

“They think I don’t know anything”: Race, gender and perceptions of expertise in crafts

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Thanks to the organisers for inviting me to be a part of this seminar and I’m pleased to present my latest work on inequalities in craft. This work is from a two-year AHRC funded Innovation Fellowship, focusing on diversity and expertise development in the craft economy, and is in collaboration with Crafts Council. In the project we aim to explore the experiences of makers of colour in the UK craft sector, highlighting the barriers and challenges they face and working towards making the craft sector more inclusive. In this paper today I’m focusing on the concept of expertise in craft, and how the politics of expertise are bound up in entrenched ideas of what constitutes craft expertise. These ideas are gendered, classed and racialised, and the accounts by the women I have interviewed so far suggest that the politics of expertise shapes their experiences as makers, working professionally in the UK craft sector. I argue that in order to address the existing inequalities in the UK craft sector, we need to think about how crafts by makers of colour and by women are judged and valued, and the role of craft organisations and spaces in reproducing patriarchal value judgements about craft.

This paper

- About the project
- What is expertise in craft?
- The politics of expertise in craft
- “Work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell” – craft and cultural value
- “They want the next new thing” – getting recognised
- Concluding points

First I’ll say a bit more about the project, which is called ‘Craft Expertise’, the work we’ve done so far and where you can find out more about it. I’ll then go into the research itself by first providing some background on expertise as a concept and its meaning within craft, then a focus on the politics of expertise, particularly how expertise is gendered, classed and racialised, and how this applies in craft. Then I will go through the main themes of my findings – which relate to craft and cultural value and recognition of craft expertise, before finishing with some concluding thoughts.

About the project

- Two year funded AHRC/UKRI Innovation Fellowship (Creative Economy strand) ending Feb 2021 (could be extended for 2 years, TBC)
- In collaboration with Crafts Council
- Website <http://craftexpertise.com>
- Craft Economies: Inequalities, Opportunities, Interventions Conference held in Birmingham December 2019 (pictured right)
- [Maker Stories podcast series](#)
- Forthcoming – special issue in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, policy recommendations, closing event

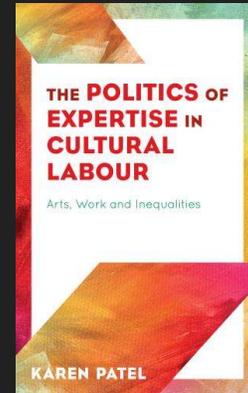


Maker
Stories

So about the project - this is a two-year Creative Economy Innovation Fellowship funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and in collaboration with Crafts Council. The project could be extended for another two years, pending a successful bid. More about the project can be found at the website craftexpertise.com. Some of the outputs from the project include a conference which was held in Birmingham last year, which included papers and discussions about the current state of craft, with case studies from around the world. There is also the maker stories podcast series of which there have been two episodes so far, featuring interviews with women makers of colour in the UK. A third episode was recorded last week and will be released very soon. You can find the podcast and information about the conference all on the project website. In terms of what's to come from the project – a special issue in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* on inequalities and diversity in craft, policy recommendations for making the professional craft sector more inclusive, which we hope to engage further with the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre about, and hopefully a closing event at the end of the project, launching the policy recommendations and other outputs.

What is expertise in craft?

- Expertise in cultural work: Patel, K. (2020) *The Politics of Expertise in Cultural Labour: Arts, Work, Inequalities*
- **Expertise** involving “knowledge of some sort” (Fleck, 1998) and skill, which is developed over time (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986)
- In craft/creative work – knowledge of aesthetic codes and classifications required. Pye (2010) craft has aesthetic importance



So, onto today's paper. I thought first it would be useful to outline what I mean by expertise, and what it means in the context of craft. This to some extent draws on my previous work on the politics of expertise in cultural work, and my book on this is out now if you're interested. Expertise is generally believed to involve “knowledge of some sort” as described by James Fleck, and skill, which is developed over time according to Dreyfus and Dreyfus. In creative and cultural work, including craft, some knowledge of aesthetic codes and classifications is required, Pierre Bourdieu talked about this in *The Rules of Art*, when he describes artistic competence. In craft, David Pye argues that craft has an aesthetic importance which depends on the creative freedom of making.

What is expertise in craft?

- Mamidipudi (2019) – practices of handloom weaving in India – involving “tacit knowledge” which can't be easily described
- Sennett (2010) – to become an expert craftsperson requires 10,000 hours of work
- **Craft expertise** - involving craft skills and knowledge, developed over time and which can be applied instinctively.
- Developing craft expertise requires resources and time

In a more contemporary Global South context, Annapurna Mamidipudi highlights the craft expertise of handloom weavers in India. She describes the ‘tacit knowledge’ that they develop over many years, a natural, instinctive knowledge that is not easy to describe or recall. The development of this tacit knowledge takes place over many years and with much practice. As Richard Sennett claims in his book *The Craftsman*, to become an expert at a craft requires around 10,000 hours of work. He describes the benefits of the slow and deliberate process of craft – the obsession with technique, and the perfection of skills until the act of craft becomes instinctive – tacit knowledge. The definitions of expertise described here help to clarify how I understand craft expertise – as involving craft skills and knowledge, developed over time and which can be applied instinctively. However, accounts of craft such as Sennett’s imply that anyone can develop their craft expertise, given the time and resources.

The politics of expertise in craft

- Cultural workers' ability to develop and signal aesthetic expertise is dependent on access to resources (Patel, 2020)
- Expertise also needs to be recognised
- Feminist scholars – women's art and creativity has been denigrated and misrecognised throughout history (Nochlin, 1988; Pollock, 2003) because of societal expectation on women to focus on domestic responsibilities

In my book I argue that cultural workers' ability to develop and signal aesthetic expertise in the UK context at least is dependent on access to resources, or capital. Signalling expertise is the process of communicating credentials, skills and abilities. In the book I discuss how cultural workers signal their expertise on social media, by displaying work in progress and enhancing their status through sharing endorsements and prominent connections online. However, signalling expertise is not enough – it also needs to be recognised by other prominent people in your field who can help to enhance your status. Some feminist scholars have argued that women's art and creativity has been misrecognised throughout history. For example, Linda Nochlin argues that the white, male western viewpoint of what should be considered great art is one that is unconsciously accepted. Griselda Pollock argues that these conditions persist, and that women's art is often judged in relation to art done by men. These writers suggest that women's art and creativity has been traditionally denigrated because of the societal expectation on women to focus their energies on domestic responsibilities.

The politics of expertise in craft

- Luckman (2015) growth in craft micro-enterprise due to Etsy, allowing women to fit craft enterprise around domestic life
- Roziska Parker (2010) - gender division between forms of craft, inscribed in society
- Women historically marginalised in crafts through the guild system

In the contemporary context, craft is seen as an appealing way for women to balance creative work with domestic life, as discussed by Susan Luckman. Some forms of craft, particularly fibre crafts, are associated with the domestic space and completely separate from art. Roziska Parker argues that there is a gender division between forms of craft such as sewing and woodworking, which is inscribed in society. This is fostered by the education system which still, to quote her, “directs boys to carpentry and girls to needlework”. Parker also describes how historically, when arts and crafts became professionalised and profitable in Western economies, women were marginalised.

In craft this professionalization was organised through guilds, from which women were traditionally excluded. These institutions helped members to identify as experts in their craft and required a level of expertise to join. As feminist writers such as Nochlin, Pollock and Parker show, women’s creative expertise has traditionally been dismissed. This is because what is recognised as culturally valuable or good art is judged against standards set by privileged men. In addition, it is important to consider that the judgement of creative expression is also classed and racialized.

The politics of expertise in craft

- Audre Lorde - poetry was considered lesser art form, but was the major voice for working class women of colour.
- “When we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art.” (Lorde, 1980:855)

For example, Audre Lorde points out how poetry can be considered a ‘lesser’ art form, yet it was the major voice for working class women of colour. This is because poetry requires less resources and time. She highlights how access to art supplies is dependent on class and economic status. While this relates to one’s ability to produce art and craft, it also unavoidably feeds back into the judgement of creative work and which forms are valued.

The focus in this paper is women makers in the UK, who are either working towards a craft career or aspire to do so. Most of the women interviewed for this research were born in the UK. All the interviewees have family origins outside of the UK, predominantly from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. I have interviewed 15 women in total so far, from various locations around the UK including London, Birmingham and Newcastle. Participants were asked about their journey into craft and their experiences as women of colour in the sector. I found that throughout their careers these women have experienced challenges which are related to the intersection of gender, race, and in some cases, class. Such challenges have made it especially difficult to get their work valued and their expertise recognised as such, and thus has hindered their progression towards a full-time craft career.

“Work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell” – craft and cultural value

- Craft’s precarious position as a valued and legitimate form of cultural production, and tenuous status as a creative industry (Luckman, 2015)
- Crafts Council promote craft work which sits at the intersection between craft and high art, probability of reaching such heights is slim
- UK professional craft dominated by white, relatively privileged makers

So on to the first theme from the interviews, which relate to craft and cultural value. Craft’s position as a valued, legitimate form of cultural production in the Western context has always been precarious as highlighted by Susan Luckman. Organisations such as Crafts Council tend to promote work that sits at the intersection of craft and high art, work which exhibits an elite level of craft skill and aesthetic expertise. The probability of a maker reaching such heights is slim, as it requires a University education, and enough cultural, social and economic capital in order to develop craft and aesthetic expertise and get it recognised. As a result, the face of UK craft in this field is homogenous, dominated by white, middle class and relatively privileged makers.

“Work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell” – craft and cultural value

“At Open Studios, you have all your work out on display and it’s for sale. You can see that this is a workshop. And people have said to me - And usually it’s been people of a certain age and of a certain demographic. And they’ll say, “Is this all made here, in the UK?” Or, “Do you make this yourself?” Or, “Is it made here or is it made abroad?” Why would they ask me that?”

- Tina

Almost all the makers working professionally in the sector mentioned that their work has been judged on the basis of their ethnicity, rather than the work itself. For example, Tina, who is of South Asian heritage and has a jewellery studio in London, described her experience at an Open studio event where she works:

She says: “At Open Studios, you have all your work out on display and it’s for sale. You can see that this is a workshop. And people have said to me - And usually it’s been people of a certain age and of a certain demographic. And they’ll say, “Is this all made here, in the UK?” Or, “Do you make this yourself?” Or, “Is it made here or is it made abroad?” Why would they ask me that?”

Tina felt that the origin of her work was being questioned because of her ethnicity. She also described instances where her craft expertise and the quality of her work was being questioned by potential customers. Tina was confident that a white maker wouldn’t be asked such questions and described how it was “exhausting” to deal with.

“Work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell” – craft and cultural value

“It’s quite hard to describe myself as a jeweller because people don’t always understand. They have a certain perception of either somebody who obviously makes Asian jewellery or traditional jewellery, they don’t quite get that I’m quite versatile in what I do. [...] **my work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell.**”

– Rebecca

“Craft is associated as something uniquely British. So, I can’t be seen to be doing a British craft because I’m not British. [...] On the one hand, **I’m not allowed to do what’s British, but on the same extent I’m not allowed to do what’s culturally mine either.**”

– Anita

Other makers felt that they were put in a difficult position in terms of the type of work they are ‘meant’ to produce, based on their ethnicity. Rebecca, a jeweller in Birmingham who is of South Asian heritage, described how she hasn’t felt successful in her jewellery career. She says:

“It’s quite hard to describe myself as a jeweller because people don’t always understand. They have a certain perception of either somebody who obviously makes Asian jewellery or traditional jewellery, they don’t quite get that I’m quite versatile in what I do. [...] my work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell.”

Anita, a craft artist in London, mentioned the “lose-lose” situation she is in, where “craft is associated as something uniquely British. So, I can’t be seen to be doing a British craft because I’m not British. [...] On the one hand, I’m not allowed to do what’s British, but on the same extent I’m not allowed to do what’s culturally mine either.”

“Work that relates to my culture doesn’t sell” – craft and cultural value

- Makers in UK professional craft must appeal to a “certain demographic”
- Cultural value is linked to social inequality – “specific types of cultural consumption are intertwined with who is able to succeed in cultural production” (Oakley and O’Brien, 2015:4)

It seems that in order to be successful in the UK craft sector and make a living, makers must appeal to the “certain demographic” which Tina refers to – namely white and middle class customers who will buy the work, or predominantly white and middle class gallery owners and curators who select the work. This means that not only is a certain standard expected but also a certain aesthetic to appeal to these tastes, to the exclusion of other work which sits outside of this framework. Therefore, some of these makers feel that they are in a difficult position - they feel are judged on the basis of their skin colour and the types of craft they are expected to make. Even when, like Tina and Anita, they try to incorporate their heritage, it is rejected. These examples illustrate Dave O’Brien and Kate Oakley’s (2015) argument that cultural value is linked to social inequality, whereby “specific types of cultural consumption are intertwined with who is able to succeed in cultural production” (p.4). I suggest also that the link between cultural value and privileged groups feeds into the politics of how craft expertise is recognised.

“They want the next new thing” – getting recognised

“People just want the next new thing, so the emerging designers will get those few opportunities [...] how do you keep longevity in what you're doing?”

“I think that you move in different circles if you come from a different class, and that also creates opportunities. You exude a certain confidence as well if you come from a certain background”.

- Rebecca

The more established professional makers frequently discussed the difficulty they have getting their work recognised. Though they have enjoyed some successes, some of these makers do not feel successful overall. This might be characteristic of the precarious nature of craft, where achievements are short-lived and makers must move on to the next project or commission in order to keep a steady income. Even so, some felt their work has been misrecognised or undervalued. Rebecca, the jeweller from Birmingham, described how she tried to get into exhibitions and get her work selected. She felt her work wasn't “out there” enough conceptually, and that because it is sometimes inspired by her culture, it is not considered contemporary. Rebecca has been working in craft for over 20 years, and she felt that in competitions and exhibitions, there has been a shift over the years towards more abstract, conceptual craft, and she feels her work is not being recognised for the skill and expertise involved. Instead it is being judged on its conceptual or abstract qualities. This requires some artistic education, which Rebecca hasn't had, so she is left doubting her own abilities and questioning her career despite having worked for so long as a jewellery designer. She said that for shows and exhibitions, “people just want the next new thing, so the emerging designers will get those few opportunities [...] how do you keep longevity in what you're doing?” Rebecca also felt she was at a disadvantage because she was from a working-class background, she said “I think

that you move in different circles if you come from a different class, and that also creates opportunities. You exude a certain confidence as well if you come from a certain background". She felt that the existing criteria and structures in place automatically disadvantage her, and this has left her disillusioned with her career and future direction.

“They want the next new thing” – getting recognised

○ Feeling like an ‘outsider’ in craft

“It gives you a confidence that you can be in a place like this and working with such amazing makers and it gives you a confidence in your work, it gives you a confidence in your pricing, it gives you a confidence in yourself as a person. I've taken that on regardless of whether I'm black or white and maybe more so because I'm black and I'm in the space where we're so under-represented. It does give me a confidence and no one's going to take that away from me, really, **regardless of the throwaway comments or people asking ridiculous questions**, or questions that you've never even thought about that **can get you to question what it is that you're doing.**”

- Olivia

The quote “they want the next new thing” implies that it is somehow less challenging for early career makers to build a career in the sector, but this is not the case. Some of the interviewees at early career stage had their own difficulties with breaking into a professional craft career, and often referenced their ethnicity as a potential factor. Sam, a ceramicist from London whose family is of East Asian heritage, says she feels like an “outsider” in craft because she doesn't have the networks to get recognised. Olivia is another early career maker from London and of West African origin who secured a grant to get a studio space in London. Such schemes can help makers get a foot in the door and enhance their chances of recognition. Olivia said the grant gave her confidence, to quote her:

“It gives you a confidence that you can be in a place like this and working with such amazing makers and it gives you a confidence in your work, it gives you a confidence in your pricing, it gives you a confidence in yourself as a person. I've taken that on regardless of whether I'm black or white and maybe more so because I'm black and I'm in the space where we're so under-represented. It does give me a confidence and no one's going to take that away from me, really, regardless of the throwaway comments or people asking ridiculous questions or questions that you've never even thought about, that can get you to question what it is that you're doing.”

Here Olivia references comments she has received which sometimes make her

question her work, similar to the quote from Tina earlier in this paper. The confidence Olivia has gained from the grant means she can try and shrug off those comments, and she has embraced her role as someone representing black makers in a studio which is mostly white. This is yet another example of additional judgements and challenges women makers of colour can face, even when they have made it into a prestigious studio or scheme.

Concluding points

- Fine art aesthetics of contemporary UK craft make it difficult for women of colour and working class makers to make a career in the sector
- Recognition of expertise tied up in what is deemed culturally valuable in craft
- Treatment of women of colour in craft:

“they’re [gold platers in trade] not used to it at all. They often think that I don’t know anything, you just get that attitude. [they] think you don’t know what you’re talking about when you go and speak to them about your work”

- Rebecca

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was that the trends and tastes of the professional craft sector - which are aligned to the aesthetics of fine art – make it especially difficult for women makers of colour to make a career in craft and have their craft expertise recognised as such. Perceptions about the types of craft which should be valued are inherently linked to white, middle class tastes which in turn disadvantage anyone who does not fall into that bracket. Attitudes towards makers of colour in craft which are highlighted in this paper reinforce the sense that professional, contemporary craft is not inclusive.

As well as the stories from Anita, Tina and Sam already referenced, Rebecca also talked about how she feels she is treated differently in the jewellery industry. She describes how she deals with trade suppliers such as gold platers, which are male dominated. She said that because she is an Asian woman, “they’re not used to it at all. They often think that I don’t know anything, you just get that attitude.” She feels like when she visits trade suppliers she is “looked down upon” and they “think you don’t know what you’re talking about when you go and speak to them about your work”.

All the women working professionally in craft have experienced some form of discrimination, had their expertise questioned or made to feel like an outsider in craft spaces. We need to rethink how craft is judged and valued. Craft should be judged

not only for its aesthetic value but the level of tacit knowledge, practical expertise and craftsmanship which has gone into it. Craft created by women of colour should be judged on its own merits, and not through the prism of their race, gender or class, as it can be in the sector.

Concluding points

- Raise visibility – e.g. BIPOC in Fiber
- “Making our own table” – Lorna Hamilton-Brown



To this end, this paper has highlighted the obstacles women of colour face when trying to forge a career in craft. Their position and their work are denigrated on the grounds of their race in particular, but also their gender, and against aesthetic and conceptual ideas of craft which are classed.

What to do about this? Raising the visibility of makers of colour in craft is important, and on social media, groups have mobilised to do this. For example, BIPOC in Fiber is a website established by prominent British knitter Jeanette Sloan. The website is “dedicated to highlighting the work of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in the Fiber community”. The website was established after ongoing debates about racism in knitting which took place predominantly on Instagram during 2019 and are still continuing. Jeanette and two other knitters together raised over £30,000 via a crowdfunding campaign to support the website’s creation. It is an example of how women makers of colour can gain visibility online, coalesce and help each other. Another knitter involved in this website, Lorna Hamilton-Brown, spoke at the craft conference I organised for this project. On the issue of the lack of diversity in craft, she said: “I never get invited to the top table. So, I’m just going to build my own table.”

At least by building their own table, the expertise of these makers will not be judged against entrenched patriarchal standards about what constitutes ‘good work’ in craft.

Such models which centre on co-creation and collective action are a hopeful point of departure for thinking about how the craft sector could be more inclusive, and what policy can do to support it.

Thank you

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