

Exploring the role of making, crafting and creative activities for autistic and non-autistic adults

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Editorial comment

In this very engaging study which interweaves her personal story with her academic work, Anna Sheehan explores the views of autistic and non-autistic people who are engaged in crafting and creative activities such as knitting, crocheting, sewing, painting, and baking. An online survey was sent to crafting groups and discussions and a workshop were held with adults who crafted. Questions focused on the benefits, whether these were solitary activities, the length of time spent on crafting and on the emotions and feelings experienced. Anna makes the point that crafting is largely a female activity and that many autistic women in this sample and elsewhere, would fulfil the DSM 5 diagnostic criteria for having restricted and repetitive behaviours. However, crafting may not be viewed as such, as it is not seen as unusual, or questions may not be asked by clinicians about the intensity or function of crafting. This may then lead to missed diagnoses. This may have been true for those in the autistic group as only 24 out of 45 participants had a formal diagnosis of autism.

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Conflict of interest

The author was a member of the crafting communities from which data were obtained.

Introduction

I have made things for as long as I can remember, my earliest happy memories being of learning to knit, sew, crochet, macrame and embroider rather than playing with friends or family outings. As a small child, as well as teaching me to knit and spending many happy days 'crafting' with me, my mother used to attend a holiday craft club with me where we made, among other rather unusual items, a large 'cloth sculpture' crib scene which still makes an appearance every Christmas.

Last year, at the age of 58, I finally received an autism diagnosis. Despite believing that the likely cause of my sensory and communication differences was autism, I remained convinced on the day of the assessment that I was a fraud.

To the best of my knowledge I had never exhibited the rigid and repetitive behaviours and special interests (RRBI's) which are one of the central criteria for an autism diagnosis (DSM-5, APA, 2013). Fortunately, the practitioner who carried out my assessment was sufficiently experienced to recognise that my interest in creative activities, knitting in particular, served the same purpose. From learning skills and crafts with my mother, I graduated to knitting from dawn to dusk as a teenager and taking my needles on the beach, in the car and inter-railing with my boyfriend in my twenties. Being invited to a party excited my interest more in the opportunity it afforded for creating a special outfit (usually from sheets, charity shop purchases or lining fabric) than in the event itself. During university holidays I

would knit for nine hours a day. Whilst this did not strike me as unusual at the time, I now understand that viewed through a neurotypical lens, my special interest in craft went beyond that which would be considered 'normal'.

My diagnosis led me to wonder whether creative activities might be indicative of RRBI's, traditionally ascribed a low cultural value (Lampitt Adey, 2018) and too often regarded as dysfunctional (Milton, 2017; Cook and Garnett, 2018). Had knitting, crochet, crafting, or even other traditional women's domestic work such as cooking and cleaning been perceived in academic research or in diagnostic tools as typical autistic female special interests? Could the apparently 'normal' nature of traditional female activities such as craft be a contributory factor in the late diagnosis of women (Morgan-Trimmer, 2022)? If so, how do repetitive female activities fit into, and affect, the lives of autistic people?

Literature review

A thorough search was made of Google Scholar and Web of Science for papers relating to the role of knitting or making for autistic people. The findings demonstrated the dearth of academic research in this area, the only references to knitting being occasional comments on autistic females' special interests (e.g. Morgan-Trimmer, 2022; Cook and Garnett, 2018). Therefore, no articles were excluded which referenced autistic people's crafting, making or creative activities.

Typing the same search terms into Google, however, yielded a rich variety of websites, blogs and social network groups for autistic knitters, such as [madaboutknitting.wordpress.com](https://www.madaboutknitting.wordpress.com) and autisticprofessor.com/auti-craft. The National Autistic Society's 'Now I Know' campaign which features late diagnosed autistic women, includes a photograph of Dawn, surrounded by her knitting paraphernalia. She describes her relationship with knitting thus:

"...more than simple pleasure. It is very relaxing in stressful situations... it's a way of tuning out other things that might be bothering me on a sensory level. It's very rhythmic with counting stitches!"

autism.org.uk/what-we-do/campaign/our-new-campaign/now-i-know-campaign/dawn-s-story

The value of making and crafting

Whilst there is a paucity of research relating to autistic people and crafting, numerous studies have examined the value of knitting and making to mental health and overall wellbeing in the general population. Writers extoll the value of making, arguing that participating in some form of creative activity on a regular basis can improve mental health as well as the quality and even the length of life (DeBenedette, 2021; Magsamen and Ross, 2023; Mayne, 2016, 2018, 2020; Corkhill et al., 2014; Burt and Atkinson, 2012).

Corkhill et al. (2014) utilised the term 'therapeutic knitting' (p39) to reflect its meditative nature. A questionnaire sent to 3,514 members of an online knitting community indicated the most common reasons for knitting were the perceived psychological benefits of relaxation, mood enhancement and distraction from pain. Participants also reported improvements in cognitive ability and mathematical and design skills. Whilst data relating to respondents who suffered from depression or chronic pain were obtained, none were reported from autistic or neurodivergent participants.

Later or missed diagnoses of women

It has been argued that one of the reasons that autistic girls or women have been missed or diagnosed later than boys and men is that they are more likely to have 'typical' special interests such as knitting and crafting, baking, fashion, animal care, celebrity (Gould, 2017; Hull, Petrides and Mandy, 2020). However, it is important to explore the nature, purpose and intensity of their interest when making a diagnostic assessment. For example, Morgan-Trimmer (2022), an autistic adult who loves cooking and knitting suggests that knitting garments for strangers is typical of this phenomenon.

Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (Criterion B, DSM-5, APA, 2013)

Whilst the diagnostic criteria group restrictive and repetitive behaviour, interests or activities together, these are qualitatively different (Grove, Roth and Hoekstra, 2016). Crafting involves a significant element of repetition. Knitting for example is, essentially, repeating the same physical action. Temple Grandin (2008) maintains that autistic special interests for adults are more about the accumulation of

external knowledge and expertise than simply the joy of repetition. I suggest that knitting and craft can fall into the categories both of repetitive behaviours and special interests, affording the opportunity to participate in soothing yet socially acceptable repetitive behaviour, and, if desired, accumulate knowledge and expertise. I always have a straightforward piece of knitting available which fulfils the need for a repetitive action whilst allowing me to hold a conversation or watch television. More complicated pieces, which require my full attention, are reserved for occasions when I am alone, with the time and physical and mental energy to commit fully to the project.

The value of special interests

Much can be garnered from the writing of autistic authors. Temple Grandin's life changed when she started to channel her intense interest in cattle chutes into what was to become a life-long career and area of expertise (Grandin and Scariano, 2005; Grandin, 2008). Liane Holliday Willey (2014) ascribes magical powers to autistic special interests and Luke Jackson (2002) speaks of the intensity of his special interests, stating that when he is fascinated by a subject, everything else is literally insignificant. His level of excitement is so great that he has to talk about it to the exclusion of all else and is oblivious to the reactions of his listeners.

The concept of monotropism, that autistic people concentrate their processing resource on one thing to the exclusion of all else (Murray, 1992; 2018), describes the restricted range of interests within autism which enables autistic people to reach a state of flow (Milton, 2017). Flow research began in the 1960s in the study of intrinsically motivated activity. Csikszentmihalyi et al (2014) observed that artists became absorbed in their work to the point where hunger, fatigue and discomfort were disregarded and defined flow as:

"The state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." (p.228)

Lampitt Adey (2018) relates the concept of flow to knitting, suggesting it intrinsically links process and product.

Aims of the study

This study was designed to assess the motives for and impact of knitting, crafting and creative activities for autistic adults within the real and virtual communities of which I am a member. These were compared with the experiences and views of non-autistic adults also within my communities.

Methods

An online survey was sent to autistic adults from my local community and from autistic and neurodiverse Facebook groups of which I am a member, with responses received from across the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere. It was then sent to non-autistic creatives from both communities. In addition, I talked to two local autistic adults (with support workers present) who had higher support needs and were not able to complete the survey as well as conducting a workshop with members of the local Autistic Adults' Social Club to explore the role of crafting for them. These data enriched the survey responses. All participants were given an information sheet explaining what would be required of them and how the data generated would be used. They also completed a consent form, were allowed time to withdraw their input and guaranteed anonymity.

Survey questions

The first section requested information on geographical location, preferred creative activities and gender. The second section pertained directly to autism:

- If you have a formal autism diagnosis, did you discuss your making/ crafting/ creative activities at your assessment?
- If you consider of your crafting/ making/ creative activity as an autistic special interest, can you give any examples of occasions when this has taken on special significance or interfered with other parts of your life?
- Has anyone ever suggested that your crafting/ making/creative activity is surprising in its intensity or focus?

The third section of the survey comprised two questions with Likert scale ratings. I generally dislike Likert scale questions. When in hospital, I always wonder how it is possible to quantify pain on a scale of one to ten without a base rate with which to relate it. Wishing to avoid placing others in this confusing situation I originally intended to make all the survey questions open. However, after several months of studying relevant literature and posts online relating to knitting and making, I concluded that for certain questions, a Likert scale would be useful.

The two questions using a Likert Scale were:

- Why do you take part in making/ crafting/ creative activities?
- How do you feel when you are participating in your making/ crafting/ creative activity?

Participants were asked to rate each of seven responses to these two questions, the options being drawn from the literature relating to the motivations for, and benefits of, crafting (Mayne, 2018; Yair, 2011; Corkhill et al., 2014) and online posts and the comments such as those shown in *Figure 1*.

The fourth section of the survey related to the frequency of making and whether the participants engaged in creative activities with other people (either in person or online) and, if so, what they gained from this. Finally, they were given an opportunity to report anything else about why they engaged in creative activities and how doing so made them feel.

The findings

Survey responses

A total of 45 questionnaires from autistic adults aged 18 and over were returned over a seven week period. The questionnaire was then sent online to non-autistic people from my physical and virtual communities and the survey was closed once 45 responses had been received. Before presenting the data, it is noteworthy that, on average, the autistic participants spent over 18 minutes completing the questionnaire, whereas the non-autistic group averaged less than eight minutes. This disparity is further reflected in the length and depth of the answers given - the autistic

Figure 1: Examples of online posts which guided the Likert rating scales

I've added a fern to my recent crochet plant obsession. I find it so relaxing doing the same stitch over and over again.



I did a thing! I've been hyperfocused on moss walls for the last few months and have been working on this big piece since early January.

It's finally complete and I think I want to make like 10 more! The texture of the moss is so rewarding and relaxing to work with - it's like touching what clouds *should* feel like!



responses being more elaborate than their non-autistic counterparts. All participants were aware that I was studying the impact of, and motivation for, crafting for autistic people, therefore non-autistic participants may have felt less motivated to spend time on the questions. This disparity should be borne in mind when comparing the responses of the two groups.

Location

The majority of respondents in both group lived in the USA, followed by the UK and Jersey, with individual representatives from several other countries.

Gender

While the majority of both groups were female, the autistic cohort was more diverse, nearly one third of participants identifying as non-binary, gender fluid or transgender (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 3: Gender of the non-autistic participants

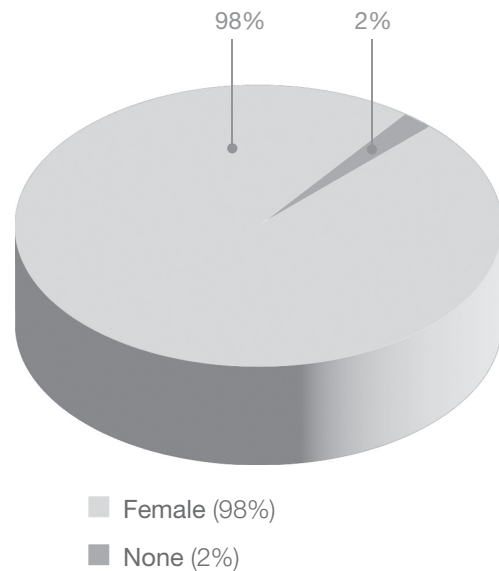
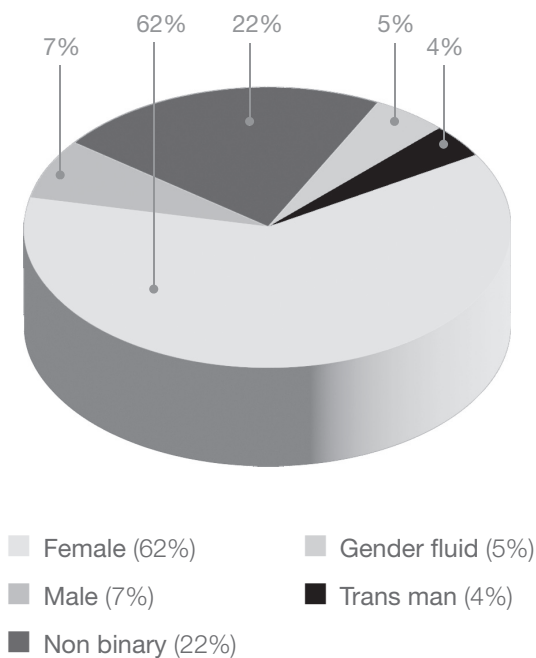


Figure 2: Gender of the autistic participants



The variation in gender diversity between the autistic and non-autistic groups may indicate that a larger proportion of autistic people identify as gender-diverse and transgender than in the general population (Warrier, Greenberg, Weir, Buckingham, Smith, Lai, Allison and Baron-Cohen, 2020; Sala, Pecora, Hooley and Stokes, 2020; Manjra and Masic, 2022). Extensive research is now being conducted into the intersectionality between autism and gender identity (Kourti and McLeod, 2019; Moore, Morgan, Welham and Russell, 2022). The National Autistic Society feature autistic women and non-binary people in their ‘Now I Know’ campaign (www.autism.org), Wiskerke, Stern and Igelstrom (2018) look at the camouflaging of repetitive movements in autistic female and transgender adults (2018) and some social media groups, for example, Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network, are only open to female and gender diverse members.

The gender disparity may, however, merely relate to the different Facebook groups from which the participants were recruited. Although I approached more general artistic communities, the majority of the participants in my non-autistic sample were from Knitters Gonna Knit, whereas participants in the autistic sample came from several general

autistic and neurodiverse artist and fibre artist groups. More research is necessary to determine whether the gender difference is due to the fact that more women knit as opposed to carrying out a wider range of creative activities and, were I to have had submissions from non-autistic people across a broader range of artistic media, a more diverse gender representation might have emerged.

An interesting discussion around gender and sexuality within the autistic community also arose in the co-creation workshop, when one of the participants explained her symbolic use of a spectrum of colours to describe her affiliation with the LGBTQ+ community. Two of the six workshop participants identified as gender diverse.

Preferred crafting activities

The respondents were invited to give as many answers as they wished regarding their favourite crafting/ making/ creative activities (see Figure 4).

It is noteworthy that the autistic participants reported significantly more activities than the non-autistic respondents, one saying that she engaged in:

“All of them. Whichever I have access to the supplies for.”

The top activities for the autistic cohort in order of frequency were those in the broad categories of painting, knitting, sewing and sculpture, and for the non-autistic group knitting, sewing and painting.

Frequency of participation in craft/ making/ creative activities

Whilst a similar percentage of both groups reported engaging in crafting weekly and several times a day, significant differences pertained in daily engagement and consistency. Twenty-two percent of autistic, compared with only nine per cent of non-autistic respondents reported inconsistency in the frequency of their crafting. For many within the autistic cohort, the intensity of their participation depended on whether they currently had a special interest or hyper-focus on one particular craft.

Figure 4: Preferred crafting/making/creative activities

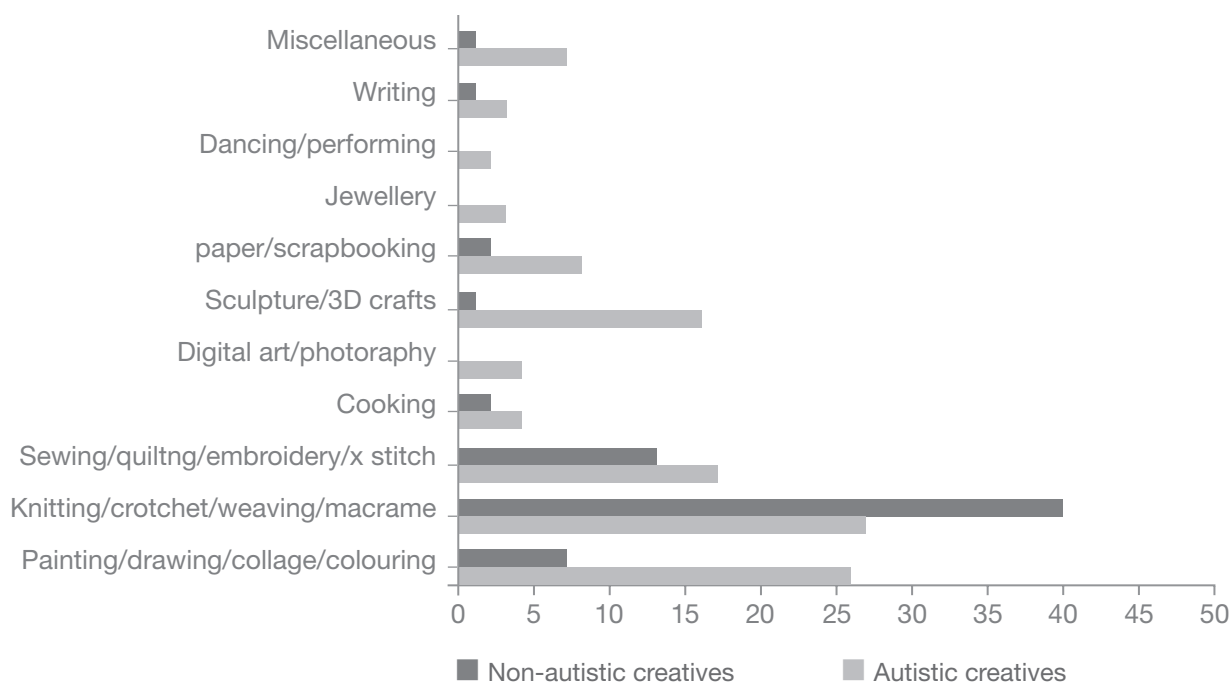
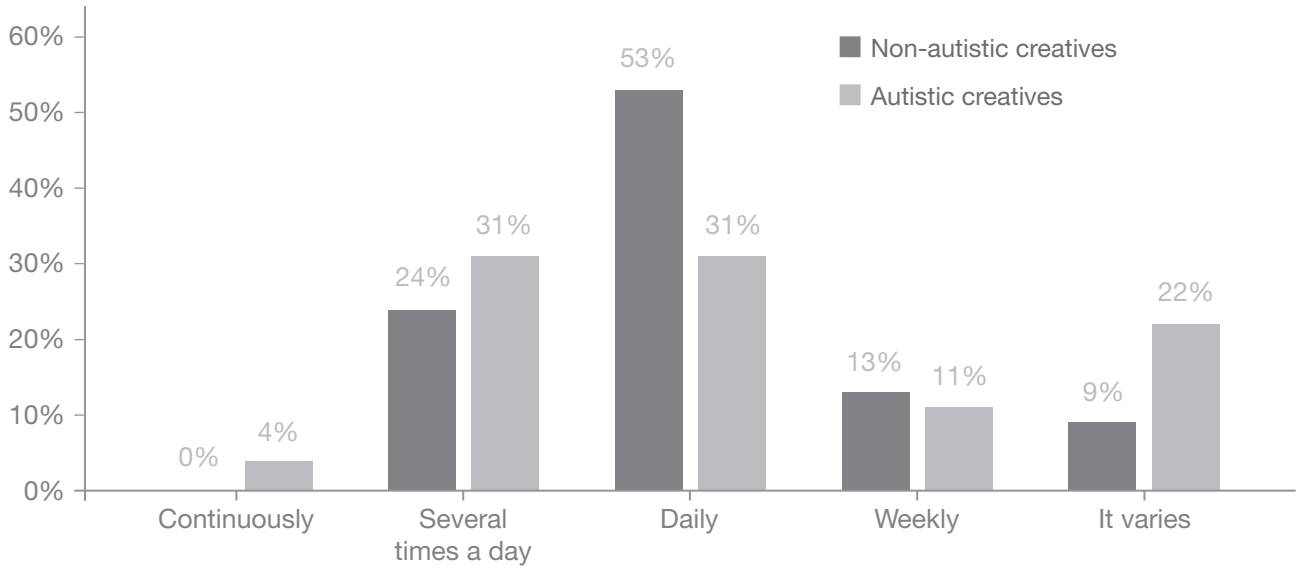


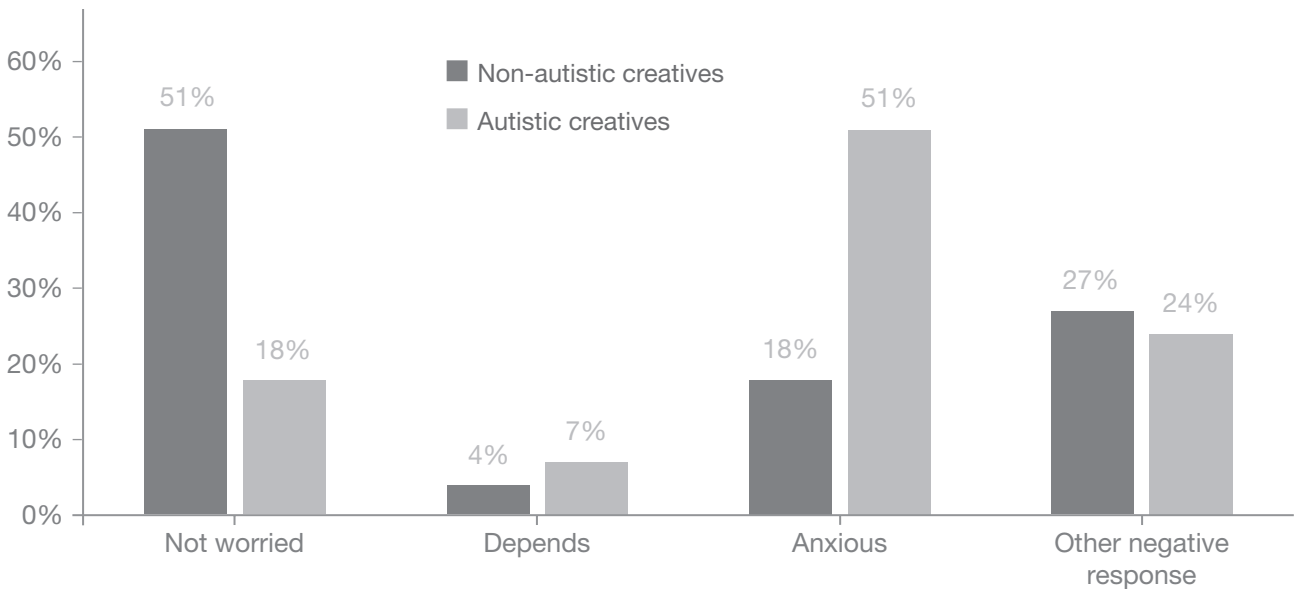
Figure 5: Frequency of participation in crafting activities



Emotional reaction when not able to engage in crafting

Over half of autistic participants said that they became anxious when unable to engage in crafting, whereas this did not worry the majority of the non-autistic cohort (see Figure 6).

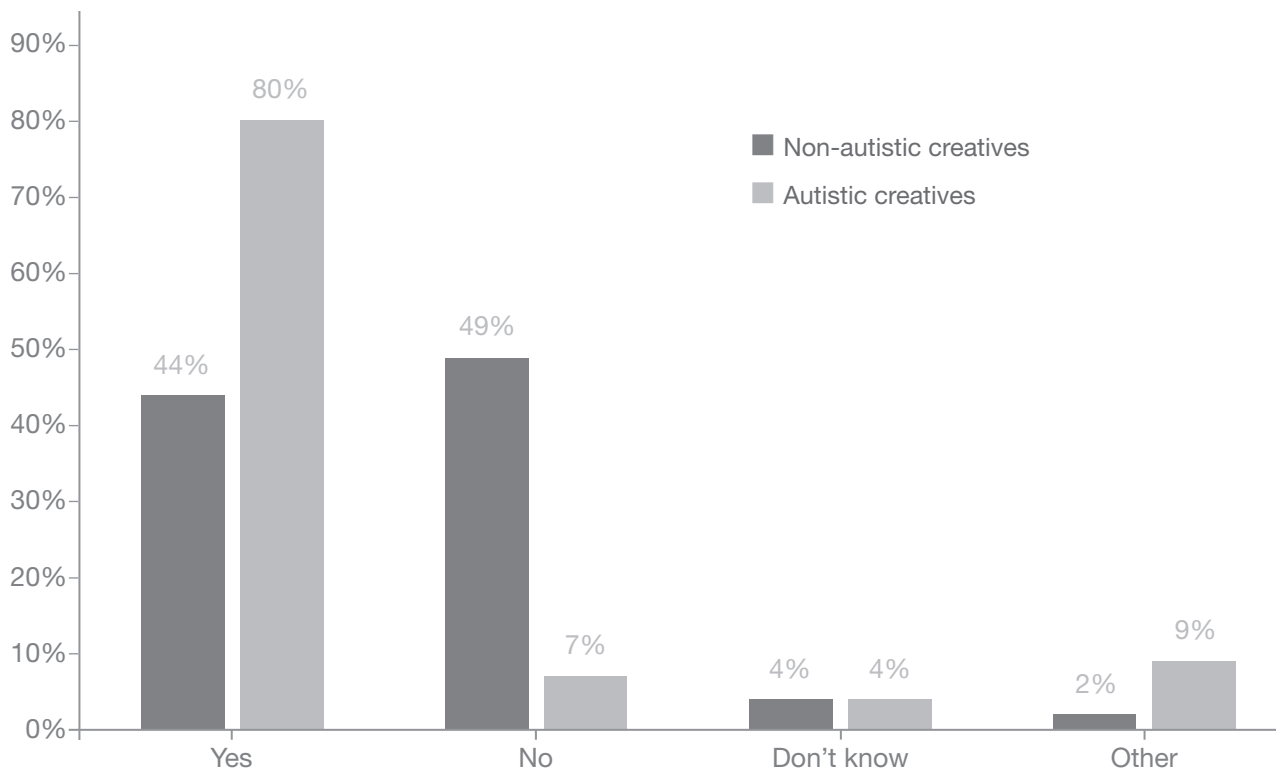
Figure 6: Reaction when not able to engage in crafting



Intensity and focus when crafting

Almost twice as many autistic than non-autistic respondents (80 per cent) said that others had expressed surprise at the intensity of their engagement in crafting (see *Figure 7*).

Figure 7: Comments made by others about the intensity of their focus on crafting



Mention of crafting at their diagnostic assessment for autism

Of the 45 autistic participants, 24 had a formal diagnosis. Thirteen of these said that crafting had been discussed at assessment (see *Figure 8*).

Extent to which crafting has had special significance or interfered with other parts of life

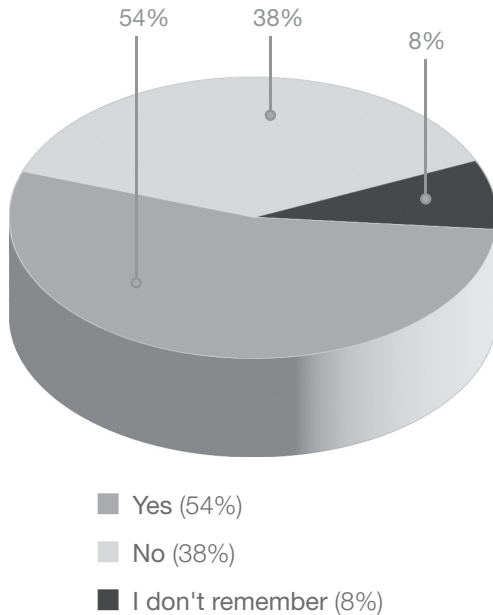
All the autistic participants responded to this question. Positive effects, which will be discussed later, included benefits to their mental health, self-esteem, sensory system and communication. Negative aspects included the impact of hyperfocus on everyday life, including self-care, physical health and work and the financial burden of buying (and storing) materials.

Wharmby (2022) describes forgetting to eat, drink, sleep, use the bathroom or attend appointments while focusing on his special interest. The autistic participants in this study reported similar levels of focus and engagement, sometimes to an extreme degree.

“I’d forget to eat/ drink, use the restroom, stand up, sleep etc.”

“I often forget to eat and drink, and take care of myself while crafting. Sometimes I’ll even get so lost in the stuff I make I won’t sleep for days, without realizing it.”

Figure 8: Participants with an autism diagnosis (n=24) who discussed crafting during their assessment



"I've become obsessed to the exclusion of sleep and eating and everything while researching a new project or tool. One time ... I became so obsessed with a project that I looked up at like 4am and realized I hadn't spoken for over two days."

"I find it hard to remember to eat ... I've gone up to 14 hours with no food and little water due to focusing on my piece."

"I lose a lot of sleep. I have gone 48 hours without sleeping before, to sew. I've only gotten one hour of sleep for a week straight because of baking."

Several of the autistic participants described taking this focus to the point of causing themselves physical pain:

"Absolutely ruining my joints from sitting in terrible positions because I MUST get super close to whatever I am doing, spine be damned."

There were also financial costs reported by some and issues with storing materials.

"There have been many times when I get so into art as my special interest that I spend money I don't have to buy supplies. The supplies pile up for years sometimes before getting used."

"I've spent hundreds of dollars on supplies for projects instead of paying bills."

"More than a few times I've spent money I 'shouldn't' and been in a tight spot."

"Craft supplies take over my physical space."

Participation in crafting with others

Eighty-two percent of the non-autistic, and 69 per cent of the autistic, cohort said they crafted with other people. However, 60 per cent of the autistic participants said they preferred making on their own compared with only 38 per cent of non-autistic respondents. Both groups adduced companionship, a sense of belonging, the social aspect of working together and the benefits of teaching, learning and sharing their achievements as well as the positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. In contrast to the non-autistic creatives, several autistic participants referred to their social anxiety and said this could deter them from participating in crafting groups, even when interested in the activity.

Comments from some autistic respondents, however, indicated that they felt less anxious about verbal communication when crafting with others:

"The ease of conversation ... It feels connecting and healing to be somewhere where you're completely understood."

"Conversation without pressure. You can talk about your projects/ crafting in general and if comfortable deeper conversations."

"It feels very freeing to be able to just be together without expectations for interaction."

“It is a good excuse to talk about my special interest. In day to day life I feel overbearing talking about them because they aren’t most people’s top subject, but in a situation where it is everyone’s focus it actually feels appropriate to talk about it.”

Other autistic participants cited the creative activities themselves as a means of communication and expression:

“Painting has become a safe haven for an autistic person such as myself. It allows me the ability to safely express emotions I have difficulty conveying, and to create a narrative without words.”

“I can relate with people using my art in a way I have never been able to with my words.”

Responses to the Likert scale questions

Participants were asked two questions, each offering seven options on a Likert scale ranging from ‘absolutely disagree’ to ‘completely agree’. Not all the participants responded to every option. Percentages shown are of the entire cohort (n=45 for each group), including non-respondents.

Reasons for engaging in making/ crafting/ creative activities?

The most positive responses within both groups to the question of why they participate in craft related to mental health questions. The most frequent answer within the autistic cohort was “Because making things helps me feel calm” whereas the non-autistic cohort preferred ‘Because making things helps my mental health’. The two groups’ responses to “Because I can express myself through the things I make” closely corresponded, although it should be noted that the autistic responses overall were more extreme.

Figure 9: Autistic participants’ responses

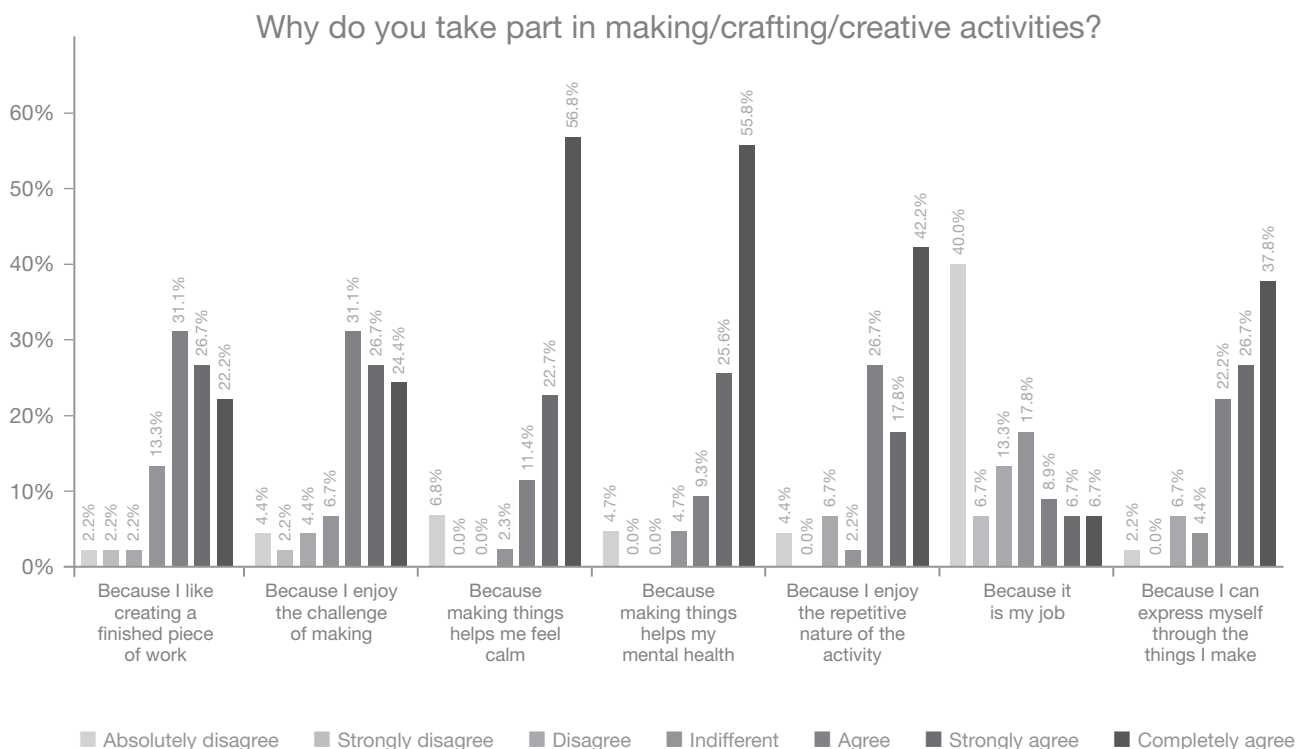
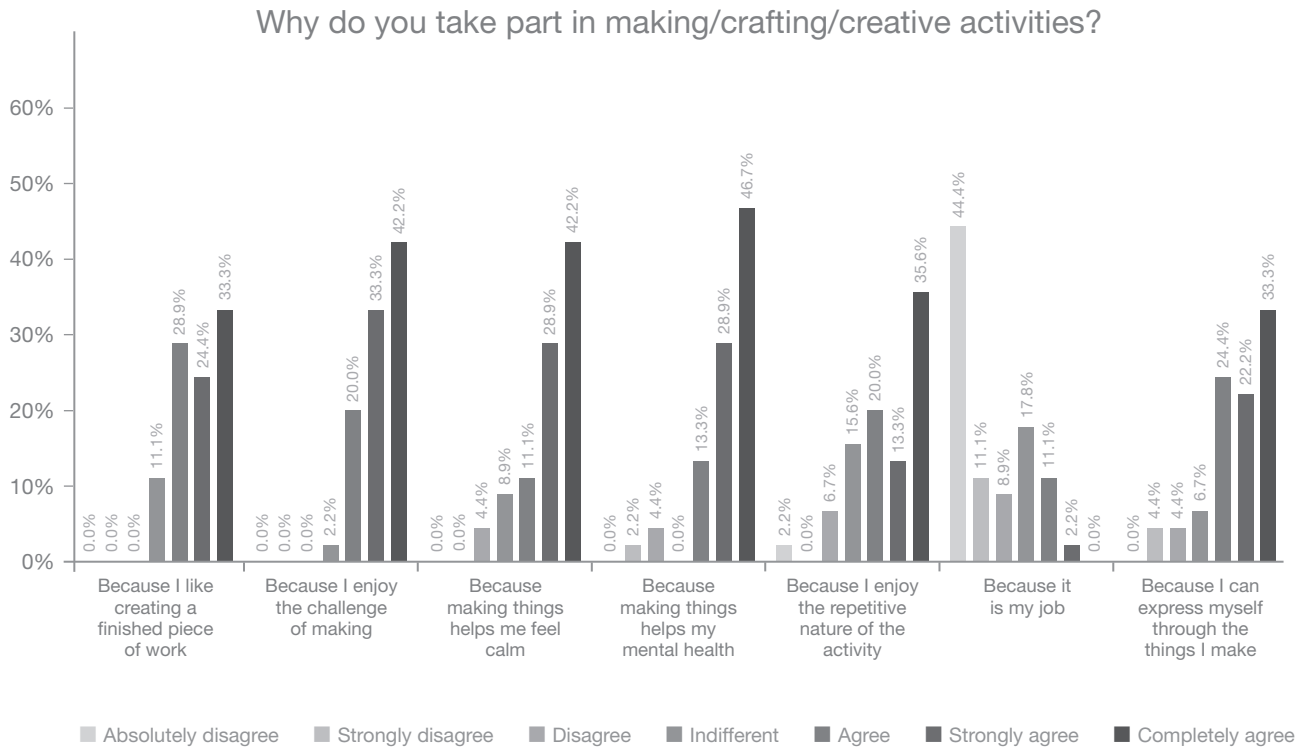


Figure 10: Non-autistic participants' responses



One non-autistic and two autistic participants commented on the benefit of crafting to their physical health (Reynolds, 1997; Magsamen and Ross, 2023). One used making as a pain management technique and another said it helped control tremors caused by medication.

The “Because it is my job” option was presented to ascertain whether there were any professional creatives within the groups. Twenty-two percent of autistic and 13 per cent of non-autistic participants indicated that they gained financially from crafting.

The two cohorts’ responses to “Because I enjoy the challenge” differed significantly with all the non-autistic respondents choosing indifferent or higher. Forty-two percent of non-autistic participants completely agreed that they enjoyed the challenge, compared with only 24 per cent of autistic respondents.

A significant disparity also obtained between the two cohorts with regard to the statement:

“Because I enjoy the repetitive nature of the activity”. Only 13 per cent of autistic respondents said they were indifferent or disagreed, compared with 25 per cent of the non-autistic cohort. Eighty-seven percent of autistic participants and 69 per cent of non-autistic respondents agreed to some extent. Many autistic respondents referred to making as an acceptable, soothing, self-stimulatory behaviour (stim).

Autistic participants’ comments included:

“Watching my hands move in the same way for hours calms me down.”

“The rhythmic nature of it, the repetition with controlled innovation, helps me regulate myself.”

“The repetitive motions satisfy my need to stim, allowing me to do so in a positive and rewarding way.”

“I have been crocheting everywhere I go for decades now, as it is my stim.... I cannot focus if I cannot move my hands.”

Emotions felt when participating in your making/ crafting/ creative activity?

Figure 11: Responses from the autistic group

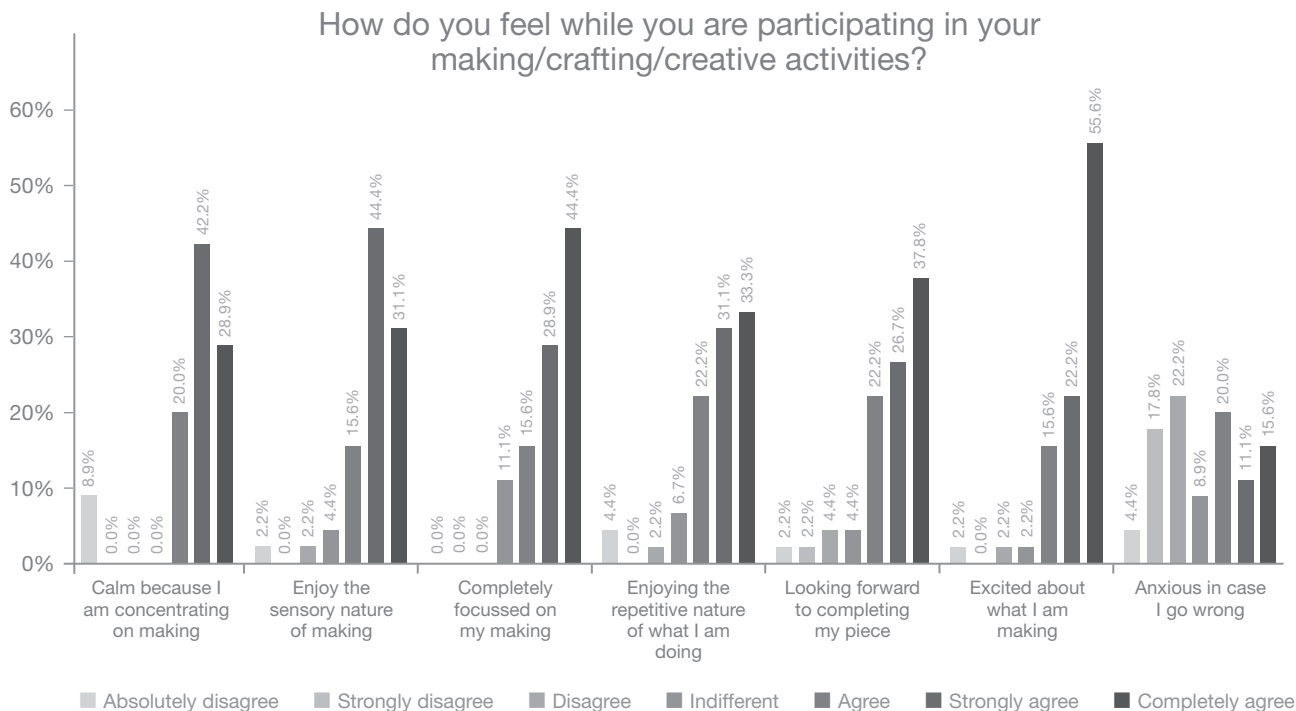
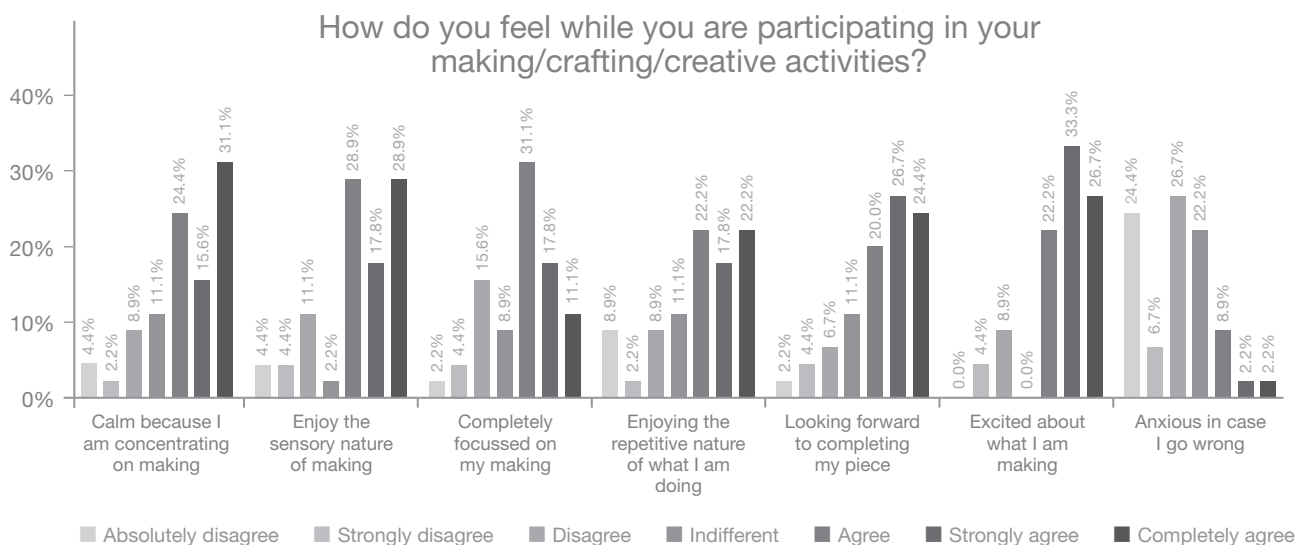


Figure 12: Responses from the non-autistic group



When asked how they felt when crafting, the autistic responses were more extreme. Ninety-one percent agreed, strongly agreed or completely agreed that they felt calm when concentrating on their making whereas the other nine per cent absolutely disagreed. Of the non-autistic cohort, 71 percent agreed to some extent and four per cent absolutely disagreed.

The benefits of crafting and making to mental health and wellbeing are now widely acknowledged in academic research, the media, social media and government alike (Reynolds, 1997; Mayne 2018, 2020; Gordon-Nesbitt and Howarth, 2020; Howell, 2021; Magsamen and Ross, 2023). Milton (2017) maintains that engagement with special interests can lead to a positive state of flow, a view supported by some autistic participants for whom crafting is an intrinsic part of who they are. Autistic participants spoke at length and used powerful language to express the importance of crafting:

“Crafting in general creates a sense of well-being that is not easily come by in day-to-day life.... It truly grants a sense of peace, and in a world that so harshly judges an autistic person’s abilities and even autonomy, it gives me a place where I’m free of judgement.”

“I don’t think I’d live long if I suddenly couldn’t create.... Calm. Centered. Relaxed. Often hyperfocused to where other things don’t attract my attention that would often otherwise overwhelm me. Peaceful. Restful. Even in a challenging project it feels like my safe space.”

“My creative output is intrinsically linked to my mental wellbeing, but I am not always able to pursue the desire as and when it comes up... On the rare occasions everything comes into line, environment, time, mood, resources, etc. That is the place I feel most alive and fulfilled.”

Non-autistic respondents also cited the relaxing and calming benefits of crafting:

“I feel like knitting has been a sort of therapy for me, almost a meditative practice. I have a very stressful job and knitting is calming and grounding.”

“It has proved immensely helpful in fighting the anxiety of hospital testing and other trauma-linked circumstances.”

Unlike the non-autistic cohort, many autistic participants also drew attention to the sense of control, only achievable for them through craft. In addition, some referenced the intensity of pride and validation provided by their making:

“I feel like it’s the one thing I’m good at. Most people don’t like me because I’m ‘weird’. I’m not good at things that most people consider easy everyday activities. But almost everyone says my art is really good.”

“I feel like I can finally accomplish something and create something of value.”

“I feel proud when people like my work, just the slightest bit of praise makes my day.”

While 44 per cent of the autistic participants completely agreed that they were “Completely focused on what I am making”, only 11 per cent of the non-autistic cohort felt the same.

The two groups also differed significantly with respect to the statement “Anxious in case I go wrong”. Whereas 47 per cent of the autistic respondents agreed with this statement to some extent, only 13 per cent of the non-autistic participants felt the same. For most participants, crafting helped induce calm and had positive effects. Some autistic respondents, however, also experienced anxiety and frustration. Wharmby’s description of adoring making things but being “petrified of failing or making mistakes” (2023, p.31) and its potential negative effect on mental health was reflected by five of the autistic cohort:

“Besides feeling calm... there’s of course the accompanying frustration when things go wrong... so I can’t fully say it’s a very calm process.”

“I get anxious about getting it wrong a lot. I also get very cross.”

“If my mood is low as I am prone to depressive episodes I lose my ability to focus and all desire to create, those are the bleakest moments of my life.”

Other benefits of crafting

Both groups referenced the benefits of making gifts and the sense of continuity with past and future through the act of creating articles which outlive the maker. Hand crafted presents gave both the autistic and non-autistic respondents a sense of accomplishment, pride and validation. For some, it was also a way of obtaining an income. There was reference by the autistic cohort to the simplicity and portability of certain crafts such as knitting and crocheting which enabled their use in meetings and family gatherings as well as to the sense that being able to create gave control in an otherwise uncontrollable world.

Overall themes

The autistic responses frequently referenced crafting and making as a special interest, with benefits to mental health, self-esteem, social life, participation in the community and the opportunity to give and share. These were offset by the negative costs: financial, physical, mental, social and sometimes work related. Non-autistic participants were more likely to mention connections with family and women, past and present.

As an autistic creative for whom making has been a life-long passion encompassing many of the themes above, I designed and made a graphic to summarise my interpretation of the results (see Figure 13). Knitted strands representing the weighting of themes emergent from the four data streams, woven together in a tree-like structure, communicate the interaction of the different motivations for, and impacts of, making for the participants. Health (in particular mental health) was the predominant theme within all data streams and therefore makes up the bulk of the 'trunk', into which the negative impacts of crafting drawn from the autistic survey responses are interwoven. The social aspect of making was also apparent from all four data sets, albeit on a lesser scale, with other themes such as communication and giving being common across some, but not all groups.

Limitations of the study and areas for further research

This study was limited to the communities of which I am a member, both online and in person. Caution should therefore be taken in generalising from the data obtained.

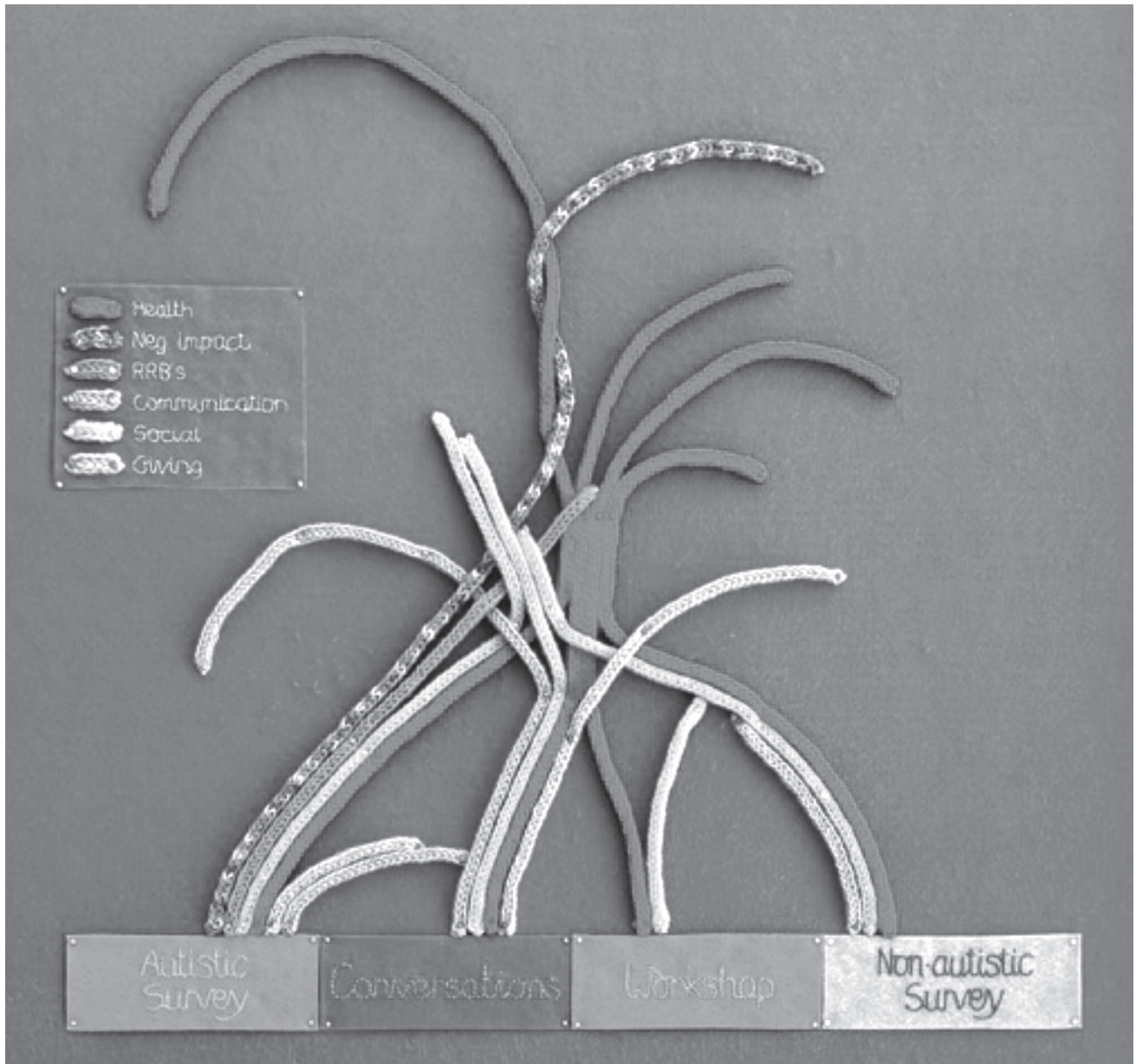
Although my personal experiences formed an intrinsic part of the research, influencing the interpretation and conclusions reached, many of the responses reflect experiences and opinions very different from my own. Four different sources of data were accessed to gain the views of those with different support needs and creative experiences. Whilst this enabled a more diverse range of opinions, it made synthesising and weighting the data more difficult.

Future research would benefit from more facilitated conversations and co-creation workshops. Many of those who participated online wrote at length about their experiences of crafting and making, whereas those with higher support needs did not provide the same level of information. In future, data might also be obtained by observation and discussion. The vast quantity of data received constituted a limitation in itself. For the purposes of this study, I considered the major themes, leaving other interesting subjects which emerged, including the intersections with gender and co-diagnosis, communication, synaesthesia, sensory stimulation and the potential benefits of crafting in groups, for future research.

Concluding comments

I became completely immersed in this ethnographic study on the motivations for, and consequences of, crafting for autistic people. Designing and making a graphic to communicate my personal understanding and interpretation of the major themes gave me a fascinating insight into the way I use craft, not only as an enduring special interest but also a repetitive and soothing behaviour and means of communication. Positive reinforcement from others and the opportunity to discuss the development of the project with members of my family engendered a feeling of pride and shared purpose reflected in many of the participants' responses.

The findings indicate that the motivations for, and consequences of, crafting, making and creative activities are similar among autistic and non-autistic people. All four groups: autistic and non-autistic survey respondents, in person participants and workshop attendees referred to the health benefits of making and the social benefits of

Figure 13: The author's graphic of major themes

shared interests. The opportunity to craft in groups and to share a special interest affords autistic creatives social and educational benefits, engendering a sense of pride and fora for structured communication.

Differences nevertheless obtained between the autistic and non-autistic responses relating to the intensity of their

feelings towards, and involvement with, creative activities. Autistic responses were often more extreme than those from the non-autistic cohort. In line with the well-documented finding that autistic special interests often overwhelm other parts of their lives (Attwood, 2003; Wharmby, 2022) some of the respondents cited hyperfocus and obsessive crafting.

Crafting is physical. While often soothing, its repetitive nature can lead to physical discomfort and pain. I have arthritis in my thumbs from the hours spent knitting but I am unable to stop. Many of the autistic survey participants remarked upon the negative effects of making and crafting on their physical and mental health, financial and familial wellbeing, work and home environments. Nevertheless, crafting as a special interest, repetitive behaviour and self-stimulatory habit were more frequently cited as a positive.

In conclusion therefore, despite the potential negative impacts of all-encompassing interests in craft, making and creative activities, this study indicates that these play an important role in the lives of many autistic people, constituting special interests which are not only socially acceptable but desirable. They can also facilitate social interaction and recognition, engendering a sense of flow, calm and pride. Making enables autistic people to express themselves and communicate with others in a physical, multi-sensory form whilst affording the opportunity for repetitive, self-stimulatory or soothing actions.

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