

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

ManCraft: Textile crafting and emergent dialogue supporting the wellbeing of vulnerable men

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Abstract

ManCraft is a community-based textile craft group for men, established as the main method of research for my practice-based PhD. Building on existing evidence of the therapeutic benefits of textile crafting to the health and wellbeing of individuals, this research seeks to examine the therapeutic use of textile craft processes for vulnerable men's wellbeing. The ManCraft practice is motivated by concern for the high suicide rate amongst men in the UK and the findings of my previous practice-based research which identified certain issues preventing men from engaging with textile craft processes in a mixed-gender group. This paper draws on evidence from a specific discussion during the ManCraft practice, recorded in my observational journal, to advocate for a relational understanding of wellbeing. The exchange details participants' responses to five evidence-based categories, identified by Leamy and colleagues (2011) as crucial to an individual's mental health recovery: Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment (CHIME). Using the CHIME categories as a starting point for discussion, participants identify that connecting with others and being able to help others are crucial to their sense of wellbeing. As a result of ensuing discussions with participants this research shifts the focus from the individual acquisition of wellbeing to foreground relationality, social interaction and notions of responsible wellbeing.

Keywords: men's wellbeing; vulnerability; textile crafting; dialogue; therapeutic process

Introduction

This practice-based research seeks to examine the therapeutic use of textile craft processes for vulnerable men's wellbeing. The research uses practice as its principle method of research, which consists mainly of the long-term community-based textile craft group, ManCraft, situated at Charnwood Arts, Loughborough. My initial decision to work with men stemmed from the findings of a previous research project, conducted between 2012-2014 with a mixed gender textile craft group. From the participants' feedback I identified issues concerning anxieties relating to asking for help, fear of making mistakes, and difficulties initiating and sustaining communication and dialogue within a mixed-gendered group. The difficulties identified through this practice informed my decision to work with vulnerable men for the purposes of the PhD.

The ManCraft participants' relationship to and use of craft materials and processes was initially the main focus of this research and my earlier journal entries reflect this focus. As the practice progressed, I recognised that dialogue and communication were becoming more frequent in my observational journal. The ManCraft participants unfamiliarity with textile craft processes facilitated concentration in the acquisition of skills, leading to an uninhibited dialogue. The practice has further demonstrated that crafting alone might not be beneficial to vulnerable men's wellbeing, despite previous research showing the wellbeing benefits of solitary crafting for women (Mayne 2016, Dickie 2011). While textile

craft materials and processes have not been eradicated, focus has shifted to consider craft as part of a social process through which dialogue and communication is facilitated. For example, in workshops the sharing of memories and stories based on participants' experiences have been enabled by textile craft processes and materials. The shift in focus from crafting as the sole source of the therapeutic effect to instead considering it a facilitatory tool through which other therapeutic activities are produced has resulted in my advocacy for a relational understanding of the therapeutic process. Textile craft processes are no longer considered the sole source of the therapeutic effect, rather the relationship between craft and dialogue and the importance of dialogue to participants' experiences of wellbeing are emphasised as part of a multi-layered understanding of the therapeutic process (Parr 2012).

Discussions in this paper focus on the complexities of wellbeing, specifically how ManCraft participants' perceptions of wellbeing have informed my understanding of wellbeing as a relational process. I focus on one significant exchange in a ManCraft workshop to problematise alternative approaches to wellbeing which favour processes of acquisition and 'self-responsibility' of wellbeing (Sointu 2005: 255), advocating instead for a processual and social understanding of wellbeing (White 2010, Chambers 1997). By involving ManCraft participants in identifying significant wellbeing practices this research validates, legitimises and values the views and opinions of their lived experiences. This inclusive approach to the practice is significant to the participants' perception of themselves as able and their perceived state of wellbeing. This is important because several of the participants identify as having Asperger Syndrome, defined as 'a life-long developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others' (The National Autistic Society 2017, n.p). I begin by briefly detailing my practice methods and rationale for positioning the practice within the field of Arts for Health and Wellbeing. In the section titled *Exploring wellbeing through practice*, I will discuss participants' understanding and examination of wellbeing. I draw on these discussions from practice to examine the uses and limitations of alternative theorisations of wellbeing covering three specific strands of wellbeing theory, as follows: (a) component-based or compartmentalised approaches prominent in social sciences and psychology, (b) psychological wellbeing, specifically notions relating to individualisation of wellbeing and (c) wellbeing as processual, a perspective which stems largely from the fields of sociology and human geography. I will conclude by defining how the practice has led to my definition of wellbeing as a social and relational process involving notions of 'responsible wellbeing' (White 2010; Chambers 1997). Throughout this paper I will draw on my observational journal/diary, written at the end of each workshop, as a source of evidence. These written accounts of the exchanges in the workshops are indented and italicised in the body of this paper to distinguish them from other literary sources. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Methodology and methods of practice

I situate the ManCraft practice primarily within the field of Arts for Health and Wellbeing, a growing field of practice and research which promotes engagement in participatory arts and creative activity to enhance individual health and wellbeing (Jackson 2012). Arts for Health and Wellbeing projects tend to adopt facilitatory and participatory methodologies, where individuals are regarded as active agents who can create their own values and determine a meaning to their life. The practice element of this research actively diverts from reducing participants to their vulnerabilities and places them at the centre of the research as artists and co-researchers through my adoption of Person-Centred Approach (PCA). PCA was initially established by psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1995) as a specific approach to psychotherapy, and later advanced into Participatory Design by researchers and textile

practitioners Glazzard et al. (2015). PCA is a developing mode of inquiry, the central tenet of which is to advocate for the rights of the participant to discover their own directions (Kettley et al. 2015). A significant aspect of PCA for this research includes valuing what is important to the participants, 'not to society's or any expert's view of how they should be.' (Kettley et al. 2015: 1102). Other significant aspects of PCA I identify include recognition of the importance of a facilitatory agent within the therapeutic process (Nelson-Jones 2000), developing a non-judgemental environment (Glazzard et al. 2015; Briggs-Goode et al. 2016), and the importance of communicating and being heard (Rogers 1995).

Prior to establishing the main ManCraft group in June 2016, I ran several pilot workshops at pre-existing creative arts groups in Leicester and Loughborough. These workshops provided me with the opportunity to trial my chosen methods including textile crafting, a dialogical approach to facilitation and the use of an observational journal. I identified that participants responded well to the dialogical approach as it gave them opportunities to discuss the workshops in an open and trusting environment where they felt listened to and unhindered by direct questioning and/or questionnaires. The project was structured in five phases: 1. Satellite workshops at pre-existing groups, 2. Pilot of weekly workshops at Charnwood Arts, 3. ManCraft established as part of Charnwood Arts' wellbeing programme, 4. Exhibition, 5. Future planning and Autonomy.

One of the aspects of the practice that I have found interesting relates to my role within the practice as arts facilitator. The role of the arts facilitator is complex but is generally understood as a form of enabling, assisting and supporting the creativity of others (Prospects 2016). The extract below demonstrates how the roles and relationships between researcher and researched developed and changed over the course of the practice.

4th April 2017

*We were getting confused with drawing on the back of the fabric and flipping it
– it would be the wrong way round.*

*Kyle must have explained it to me at least three times, he became the teacher, helping me
to understand how we could make it work.*

*Kyle realised when I was trying to draw the second one, and making a right pigs ear out of
it, that we could flip the first shape and use it as a template to draw around.*

This extract exemplifies the fluidity of the roles and relationships between researcher and researched, whereby participants gained a sense of autonomy and ownership of the group when they began to lead creative problem solving during the workshops. This exchange demonstrates the importance for arts facilitators to recognise when to withdraw assistance and allow participants to take control. The arts facilitators' ability to adapt to scenarios and situations fluidly in this way allows the research to be a collaborative and cooperative process, whereby participants become co-researchers (Kettley et al. 2015).

Exploring wellbeing through practice

Wellbeing has been studied in a variety of disciplines including, psychology, philosophy, social sciences, medical humanities, and human geography. Each discipline presents its own ideas about the nature and origins of wellbeing and consequently offer different focuses, approaches, definitions or conceptualisations, making wellbeing a complex multifaceted concept (Dodge et al. 2012; Stewart-Brown 2014). To explore understandings of wellbeing in more depth I draw on an extract from my

observational journal which records the use of mental health specialist Mary Leamy and colleagues' theoretical framework CHIME, which identifies the components and processes of personal recovery in mental health (2011). This framework was chosen for the distinct overlaps with wellbeing research (Leamy et al. 2011; Aked et al. 2008), the inclusion of aspects that are open to interpretation and its use in previous critical reviews of the contribution participatory arts make to mental health recovery (Stickley and Sawyers 2018). ManCraft participants were introduced to the five wellbeing indicators, *Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment* (CHIME) on the 10th and 17th January 2017, and were used in a mind mapping exercise as a catalyst for discussion. Participants used the mind maps (figures 1 and 2) to capture ideas and responses as to how these categories might improve their wellbeing and were asked to consider activities/actions they engage in that link to the categories. The process of unravelling what CHIME might mean to participants, initiated a development of their understanding of it through discussion with each other.

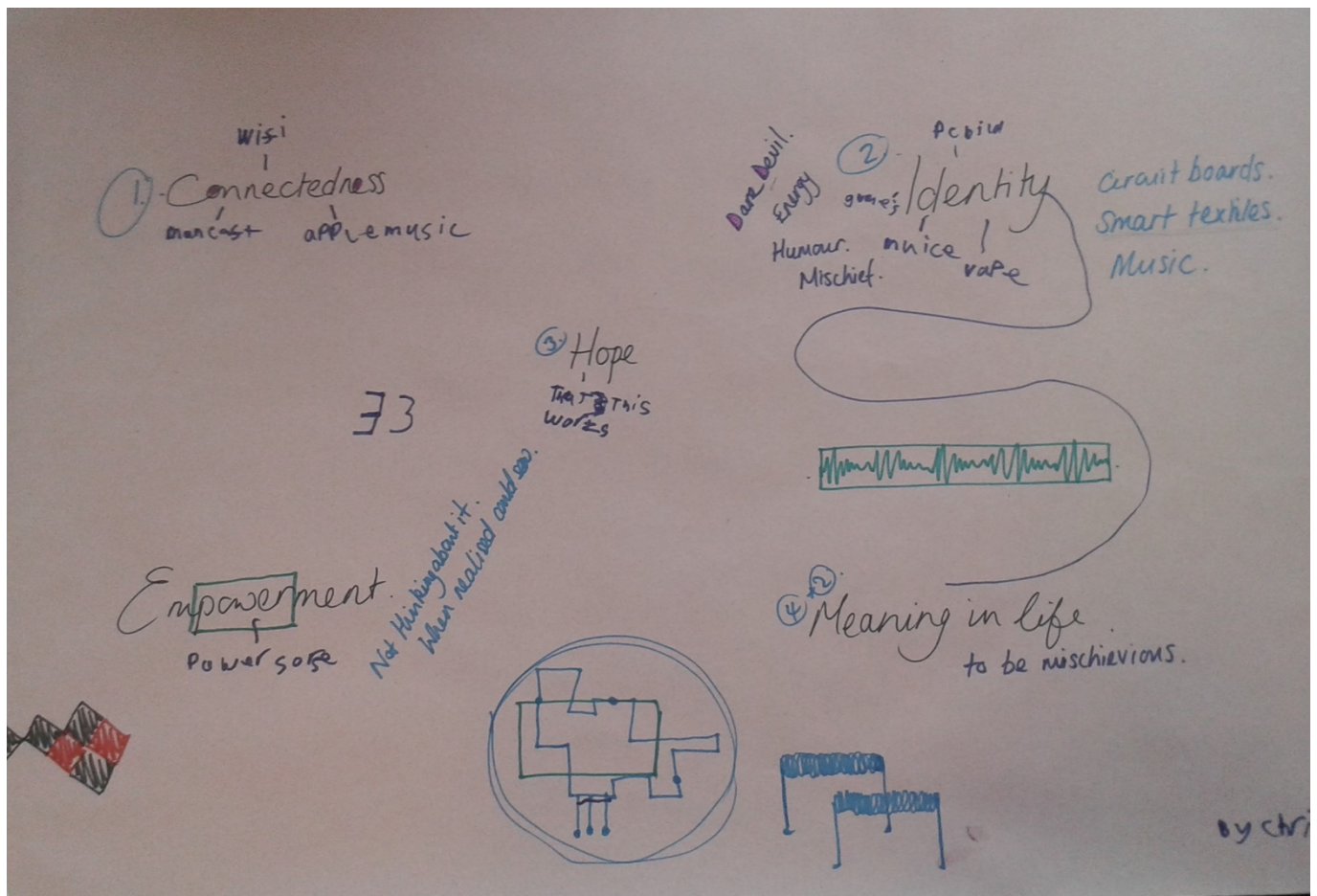


Figure 1: Kyle's Mind Map, 2017.

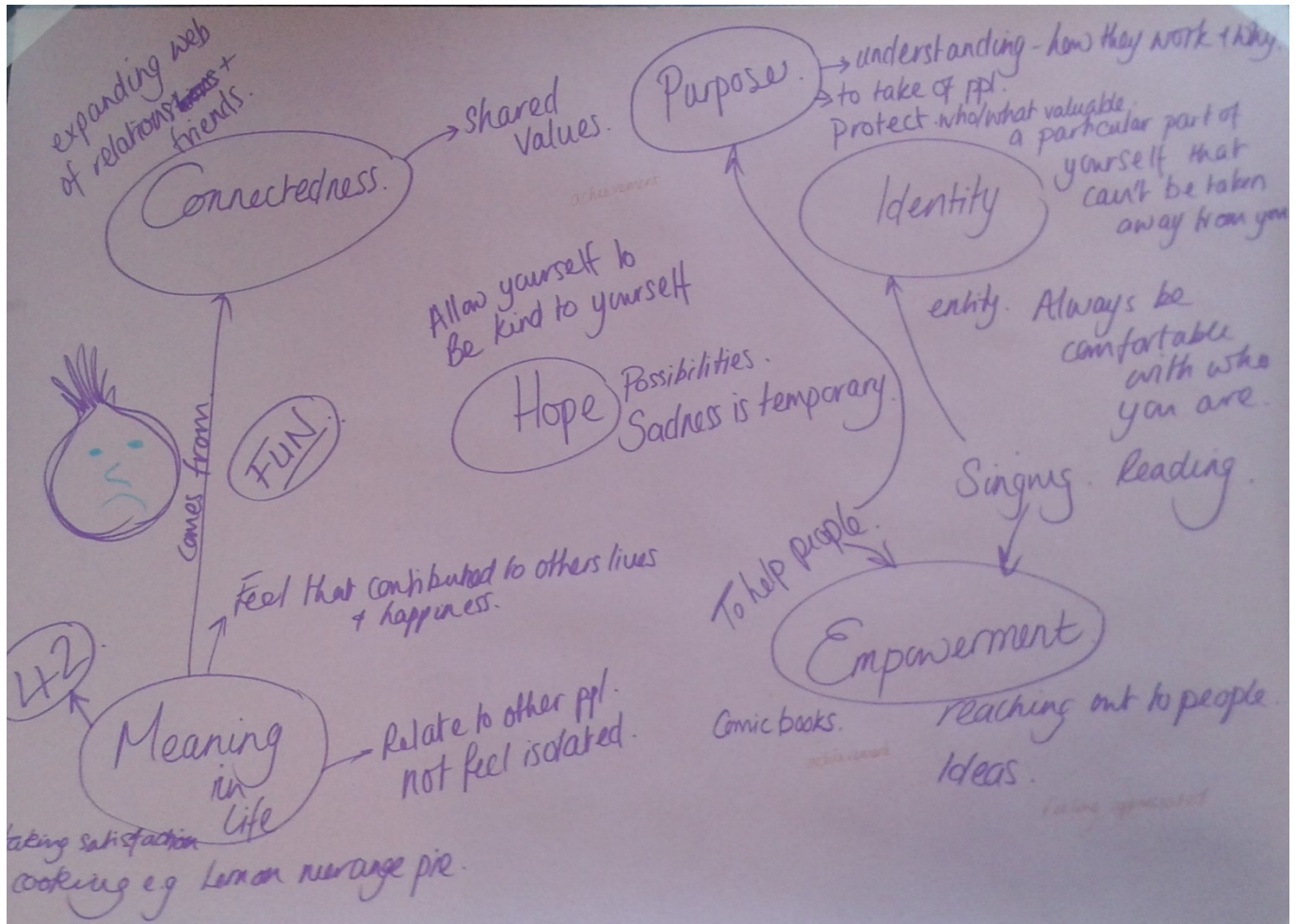


Figure 2: ManCraft Participants' Mind Map, 2017.

The extract below is used as a means of illustrating my argument that shifts the focus from the individual acquisition of wellbeing and foregrounds relationality and interaction instead.

17th January 2017

I recall that last week Kyle provided very literal responses to the headings, where 'WIFI' and 'ManCraft' signified connectedness, whilst 'Power Source' provided empowerment. But rooted through these literal interpretations was an underlying theme of mischief, mayhem and technology. I anticipated further literal responses from the others but was surprised to find that Stan's contributions in particular were well considered...

Connectedness, seemed to provide an easy route into discussion and Stan responded beautifully in his own unique way to define how 'expanding the web of relations and friends, and having a sense of shared values' adds to his sense of connectedness. Beginning with the heading Connectedness also allowed discussions to flow into the other headings, as Stan explained how Meaning (in life) comes from connecting with others, 'it's feeling that you can contribute to others lives and happiness, relating to other people and not feeling isolated'. His interest in other people continued to dominate the topic of conversation as superheroes flew into the mix with regard to Empowerment. 'Helping people' and 'reaching out to people are empowering actions'. Like superheroes, who are powerful but use their power to help people all the time. 'It gives me a purpose too, to help people - that should be a heading'.

The overall theme emerging from the mind map discussion was the significance of Connectedness to the ManCraft participants' experiences and understandings of wellbeing. Being and feeling connected to others, outwardly seeking opportunities to connect with others, helping people and reaching out to people as well as contributing to others' lives were actions that featured frequently in the participants' verbal discussions of wellbeing. The discussions on CHIME allowed me to draw out the most significant aspects of wellbeing theory for this specific group of individuals, which relate to:

- Connectedness – contributing to others lives and happiness as well as forming meaningful social bonds;
- Positive Identity – as relational, being developed through interaction with other people, materials and places rather than what a person has or is labelled as being/having;
- Purpose – having a clear purpose in life that can provide one with a goal and hope for the future;
- Empowerment – increasing ones' sense of agency and autonomy which allows individuals to feel as though they can contribute to ones' community.

I was also able to make additions to the framework as a result of the practice and ensuing discussions:

- Skill – having increased/developed language and practical skills, leading to feeling empowered;
- Achievement – achieving goals, such as completing artworks, trying out new techniques and exhibiting add to an increased sense of self-worth, confidence, and desire to engage.

The mind maps and consequent discourses in practice led me to develop a customised framework which collates the significant determinants of wellbeing, identified by ManCraft participants as Purpose, Connectedness – Empowerment, Achievement, Skill and Identity, giving the acronym PC-EASI. Drawing out the significant determinants of wellbeing in this way presents a more personalised framework for this specific group of individuals and a useful resource for analysis and evaluation of the practice. It is important to note that these headings are not in any linear order or order of significance, they are considered relational in nature, where engagement in one action will inform and impact on the other headings whereby wellbeing is constantly in a state of flux and formation akin to processual theorisations of wellbeing (White 2010).

Skill is often undervalued in the literature on wellbeing, with creative processes often being described in terms of their therapeutic effects over any other aspect (Corkhill 2014; Reynolds 2000, 2004; Riley 2008). The addition of Skill to this framework aims to emphasise its importance to wellbeing more broadly. Skill is understood in this research as relating to craft skills as well as improved language and social skills. Although not overtly mentioned by the participants in the mind mapping activity, I identify that improved craft skills give the participants a positive identity as artists and designers, intervening and overriding previous identities linked largely to issues concerning deficit, diagnosis and life struggles (Reynolds and Prior 2006). Further to this new positive identity, the concentration required to engage in the craft processes alleviate the pressures of communicating with others, so that communication flows more readily through the participants (Corkhill 2014). This relationship between crafting and improved language and social skills means that participants' identified issues concerning socially prescribed expectations in dialogical encounters have been less challenging. The continued acquisition of new skills has increased participants' self-perceived ability and led to new ideas, experimentation and more ambitious projects being attempted. For example, figure 3 shows Kyle

experimenting with incorporating found objects, figure 4 shows Eric learning a new stitch (blanket stitch) despite previous aspersions as to his ability, and figure 5 shows Kenny experimenting with templates, pattern matching and layering of fabric.



Figure 3: V8 Engine, 2017.

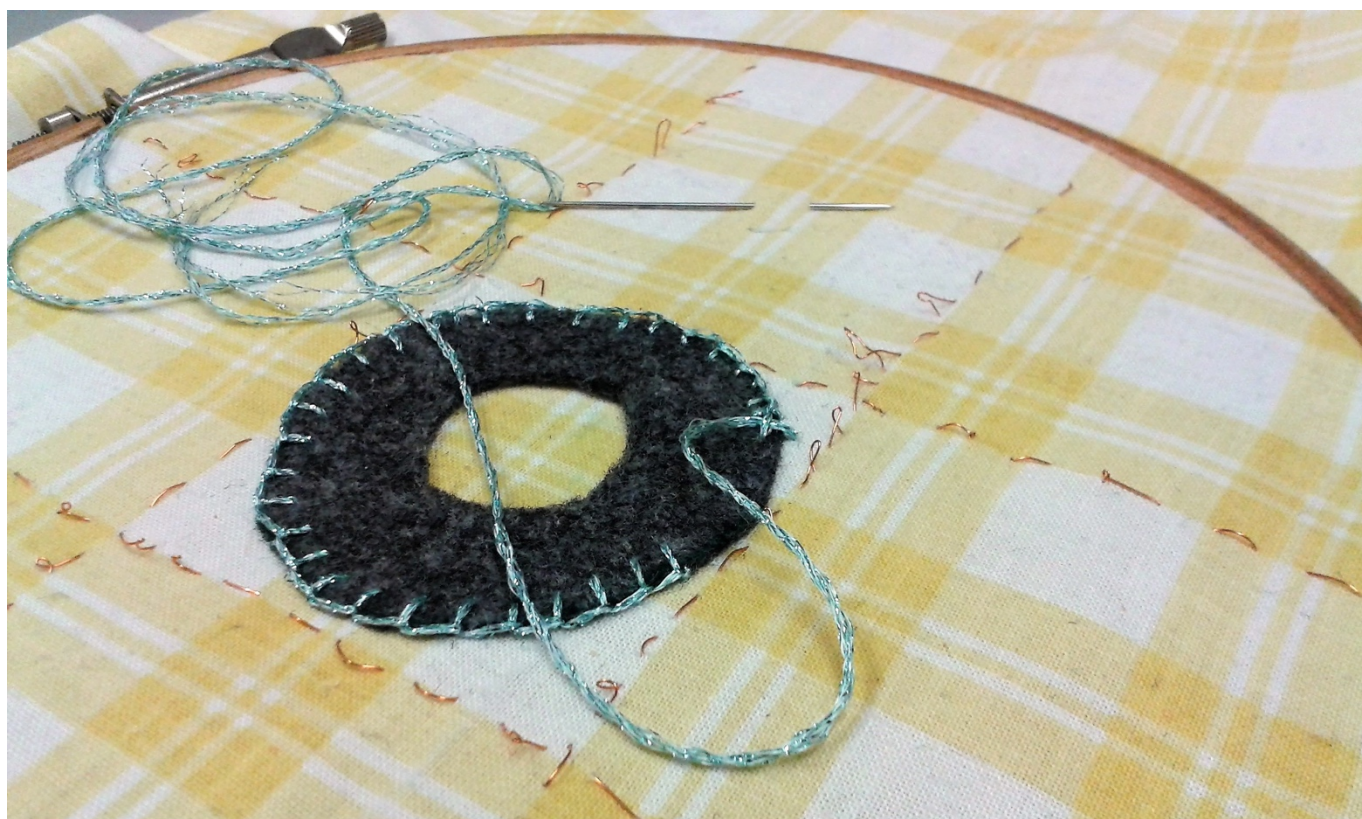


Figure 4: Noughts and Crosses, 2017.



Figure 5: Morals, 2017.

Uses and limitations of wellbeing theory

The participants' discussions and response to the CHIME headings in practice have allowed me to examine the uses and limitations of alternative perspectives of wellbeing discussed below.

Compartmentalisation and relationality

The ease with which participants were able to begin discussion utilising the headings of CHIME demonstrates the reason for the success and continued use of compartmentalised approaches to wellbeing. Component-based approaches break the complex concept of wellbeing down into more manageable chunks. These chunks, sometimes referred to as 'indicators', 'dimensions', 'components', 'determinants', and 'influencers' (Aked et al. 2008), broadly refer to factors in life that affect wellbeing. Wellbeing indicators can include a broad spectrum of elements both external to the individual, such as environment, work, family, money and education, and internal factors such as mental health, emotion and interpretation of events. Component-based approaches are favoured by policy because the breaking down of wellbeing into its constituent parts make the concept less wieldy, more structured and easier to measure (Stewart-Brown 2014; Atkinson 2013; Aked et al. 2008). The practice illustrates that for some participants interpretation of the headings was difficult, as illustrated in the extract below:

10th January 2017

We looked at empowerment last.

Kyle: 'and that means? You have to dumb it down to my level'.

Me: 'what makes you feel as though you can do things?'

Kyle: 'doing them' he laughed.

Kyles' statement that you have to *dumb it down to my level*, demonstrates difficulties in terms of understanding the abstract headings and further highlights the complexity of the process of understanding wellbeing in practice. The separation of wellbeing determinants also became a limitation when discussion became more in depth, leading to frustration as participants tried to map the correlations between the headings, evidenced in the lines drawn across the maps in figures 1 and 2. The participants' frustration demonstrates that, although useful theoretically to make wellbeing a less wieldy concept, in practice wellbeing is more fluid and complex and must take into consideration the relatedness of the differing aspects and determinants of wellbeing, supporting a relational understanding of wellbeing. Despite these difficulties, beginning with a compartmentalised approach in the ManCraft practice made it possible to develop a co-produced understanding of wellbeing.

Individualisation and commodification of wellbeing

A common feature of both component-based and psychological approaches to wellbeing is that they share a common understanding of wellbeing as a quality that adheres to the individual (Atkinson 2013; Bradburn 1969; Sointu 2005), where wellbeing is considered an individual experience and any external impact on wellbeing is not a result of what has happened to the individual but rather how the individual perceives what has happened (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The concept of individualisation focuses wellbeing as internal to the individual, located, managed and maintained within and by the individual. Wellbeing thus becomes 'a process of internal management and the object of personal responsibility' (Atkinson 2013: 140). This individualised approach to wellbeing is contentious as it presents several issues pertaining to oppression and control of individuals through increased self-responsibility of wellbeing, yet it also presents certain positives whereby individuals are viewed as decision makers with choices, preferences and the ability to gain greater agency over individual wellbeing. I suggest this self-management of wellbeing can be useful in terms of health care, where increases in individual self-management of wellbeing sees a decrease in seeking medical care and a reduction in medical expenses and health service resources, however it can equally lead to what I term 'over-responsibilisation' and to issues of low wellbeing being dismissed through blaming the

individual (Atkinson 2013). Victim blaming occurs as a result of failure to maintain individual states of wellbeing, which in an individualised approach can be positioned as ‘failure of responsible citizenship’ (Atkinson 2013: 141). To exemplify and problematise this further I draw on a specific scenario in the practice:

11th July 2017

As we were finishing up for the day Kenny was annoyed at his progress and dismissive of how much he had done during the session, reprimanding himself for not being more focused. Concerned for his wellbeing and able to see his progress from a position of objectivity I directed him back to his work. We looked over each stage he had gone through during the session, how he had built on both his knowledge and his artwork, Kenny began to realise how much he had achieved in the session.

Kenny: ‘that would explain why it went so fast, and I was having fun, and we all know what they say about fun’...

Kyle: ‘how time flies when you’re having fun’.

Kenny: ‘and I love this, I love doing it’.

Although the extract relates to a specific scenario involving crafting we can use the events to develop an analogy that reveals why increased internalisation of wellbeing can be problematic in practice. Kenny’s perception of his achievements for the workshop were linked to negative emotions, such as despondency and unproductiveness. If this scenario is likened with the ‘over-responsibilisation’ of wellbeing, then Kenny’s wellbeing is challenged by his own expectations and being ‘too hard’ on himself. As sociologist Eeva Sointu states, wellbeing then ‘disappears with the onset of unreasonable *personal* expectations’ (Sointu 2005: 266). This is where the importance of social interaction is evidenced, as it interrupts to reframe the initial negative response based on *unreasonable personal expectation* to transform it into a recognition of one’s achievements. In this case, Kenny learning from the arts facilitator how his efforts are perceived by others.

Wellbeing as a social process

As a result of ensuing discussions with participants in practice, wellbeing in the context of this research is understood as processual and relational as conceptualised by development scholar Sarah White (2010, 2017). Recent critical engagements in the notion of wellbeing as processual extend from both sociology and human geography. Underlying much of the human geographical perspectives of wellbeing is the realisation that space and place matter to experiences of wellbeing (Andrews 2018). This notion is incorporative of spaces of social interaction (Ettema and Smajic 2013), work and/or leisure spaces (Little 2014), suggesting that wellbeing is rooted in everyday life, ‘as the emergent and fluctuating effects of materiality, discourse, practices, techniques and affective intensities’ (Schwanen and Atkinson 2015: 99). What is particularly interesting to White’s conceptualisation of wellbeing for this research is the addition of a collective dimension, building on Robert Chambers’ concept of responsible wellbeing (Chambers 1997).

Responsible wellbeing

The frequent inclusion of morally conscientious actions such as *helping people and feeling like you can make a contribution to others lives* in ManCraft participants’ explorations of wellbeing through practice, has led me to foreground notions of responsible wellbeing being significant to their understanding and experiences of wellbeing. Personally, the most defining feature of responsible wellbeing, based on participants’ discussions, is the inclusion of a ‘sense of responsibility towards

others as an aspect of individual wellbeing' (White 2009: 7). This acts as a counter-weight to the emphasis on the self.

16th May 2016

Kenny mentioned today that he would like to be a fireman. He likes to help people and if he couldn't work in community arts, which is his main wish, then he thinks he could see himself as a fireman – if he can just get over his fear of heights.

This extract is significant as it illustrates Kenny's drive to help people, which is so strong that he is willing to aim for a career that forces him to address his fear of heights, and a job that puts him in dangerous situations. This suggests that helping people is such a strong driver in his wellbeing practices, that putting oneself in adverse circumstances is preferable to not being able to help others. The participants' strong desire to help others suggests that being able to contribute to the community and more specifically, in the participants case, being able to contribute to other people's sense of wellbeing, is a strong social driver of participants' chosen wellbeing practices and equally that it has significant impacts on their individual sense of wellbeing. Drawing on evidence from the PADHI group in Sri Lanka, Sarah White suggests that 'people accordingly experience themselves positively when they feel they are making a contribution to others' wellbeing.' (White 2010: 7). ManCraft participants' determination to help others suggests that their understanding of wellbeing has a more collective orientation than the leading theories in UK literature, which are dominated by notions of individualisation (Ryff and Keyes 1995; Bradburn 1969). Wellbeing, through notions of responsible wellbeing, becomes a process of sociality rather than related to acquisition of desirable ideas and objects, countering identified issues of commodification. Wellbeing becomes less a practice of self-maintenance and more about refocusing ones' attention outside of the individual, and by reorienting one's gaze, individual wellbeing is likely to improve counter to individualised approaches to wellbeing which place greater onus on the individual finding ways they can acquire wellbeing. Responsible wellbeing brings our attention back to the everyday interactions and encounters, encouraging a re-engagement in the embodied social interactions of the everyday.

Summary

The ManCraft practice has provided valuable insights into the therapeutic effects of crafting on vulnerable men's wellbeing and has provided further unforeseen valuable insights into more complex concepts such as wellbeing and the therapeutic process. As a result of ensuing discussions in practice I have come to understand wellbeing as processual and relational in nature. The participants' engagement in the CHIME headings has led to several developments including the PC-EASI framework and the advocacy for notions of responsible wellbeing as important to individual wellbeing. This inclusion of a sense of responsibility towards others, counters identified issues of individualisation and commodification of wellbeing by turning it into an active process of interaction with others. As a result of the ManCraft practice this research champions the importance of everyday encounters and interactions as a way of improving wellbeing actively without provoking issues of affluence and over-responsibilisation.

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