised self,' I argue that medicalised labels can inadvertently become a refuge.

When the pressure of the 'Burnout Society' becomes unsurvivable, a label offers a legitimate reason to step back; it acts as a shield against the crushing expectations of a system that refuses to accommodate human frailty. Could it be that we now hide behind these categories because the alternative, simply being human and occasionally failing, is no longer permitted? This is why craft is significant. It creates space to drop a stitch or make a lopsided pot without punishment. It teaches us that we do not need a diagnostic reason to rest or to be imperfect. We just need a space to be.

The practical implications of these findings are useful outside of adult mental health services. If the trauma of burnout stems from a lifelong demand for performance and systemic pressure to conform, then the 'toolbox for living' is relevant earlier in life. By integrating Flow-Thirdspace practices into educational and youth settings, we offer children an alternative to the intense pressure of standardised testing and social performance. We can teach them the value of being active makers rather than passive consumers, equipping them with the courage to experiment, make messes, and trust their own hands, before the societal fear of 'doing the wrong thing' takes root. Getting it right for children could reduce the risk of pathologisation of 'deficits' by creating environments that, like the birch grove, allow for scars and 'wonky' growth.

If space is a social product (Lefebvre, 1991), then accessing the Flow-Thirdspace is a skill that should be nurtured across the lifespan, including

childhood. We should teach children how to produce their own 'counter-spaces' within a hostile world by shifting the focus from child-psychology (fixing the child's mind) to child-sociology (empowering the child to produce their own environment). Craft, in this context, as a practical act of spatial sovereignty, allows the next generation to 'touch grass' and offer a way of being that is unflattened, self-directed, and sustainable.

8.7 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

8.7.1 Limitations

While craft is a powerful tool for some people, it has significant physical and structural limitations. Hands-on activities require manual dexterity, time, and resources that make this practice inaccessible to many. Furthermore, the parameters of this study purposefully focused on a specific demographic consisting entirely of participants assigned female at birth who already possessed an interest in craft and the educational privilege required to reflect on their distress within a socio-political context. While this limits broad generalisability, it provides a deeply focused, necessary lens on the gendered nature of masking and burnout, paving the way for future intersectional studies. I acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of this autoethnographic approach and the non-generalisable nature of qualitative research. Most critically, the data proves that craft is not a universal solution for every stage of mental health. As stated by several participants, in acute crisis, individuals often lack the cognitive or emotional capacity to engage in making. Craft requires a baseline of safety and stability that is not always present in moments of extreme distress, meaning these findings should be applied to other marginalised groups only with careful consideration of their specific context.

It is also not a universal solution for every neurodivergent individual. I acknowledge the 'high-masking' bias of this study. My findings are based on interviews with individuals who were able to articulate their experiences through sophisticated narrative reconstruction. This leaves a significant gap regarding those who are excluded from traditional academic and social discourse. While I argue that craft offers a site for re-authorisation, I recognise that this may not translate to those with different support needs or cognitive profiles. My research is intended as a starting point for understanding one specific approach, not as a universal map of the entire neurodivergent experience. In addition, I must explicitly reject a utopian reading of these findings. My research provides evidence that even creative engagement can be co-opted by the 'iron cage' (Weber, 1904-1905/2001) if it is performed to justify one's validity to an external audience. I acknowledge that I struggled with the compulsion to turn my own making into a product for academic approval. Finally, I must acknowledge the theoretical scope of my critique regarding the helper. My research has focused on the transition from powerlessness to re-authorisation; consequently, the helper is frequently examined as a component of disciplinary flattening. While this focus accurately reflects the experiences of the participants documented here, I recognise that this study is a specific inquiry into the weaponisation of care within a 'Burnout Society'. I do not claim to provide an account of all social support structures but instead, offer a rigorous analysis of when institutional care is experienced as a form of administrative control.

Furthermore, there is an inherent paradox in this research: while crafting provides a tactile refuge from the disembodied attention economy, the creation of our Flow-Thirdspace and the research methodology itself relied heavily on digital infrastructure (Teams, WhatsApp, Instagram). Additionally, while this study uses a feminist critique to explore gendered

expectations, the sample did not allow for a deep, intersectional analysis of how systemic racism and racialised medical bias compound the neurodivergent experience of burnout. While collective projects like the *Grenfell Memorial Quilt* capture this racial injustice, my individual participant sample was limited in its racial diversity. The Flow-Thirdspace should be examined in future studies through a wider intersectional lens to understand how racialised individuals navigate these 'Flatlands'.

8.7.2 Areas for Future Exploration

Although textile craft was central to this study, the diverse practices shared by my participants, from Violet's playwriting to Tate's calligraphy and the ceramics of Hollis and Juno, suggest that the Flow-Thirdspace is not tied to one medium. Future research should investigate whether different creative forms produce distinct types of transformative spaces. Furthermore, my own shifting perspective and Aster's rejection of polarising terminology highlight the need for longitudinal studies that track how identity and the stories we tell about ourselves evolve over time. These should explore the origins of burnout by tracing the trajectory from early educational 'flattening' to adult crises and could explore whether early access acts as a protective factor against the later development of burnout symptoms. By providing children with the time and space to inhabit these 'unflattened' experiences, it may support the development of narrative sovereignty (King, 2003) that prevents the onset of adult burnout.

My initial commitment to the term 'neurodivergent' gradually evolved into a critical awareness of its restrictive nature. Aster captured this by arguing that rather than liberating individuals, reliance on labels often enforces a new, politicised form of flattening:

Even with the neurodiversity movement, there's still stigma... You've got left-wing activists pushing for society to bend and flex to suit the minority, which is never going to happen... and right-wing activists saying everyone needs to be treated exactly the same, which isn't going to work either. (Interview 2, 16 April 2024)

She went on to clarify her position regarding the personal impact of these labels:

I think it's an unnecessary way of pigeonholing people. Basically, it's restrictive, they internalise it, it affects how people view them, how people treat them, it affects how you view yourself; it affects how you treat yourself. It's not... it's a very medical model. It's saying there's something wrong with people. It's making people resign themselves to the fact that this is who I am. This is how I am and I can't change it. I'm broken. And for me that's just so wrong. It's doing people a disservice. (Interview 2, 16 April 2024)

Finally, she situates this 'disservice' within the context of systemic failure:

I don't agree with people being diagnosed... The system is fucked. Basically, they need to change it. It doesn't work; it doesn't work at all. (Interview 2, 16 April 2024)

Aster's rejection of these systems and her refusal to be "pigeonholed" demonstrates the urgent need for support models that exist outside the medical framework. By examining how these material anchors mediate the relationship between the individual and the collective, we can better understand cultural phenomena like social prescribing and repair cafes as a way of living with challenges.

8.7.3 Integrating the Findings

Finally, my research suggests that craft should be offered as part of a 'toolbox for living' which provide real-life, hands-on engagement which develop relationships and community. The challenge for future practice is to integrate these principles into therapeutic or community support settings without falling into the trap of 'McMindfulness' (Purser, 2019). This occurs where responsibility is placed on the individual. We must avoid using craft to encourage quiet compliance while ignoring the institutional pressures of the achievement-driven society that caused the burnout in the first place. It must be clearly emphasised that this is not a solution-based approach designed to 'fix' a deficit. Instead, it is one of many tools used consistently to live with challenges, rather than trying to eliminate them.

8.8 Final Reflection: Stitching a Different World

I have decided to end with a short personal reflection that brings you, as the reader, back to the core of my thesis. In the spirit of non-linear storytelling, I take a step backwards in time to the autoethnographic notes I made during the construction of this chapter:

It feels apt to sit here alone on Black Friday, 28 November 2025, because in this quiet moment, I am free from the frenzy of purchasing that has become ubiquitous. Craft offers a way to resist the pressures of the 'Burnout Society' and the demand for relentless consumption. In reflecting back on this journey, I realise it began long before the start of my PhD programme in 2021. It has been a lifelong process.

I grew up surrounded by active makers in a world where my parents and grandparents were constantly creating, mending and doing. Their values and identities were expressed in the things that they made with their hands. I was privileged to be given the resources and environment as a child for the intellectual and creative seeds of this work to be sown. Yet, as I look at the world today, life has shifted away from this hands-on living approach towards passive consumption. We live in a society so consumed by the 'panopticon' of external judgment, terrified of not performing the 'perfected self,' that people are paralysed. Everyone is so concerned about what others think of them that they are fearful of doing anything, lest it be the 'wrong' thing.

Craft is the antidote to this fear. From the outside, it may look like a frivolous hobby, but it is a gentle, profound, and political act of world-building. It allows us to use our hands to make mistakes, leave uneven stitches, and to exist in a space where we are the authors of our own messy, beautiful reality. By choosing to make rather than to buy, my participants and I are executing the 'Great Refusal'. We are refusing to be passive consumers of someone else's curated ideal, and instead, we reclaim the courage to simply do, make, and be. (Field note, 28 November 2025)

The cycle of consumption is central to Marcuse's (1964/2013) *One-Dimensional Man*, where the individual is flattened by the imposition of 'false needs.' In this context, the refusal to buy, and the choice to make, is the 'Great Refusal' of my time and a rejection of the technological rationality that seeks to absorb all opposition into the status quo. A desperate focus on consumption in the pursuit of 'forever becoming' aligns perfectly with Han's final warning:

The mania for health emerges when life has become as flat as a coin and stripped of all narrative content, all value. Given the atomization of society and the erosion of the social, all that remains is the body of the ego, which is to be kept healthy at any cost.

(Han, 2015a: 50)

My research has been an attempt to reintroduce the 'narrative content' back into that flat life. Originally, I thought this would lead to some insights into the quality of flow states, but instead, the findings have focused on the textured resistance created by the time and space in which these states can exist. It is the space for understanding the meaning of our stories, especially what has happened, how we view it, and what influence it has on how we feel:

As I sit here in the silence, with the sun setting on my last paragraph, I think mostly of what is missing, feeling the absence of those who are no longer in my life and the significant influence of grief and loss on my own lived experience. In reflecting on everything that a PhD thesis means and how my life has shifted since I wrote the proposal for my application, I must return to the

PhD quilt and the final quilt block: *Let the moss grow*. (Field note, 28 November 2025)

To conclude this work with a purely textual summary would be to perform the very academic conformity that my research resists, as it would fold this work back under the blanket that flattens and distances. Instead, the Flow-Thirdspace is a material reality. It embodies the refusal to be one-dimensional and the choice to be a multi-dimensional maker. The true conclusion of this thesis is not written on this page, because it is materialised within the fabric of the PhD Quilt. The quilt is my research and represents a methodological, theoretical, and ethical argument for the value of embodied inquiry. It is an archive that holds the weight of our shared stories and the visual record of our resistance in a way that a thousand pages of transcript never could, offering a way of doing research through collaboration that finally says what happened.

Cvetkovich (2012: 21) reminds us:

Although academics frequently try to justify the significance of their work by appeal to scientific notions of progress or contributions to society, one of the most important aspects of the humanities may be the way they provide room for creativity.

I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that I can meet the conventions of the academy. By refusing the one-dimensional output of the academic 'sausage factory' I have reclaimed that room. But the more difficult, and I argue more significant, contribution is this:

I made a quilt.



Figure 108 The completed PhD Quilt

Show and Tell No. 9 *Let the Moss Grow*



Figure 109 *Let the Moss Grow* Quilt Block

The final Show and Tell biographical interlude, *Let the Moss Grow Quilt Block* (Figure 109) is the physical resolution to my research journey. While earlier blocks documented the fracture of systemic violence and the academic 'sausage factory,' this piece marks my return to the natural world. It signals the completion of a process that began in 2017 and represents my transition from being unable to face the world, trapped within a repetitive loop of trauma to a present, where I have found a space to listen to my own priorities. It is the material reality of the 'Great Refusal', where I choose to leave the relentless light of the achievement society for the safety of the grove. I have stopped performing wellness and understand the systemic pressures at play. I can look back on that moment

in 2018, watching the birch tree leaves flutter as my world fell apart and appreciate the significance of rhizomes, the connections between elements of our stories that are written. In simple terms, I have gone to touch grass.

Let the Moss Grow is built on the foundation of a moth-eaten cashmere jumper. I have not hidden the holes caused by the moths, because these gaps are the spaces where the moss has chosen to take root. These gaps represent the scars of a discreditable identity and the time when I was silenced by false narratives. By allowing the moss to take root here, I am demonstrating that these wounds do not need to be hidden because they provide the soil required for new, authentic growth. The background weaves together the threads of nature that have surfaced throughout this study. The design features three silver birch trunks made from wool I collected in the Welsh mountains. Their dark scars are stitched from my own dog's fur, honouring a history of companionship and survival. Stitching with these intimate materials provides a layer that is authentic and real. They offer a material refutation of the shallow and performative wellness often demanded by the corporate line. Surrounding these trunks are the mushrooms and fungal webs first explored in the *Reasonable Adjustments Quilt Block* (Chapter 7). The fine fibres represent the mycelium of shared lived experience and a subterranean knowledge that thrives without institutional control. This entire scene is anchored by the heavy, twisted roots of Oakley's moss-covered oak.

To capture my unflattened ecology, I used three-dimensional techniques like punch needle, bullion stitch, and needle felting. The making process was an act of intentional slowness. Each day I practiced a new technique and embraced my own failures and imperfections. The unsuccessful areas and loose threads in the work are mistakes that have been left as evidence of experimentation and practice. *Let the Moss Grow* brings Komorebi to

the final quilt block. By weaving my story into the dappled light of my needle felted birch grove, I have escaped the chains of the *Excel Scream Quilt Block* (Chapter 1). I have made a deliberate choice to settle into a life that follows the light but does not deny the dark. In a society driven by the performance of the ideal self, this is the space I have claimed. My final quilt block allows for depth, in which life can be lived on its own terms as I simply allow the moss to grow under my feet.



Figure 110 Field notes photo of Josie and Sherlock piecing together the quilt a month before he passed away, 8 June 2025

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Appendices

	Appendices Content list
A	Participant Flyer
B	Participant Consent Form
C	Participant Information Sheet
D	Workshops
E	Participant Contributions
F	Thematic Analysis Example

Appendix A Participant Flyer

**PARTICIPANTS
WANTED**





For a PhD exploring the impact of
craft on identity and mental health



Information

- Are you over 18?
- Have you been diagnosed or self-identify with a neurodivergent condition in adulthood?
- Are you interested in craft?
- Do you have a story to tell but don't really know where to start?

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR
TO REGISTER INTEREST

sjb240@kent.ac.uk



RESEARCH TEAM

Susie Bass

Supervised by:
Professor Chrissie Rogers
Dr Damian Milton



Appendix B Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Title of project: Exploration of the impact of craftivism on mental health
and identity

Name of researcher: Susie Bass

Participant Identification Number:

Please initial box

1. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet dated December 2022 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. (Contact sjb240@kent.ac.uk).

☐

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for the researcher and supervisor to have access to my anonymised responses.

☐

4. I give permission for the researcher to use anonymised, direct quotations from my interview in their dissertation and (if applicable) in future publications. Consent to use anonymised direct quotes in the thesis and publication will be sought prior to their use.

☐

5. I agree to take part in the above research project.

☐

Date

Signature

Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

A copy of the completed form is to be retained by the researcher and the participant

Appendix C Participant Information

Participant Information Statement

Exploration of the impact of craftivism on mental health and identity

Invitation to participate

Thank you very much for your interest in the research project. Please read this information sheet carefully to check that you would like to take part in the research and then complete and return the consent for to Susie Bass (sjb240@kent.ac.uk)

What do I have to do now?

If you decide you want to take part in the research study, you will need to:

- Read this information carefully and ask questions if you need to
- Sign and return the consent form

- Save a copy of this form to refer to in you need to.

What is the research about?

The research is about the impact that craft has on the mental health and identity of people who have been diagnosed or self-identify as neurodivergent in adulthood and are interested in craft / creative activities. I am interested in collecting your story, from your perspective about who you are and what is important to you, using craftivism to express this and bring about social change. Craftivism is a portmanteau of craft and activism.

Who is conducting the research?

My name is Susie Bass, and I will be the main researcher. There is a profile available if you would like more information about me. This project is part of a Sociology PhD and will be supervised by [Professor Chrissie Rogers](#) and [Dr Damian Milton](#), from the SSPSSR-LSSJ, University of Kent.

Who can participate?

Before you decided whether you are going to take part in this research, please check that you meet the criteria outlined below:

- 18 years of age or above
- Formally diagnosed or self-identify as having neurodivergent condition after the age of 18
- Are interested in or already participate in textile-based crafts.

No previous experience is required

Do I have to take part in this research study?

Participation in this project is voluntary. If you read through this information sheet and decide that you do not wish to take part, then you do not have to. If you decide to take part and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any point during the data collection and analysis stages.

How long is the research project?

The project will run from December 2022 until April 2024. You can participate for as long or as little as you like.

What does participation in this research project involve?

You can choose to take part in **any or all** the following stages:

1. **Initial interview** to discuss the project and what you would like to take part in. This can via video call, online chat or email.
2. **Craftivism Project** - You will be given three prompts to work on if you would like to contribute a piece of work (1. Who are you? 2. Mini Protest banner 3. You Should...)
3. **Feedback Padlet** – there will also be an anonymous feedback Padlet that will ask participants specific questions about the pilot and allow them to make additional comments

You can also take part in other ways by contributing a video, audio, written or creative response about the impact of craft.

Are there any risks?

Psychological Distress: You may find that some of the thoughts related to your diagnosis or self-identification are stressful or upsetting. If you do not wish to talk about traumatic events or anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, you do not need to. You can focus on the craft activity, or you may stop immediately. If you become upset or distressed because of your participation in the research project, a list of free contactable support services are included at the end of this information sheet. Although this research project is related to mental health, I am not a mental health professional or practitioner and therefore **cannot** support you directly. I can signpost you to other support services (these are listed on the last page).

What are the benefits of taking part?

You will have the opportunity to develop creative skills and express what issues are important to you using craftivism. Your story will be listened to and included in academic discourse about lived experience and participatory research.

What will happen to information about me?

By signing the consent form, you consent to the research team collecting and using information about you for the research study.

The research team will store the data collected from you for this research project for:

- A minimum of 5 years after the publication of the research results.

The information about you will be stored in:

A non-identifiable format where your identity will be given a pseudonym, to protect your anonymity

An electronic format stored on a University of Kent password protected OneDrive only accessible to the approved research investigators.

A University of Kent password protected OneDrive only accessible to the approved research investigators for any audio or video recordings collected.

Your interview will be transcribed automatically by Microsoft Office 365 software when you consent to the recording of interviews and craft sessions on the Teams platform.

How and when will I find out what the results of the research study are?

The results will form my thesis for a PhD in Sociology due for completion in May 2027. All Information will be written in a way that will not identify you. The thesis will be read by examiners and there is the possibility of further publication. There will be a Padlet (digital noticeboard) where feedback will be provided throughout the project which participants will be able to access. There will be opportunities to display the quilt and an Issuu (online magazine) will be created for participants as a record of the project. A summary report of the research project will also be available for participants on request.

What if I want to withdraw from the research study?

If you do consent to participate, you may withdraw at any time. You can do so by contacting me or either of my supervisors using the contact details below to tell us that you no longer want to participate. Your decision not to participate or to withdraw from the study will not affect your relationship with University of Kent. If you decide to leave the research study, the researchers will not collect additional information from you. You can request that any identifiable information about you be withdrawn from the research project.

What should I do if I have further questions about my involvement in the research study?

The person you may need to contact will depend on the nature of your query. If you require further information regarding this study or if you have any problems which may be related to your involvement in the study, you can contact the following member/s of the research team

Support Services Contact Details

Support Services

Samaritans: 116 123 (UK)

www.Samaritans.org

Samaritans is a charity which offers a safe place to talk.

SHOUT service can text: **85258**

it is a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope

Mind 0300 123 3393

<https://www.mind.org.uk/need-urgent-help/using-this-tool/>

Mind are a mental health charity that provide support and guidance. This link is to their urgent help and support services

Victim Support UK

08 08 16 89 111

<https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/>

Refuge Domestic Abuse Helpline

0808 2000 247

<https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk>

Contact details for the research team:

Researcher: Susie Bass sjb240@kent.ac.uk

Supervisors: Professor Chrissie Rogers c.a.rogers@kent.ac.uk and Dr Damian

Milton d.e.m.milton-2@kent.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read about my project.

Appendix D Workshops

Workshop	Date	Theme	Type	Attendees
Workshop 1 	04/02/2023	Prompt 1 Who are you?	Online	Rose, Onyx and Blaze
Workshop 2 	09/02/2023	Prompt 2 Mini Protest Banner	Online	Cancelled due to illness
Workshop 3 	14/02/2023	Prompt 3 You Should...	Online	No one attended
Workshop 4 	23/03/2023	Review of the pilot	Online	Oakley
Note: As it was only Oakley, we conducted an interview instead of the workshop				
Workshop 5 	23/03/2023	Prompt 2 Mini Protest Banner Prompt 3 You Should...	Online	Laine, Lola and two other people
Workshop 6 	14/02/2023	Craft is...	Online	Blaze, Laine and two other people

Workshop 7 	14/05/2023	Craft and Music Collaboration with Laine	Online	Laine and three other people
Workshop 8 	11/06/2023	Craft and Music Collaboration with Laine	Online	Laine
Note: As it was only Laine, we conducted an interview instead of the workshop				
Workshop 9 	14/06/2023	Quilting Grenfell Collaboration with Rana	In person	Rana, Parker and seven other people
Workshop  10	05/07/2023	Quilting Grenfell	In person	Lola and Parker

Appendix E Participant Contributions

Participant	Interviews	Other Contributions
 Ash	10/01/2023 Online	Craft kit Emails Photos of craft
 Aspen	06/01/2023 Online 29/08/2024 Online	Analysis feedback Conference Collaborations Epistemological Injustice Quilt Block Emails Padlets

		Photos of craft Poem Teams Chat Seminar Collaboration WhatsApp messages
 Aster	16/04/2024 Online	Analysis feedback Craft kit Photos of craft Facebook Messenger messages Text messages WhatsApp messages
 Banned	15/08/2023 Online	Analysis feedback Emails Photos of craft Instagram messages Text messages WhatsApp messages
 Blaze	13/01/2023 Online	Analysis feedback Craft Kit Padlets Photos of craft WhatsApp messages Workshops
 Dara	No consent form so the interview is not included	Emails Facebook Messenger messages Instagram messages
 Hollis	25/04/2023 In person 21/07/2023 In person	Analysis feedback Ceramics Daisies Quilt Block Collaboration Emails Instagram messages

	20/06/2024 In person	Photos of craft Visual poetry
 Indigo	13/01/2023 Online 04/08/2023 Online	Analysis feedback Conference Collaboration Published article by participant Exhibition Collaboration Emails
 Juno	05/04/2023 Online 16/05/2024 Online	Emails Ceramics Instagram messages Photos of craft
 Laine	23/03/2023 Online 11/06/2023 Online 07/05/2024 Online	Emails Photos of craft Facebook Messenger messages Published article by participant Workshops Workshop collaboration
 Lola	Participant did not sign consent form	Workshop
 Nova	15/03/2023 Online	Emails Facebook Messenger messages Published article by participant
 Oakley	09/03/2023 Online 23/02/2023 Online 10/08/2023 Online 11/12/2023 Online	Analysis feedback Craft kit Emails Padlet Photos of craft RA Summer Show Submission Who are you? Self Portrait Quilt Block Workshop

 Onyx	21/12/2022 Online 11/04/2024 Online	Craft kit Emails Padlet Photos of craft Workshop
 Parker		Analysis feedback Craft kit Emails Instagram messages Padlet Photos of craft RA Summer Show Submission WhatsApp messages Workshops Zine Zine Self Portrait Quilt Block
 Rae	17/03/2023 Online	Email Instagram messages Link to craft-based personal website
 Rana	05/01/2023 Online	Analysis feedback Blog posts Emails Photos of craft Instagram messages Link to craft-based personal website Mossy Moments Project Workshop Workshop collaboration

 Romy	27/03/2024 Online 30/05/2024 In person	Analysis feedback Daisies Quilt Block Collaboration Emails Photos of craft Instagram messages Published article by participant
 Rose	09/03/2023 Online	Emails Photos of craft Instagram messages Threads and fabrics WhatsApp messages Workshop
 Sage	30/01/2023 Online	Emails Photos of craft Link to craft-based personal website
 Sky	20/12/2022 Online 23/06/2023 Online	Emails Photos of craft
 Sol	16/03/2023 Online	Facebook Messenger messages
 Tate	28/01/2023 Online 05/10/2023 In person 27/03/2024 Online	Analysis feedback Emails Photos of creativity and reading journal Poem Settle Quilt Block Collaboration WhatsApp messages
 Violet	24/01/2023 07/09/2023 09/05/2024	Analysis feedback Audio clips Craft kit Crochet is my lifeboat Quilt Block Collaboration

		Emails Instagram messages Facebook Messenger messages Play script and video of performance Photos of craft WhatsApp messages
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Appendix F Thematic Analysis Example

The following example shows the first stage of coding of Indigo's first interview. This document was then sent to Indigo who printed the transcript, spun it into paper yarn and then knitted a sock. I subsequently created sketches of the transcript that eventually became Anatomy of Analysis Quilt Block. Both Indigo's knitted paper sock, an image of the quilt block and a description of the process were exhibited alongside each other as part of Indigo's PhD Exhibition (Figure 111). We then collaborated on a conference presentation.

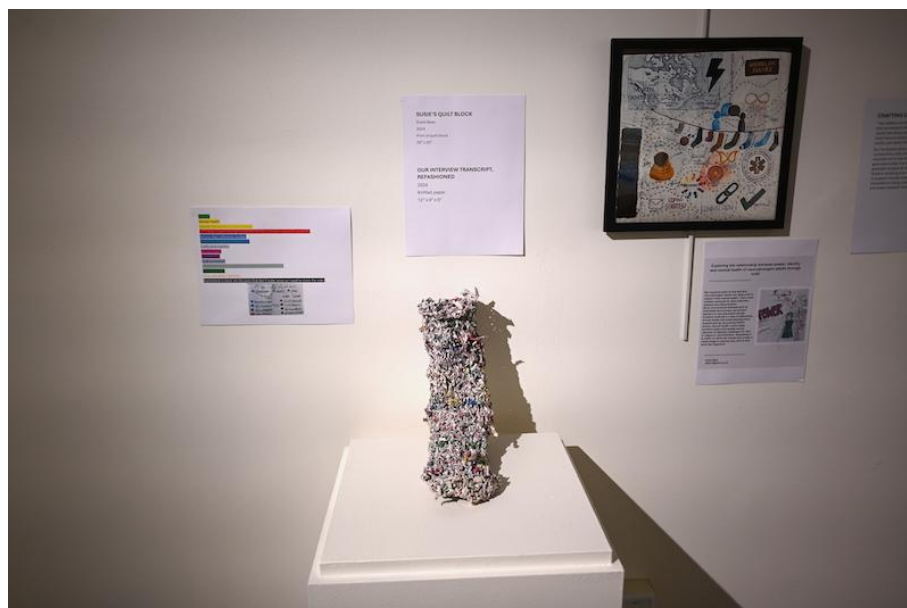


Figure 111 Exhibition of creative methods

Interview Transcript - Indigo 31st January 2023

Coding – Stage 1 August 2023

	Identity Mental health Identity influenced by mental health Power – I don't have the option to indicate differ ent types of power in word Service dog/ references to dogs Key questions or personal insights Crafty technicalities Craft histories Life histories Craft as method Cross over between craft as method and special interest Special interest Flow, attention, intention Highlighted in black are the parts that don't make sense so I need to check the video
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Explanation of methodology	Yeah, but I really like. I'm kind of being very flexible with my approach and what I actually want to get is what people want to tell me. Does that make sense? So I don't really want to structure it and I think the most important bit is for people to feel comfortable. And understand that like, I'm not here to like, extract bits and pieces out of you and like, kind of take, I really want it to be. A conversation about the importance of craft and I think a PhD... that you're doing or your PhD, it's potentially... a... a large aspect of that importance.	
Self disclosure about importance of craft	Indigo - Yes.	
Providing a "long version" of their story	Susie Boss It is for me. I mean I'm doing PhD craft because craft is it so significant for me.	
History of knitting	Indigo - Yeah, so I'll talk a little about my research here, so I... I'll... I'll take a step back and sort of give you kind of the long version.	
Portable nature of knitting	And say that sort of as I started to learn how to knit right before right... I kind of I got lost... and had a housemate who could teach me how to knit... and... so as I picked it up, I sort of... started to... You know, the... myself knitting and... I think... ?	
Knitting was part of how they interacted with their environment		

Framing in autistic language	And I started really thinking about how knitting wasn't like kind of pure of how... represented with the world around me, sort of pure of how I processed things And it felt really aligned with kind of. But some terms I've heard other autistic people use, such as whether that's stimming or special interest, to really sort of talk about kind of some of the like... sensory aspects of knitting, but also sort of the... intense focus around knitting.	
Knitting alongside academic research	And it made me really curious to think about sort of what it meant to do knitting alongside or as part of academic research is a knitting at the time I was doing a project at the local Senior Center and I found that when I took my knitting with me to the field and I would have people sort of	
Natural progression	like the knitting itself would spark conversations that I would otherwise sort of struggle to kind of approach people or figure out what to talk about, but knitting sort of changed the interaction that I was having and made me more curious to think about what it would mean to have knitting kind of as a central part of the research, so now in the PhD I've been sort of wanting to think more about what knitting means as a method in anthropology, which is totally very new here. We do a lot of reading and writing and.	
Conversations around knitting made social interaction easier – what if it was central?	Interviewing and talking, but I'm also really interested in sort of... that knitting, the fabric kind of the sensory aspects of knitting	
Knitting as a method of anthropology	So I've kind of put together a dissertation with a few different components to it, and the first kind of being the one I've gotten the furthest on at the moment has been a series of interviews with... autistic and neurodivergent people about their experiences and learning more, sort of about their experiences to them, sort of.	
Interviewed autistic self-advocates in the USA	about special interests are important in the context of their life? and then at the end of the interview, we talked a little bit about how to... how maybe their interests could be represented in knitting as a chance to kind of combine our interests so we work together to design a knitting pattern that I then will after kind of going back and forth on the design, knit up and actually	
Importance of special interests		
Designed a knitting pattern together		

Susie
August 12, 2023 at 9:47 AM

How the knitting becomes part of the everyday. Part of what you make, intersects with where you make it and then how that object is used. In this [see more](#)

Susie
August 12, 2023 at 9:58 AM

This is a key quote for this interview because of the intersections of so many strands of the research

Susie
August 12, 2023 at 9:51 AM

I am coding this red as expressed power, but this comment is right at the centre of my relationships Venn diagram for coding

Susie
August 12, 2023 at 10:19 AM

Already I am finding tensions in defining the difference and justifying the coding when something could be either IDENTITY or MENTAL. [See more](#)

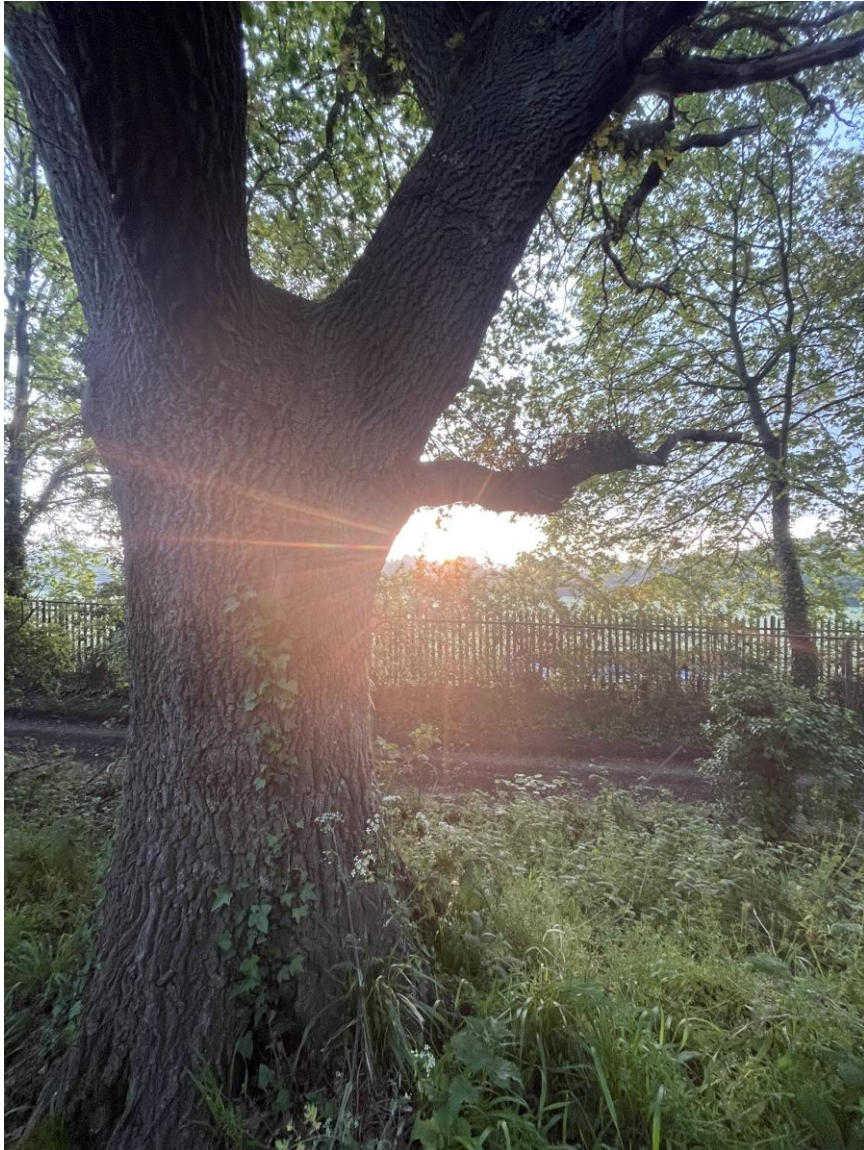


Figure 112 5am Sunrise Run, 4 May 2026

The End