



## What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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# Time to Reflect: exploring wellbeing, emotional work and research identity following a PhD.

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**Abstract:** This paper reflects on the experience of my PhD in Interactive Textiles for wellbeing and intends to provide ways for other doctoral students to reflect and understand their PhD beyond the data. First I highlight how I managed my wellbeing during my PhD and provide information on strategies which helped me to do so. I then highlight the emotional work which was required to conduct my studies, particularly within Dementia Friendly Communities. Alongside this I explain how my background and previous experience contributed to my overall approach and identity as a researcher. My key learnings from my experience offer ways for future researchers to; Reflect on and manage wellbeing; Reflect as a researcher working on challenging and emotional topics; Reflect on how background and experience influence individual research approaches. In addition, this paper provides key take aways such as training and networking suggestions.

**Keywords:** reflection, emotional work, creative practice, extreme making, wellbeing

## 1. Research Background

With over 944,000 people and 1 in 11 over the age of 65 estimated to be living with dementia in the UK (Dementia Statistics Hub, 2022) designing for dementia is even more important now than it was in 2017, at the start of my PhD. My research identified the importance to provide meaningful experiences and objects to support the wellbeing of those living with dementia and their communities building on the work of Treadaway et al. who stated that playful, personalised, interactive, comforting and tactile solutions that help those living with dementia to live positively are “urgently needed”, and that “those who have the greatest need for excellent design are often the most vulnerable in society” (Treadaway, Kenning and Coleman, 2014; Treadaway et al., 2019).

Using Research through Design (RtD) and a person-centred approach recognising participants as the 'experts' (Marshall et al., 2014), my doctoral research explored the making and use of interactive textiles for wellbeing primarily within two dementia friendly communities in Scotland. It comprised of 3 studies represented by 3 images below; E-textiles; Crafting Connections for wellbeing (Figure 1), Sonic Flock (Figure 2) and Creative Clans (Figure 3).

Study 1 was a collaborative with a fellow PhD researcher which explored the effect textile workshops with the general public (exploring traditional and e-textiles) have on wellbeing) (Nevay et al., 2019; Robertson et al., 2020). Study 2 worked with a Dementia Friendly Community (DFC) in the Outer Hebrides to crowdsource, exhibit and gift a flock of textile birds to care homes throughout the Islands (Robertson, 2019). Study 3 which was the main and final study, worked with 2 DFC in the Outer Hebrides and East Lothian (Robertson et al., 2022). Working closely with these communities, personalised interactive textile workshops and experiences were designed and facilitated. Quantitative data was gathered using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Qualitative data was collected using unstructured interviews and analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis method within Seligman's (2011) 'Wellbeing Theory' PERMA framework: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

This research was conducted with the ethical approval of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee Research Ethics Committee. The data collected during my PhD 'showed that the use and making of interactive textiles can increase wellbeing, enabling social connections, celebrating creativity, and fostering new relationships and experiences for those living with dementia and their communities' (Robertson et al., 2020). My PhD thesis presents one way of helping those living with dementia, their families, and their carers to live full and positive lives.



*Figure 1. Study 1 workshop with the general public constructing traditional and e-textile fabric birds.*



*Figure 2. Study 2, Colourful knitted and sewn birds on the Sonic Flock gifting tour visiting a care home in Uist.*



*Figure 3. Study 3 a participant creates a woven flower from beach waste to add to the Creative Clans craft bomb.*



My research “brought together making, interaction, technology and textiles to enable social connections, celebrate creativity and foster new relationships and experiences for those living with dementia and their communities” (Robertson et al., 2022). Throughout my approach I aimed to build a strong ethos of participation and inclusion within and between dementia friendly communities. I adopted 3 roles to conduct the research; Textile Designer, Design Facilitator and Person-centred researcher, working in a range of ways such as creative workshops, crowdsourcing, craft bombing and care home visits to gain trust, utilise skills, and listen to the participants, communities, and collaborators' needs, this was ultimately shaped by my own experience and understanding which I reflect on below.

## 2. Context

Nartey (2021) highlighted that there are limited papers on the experiences of recent doctoral students, especially those that explore the emotional work as well as the learnings from the specific studies conducted. To fully understand the researcher's experience as a whole, it is important to understand the background and expertise of the researcher as it informs not only the epistemological approach but also the process of the research itself which in turns affects their wellbeing. Reflecting on this can help both the researcher and the reader gain a deeper understanding of their work but also who they are as an individual and as a researcher. A PhD must be conducted in an academic, ethical and professional manner, and for those in the social sciences or world of design it is important as well to acknowledge the emotional drivers and motivation behind the researchers work and approach. A PhD is a personal journey where the student leads (and lives) the project (Tight, 2011, p. 5) meaning it is intertwined with their life for its duration (and beyond). In addition their backgrounds and previous experience shape the PhD journey (Rodgers & Wareing, 2021) therefore each PhD is unique due to the uniqueness of its candidate and to fully build on the research one must first understand the journey of the researcher. Alongside this over 40% of postgraduate students have reported “symptoms of depression, emotion or stress-related problems, or high levels of stress” (Guthrie et al., 2017, p. xv) all of which are intrinsically linked to wellbeing. This has been correlated with researching sensitive topics, lack of work-life-balance, high pressure research environments and a lack of confidence in research abilities (Guthrie et al., 2017, p. xvi). When reflecting on my experience I worked with the (Gibbs, 1988) reflective cycle and subsequently organised reflections into themes. This paper looks to explore how I as a researcher navigated my PhD highlighting how I managed wellbeing, built trust with communities and how my previous experience shaped my approach.

## 3. Managing wellbeing as a researcher

In the literature, wellbeing is conceived as a complex concept that is difficult to define (Dodge et al., 2012). A positive state of wellbeing allows individuals to realise their potential, manage life's daily stress, work productively and contribute to their community (Jeffrey and Michaelson, 2015). Dodge et al. (2012, p. 230) define wellbeing as “the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced”. They highlight that stable wellbeing is possible when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. Defining wellbeing in this way reflects its dynamic nature and the importance of learning and experiencing new things. A PhD is challenging and requires candidates to manage their wellbeing, work life balance and academic pressures (Garcia, 2020).

While I considered my wellbeing throughout my PhD it was not something that I considered in depth beforehand to implement strategies to protect myself from the work and emotional toll it could have. Although strategies exist such as building networks with peers (Tight, 2011, p. 10) 'time-out' following difficult conversations/interviews or taking time to recover with a dog walk (Herron, 2021; Moncur, 2013) no one strategy will suit everyone and a combination is required.

As Rager (2005) suggests if I had considered my wellbeing and what I might need to equip me for the journey ahead at the start of my research I would have been able to implement tools and training earlier and understand the emotional work required on a deeper level. Therefore, if I were to start the process again, I would consider not only the participants wellbeing but also how I might manage (and potentially map or measure) my own from the start. For example, I recognised that physically making things (crochet, knit, taught workshops) for fun and not for work were important to me. I used exercise to reduce stress and counselling to explore not only my research but anything else that was happening alongside my PhD. Support from peers and family was important and can be a useful way of processing the research on an emotional level (Moncur, 2013). At The University of Dundee I founded the first postgraduate society with the student union. Alongside this I started to become part of a network of peers within my school who supported (and continue) to support each other throughout their research, write up and careers. During our PhD we would meet frequently both socially and professionally, following graduation our careers and paths have taken us across the UK but we still keep in touch to ask for advice. As a network we also organised and delivered the EAD PhD symposium as part of the EAD conference at The University of Dundee.

Ultimately there is no right answer to managing your wellbeing during your PhD but considering this as early as possible would help to implement strategies and map changes. On reflection I believe the below strategies helped me to navigate this:

**Network building:** Forming a Postgraduate Society and working with others studying a PhD in my school to form a close support network.

**Research studio:** Having an inspiring space to work in with access to basic facilities and peers, the research studio at Duncan of Jordanstone college of Art and Design (DJCAD) was a shared space with students and research staff allowing access to more senior researchers and providing a feeling of belonging to a community.

**Attending training:** I utilised training to gain relevant experience and information from the Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities (SGSAH), The University and external sources such as Rowena Murray's Endgame course (Anchorage Education, 2023).

**External Opportunities:** I applied for a SGSAH PhD internship which ultimately shaped the research and enhanced the experience, connecting me to another community and network.

**Internal opportunities:** I took part in university competition and events such as Enterprise Challenges.

**Collaboration:** I worked with another PhD researcher – this is complicated as your PhD has to be your own work and contribution however working with another researcher on specific projects made the experience less lonely and learning from each other enriched the experience.

**Support services:** I accessed wider University support such as the wellbeing team.

**Funding:** On top of my DJCAD funded PhD I applied for small relevant pots of funding to help me complete my studies such as traveling to the Outer Hebrides and the cost of workshop materials. This included the DEEP working together grant supported by Life Changes Trust (Dementia Voices, 2019).

Balance: I took time out, weekends off and tried to strike the best possible work/life balance – something I am still working on.

## **4. Reflecting on Working with Dementia Friendly Communities**

### **4.1 Reflecting on inexperience**

My research worked with those living with dementia during my studies which added an additional level of emotion and need for empathy and understanding (Branco et al., 2016; Lim & Nevay, 2016; Marshall et al., 2014; Van Rijn et al., 2009; Wallace et al., 2013). Working with those living with dementia was a new experience for me, before my PhD I did not know of anyone living with dementia and therefore learnt during my research about how dementia can affect everyone differently (WHO, 2023).

I threw myself in at the deep end without much thought for how this might effect my wellbeing. For example, my first experiences of those living with late-stage dementia was initial visits to care homes in Stornoway as part of my PhD internship with An Lanntair. These initial visits were not research activity visits but for relationship and trust building to get to know the staff and residents (Robertson et al., 2022). I accompanied the project co-ordinator and a musician to sing Gaelic songs with the residents. I was excited but nervous about the first visit and unsure how I would respond to this visit emotionally having had a variety of emotional experiences in care homes with relatives. Although I had been to care homes previously this first visit was specifically a dementia ward, in a place I didn't know, with people I had just met to sing in a language I didn't understand.

I was also nervous to meet and interact with people living with late-stage dementia for the first time as I was worried I would do the wrong thing, I wasn't sure what would be expected of me or how I should act. I wanted to make sure I was being respectful and not approaching the experience with any preconceptions. If I had considered this at the start of my PhD I would have looked into training activities and events to better prepare myself and widen my understanding of how to approach this. For example a volunteer workshop by the Dementia Services Development Centre which would provide 'information, skills and practical hints and tips that can be helpful when supporting someone living with dementia' (Dementia Services Development Centre (DSDC), 2023). The more I visited the better I got to know the individuals and what was expected, each resident was living with their story, life experience and their reality. I noticed that having an activity like singing or dancing bridged social gaps and anxiety providing a common theme for interaction – these initial experiences ultimately shaped not only the research itself but how I developed a person-centred approach through building relationships and networks.

### **4.2 Building Trust**

Relationship building was a large part of this research, without it I would not have gained trust, networks and the input I had from my participants. Trust can only be gained through spending time with participants within their communities. For researchers this means volunteering with communities, attending relevant events and conferences and listening before doing. By listening to the communities before deciding on the research it allows the participants to shape the project and provides mutual benefit and ultimately investment all involved.

This can be seen in the work of (Branco et al., 2016, p. 642) who highlight that assisting with activities in the year leading up to commencing their research gave them a “*deeper understanding and develop empathy towards different experiences of living with this condition, leading to an enhanced sensibility and ethical awareness on how to work with this group of people*”. Specifically creative activities can “*build trust with residents, families and staff; getting to know the needs, likes and dislikes of residents*” (Lim & Nevay, 2016). Wallace et al. (2013, p. 2619) utilised a co-creation process and stated that input and investment from both designer (researcher) and participant enabled both to “develop a relationship of trust”.

Alongside building trust and relationships with participants, it was important to gain the confidence and engagement of collaborators for example project coordinators, carers or family who can help facilitate research activities. Marshall et al. (2014) highlights that without this investment and trust from stakeholders who are ‘experts’ the whole project can be undermined. This trust can be built in various ways such as volunteering with the community, facilitating workshops or setting projects for the communities to get involved with. For example in Sonic Flock I provided kits for local community to get involved in the research by making a textile bird (Robertson, 2019).

Some of the networks I worked with during my research were from connections I had made previously. Having set up a community interest company – creative East Lothian I made links with multiple organisations one of which later became Dementia Friendly East Lothian, I built on this relationship during my PhD and worked with the group for this research. I explore how my previous experience shaped the research approach in section 5.

### 4.3 Reflections following write up

In the final version of my thesis, I reflected on the events surrounding each study and the emotional work that was required. As mentioned above Study 1 involved collaborating with another researcher and therefore created an enjoyable and less isolating experience. It worked with the general public and therefore did not have as many emotional implications as study 2 and 3. What I learnt from working with Sara and conducting study 1 ultimately shaped Study 2 and 3 building on the methods and approach. Study 2 is where the emotional work started to become harder. It was conducted during a PhD Internship which meant I was away from home for long periods of time in an unfamiliar (albeit beautiful) location. It also involved my first visits to care homes (as detailed above). During the final part of the study; the gifting tour of birds, I visited 7 care homes. Each came with their own challenges and with each resident I encountered a new story. Some of the stories were uplifting such as a lady who taught one of the co-ordinators to knit, and some were harder to process such as seeing family members finding it hard to interact with loved ones.

Study 3 which took place over a longer period of time was the most emotionally draining. The duration from initial relationship building to final activities (over 3 years) meant that I could get to know the participants well but this also came with changes such as participants moving to later stages of dementia and therefore away from the groups which in turn affected their family who started to disengage from the community. In addition, one participant passed away during the research. The illness and death of participants brought home that this was real life, I was working with older people and death was a natural part of that. This was hard to navigate and again highlights the need for this to be considered at the start of the work and strategies put in place to help researchers manage this alongside the strain of daily life.

## 5. Research Approach and Identity shaped by previous experience

I noticed that my approach to this research brought together three parts of my identity and experience: *textile designer*, *designer facilitator* and *person-centred researcher* (Figure 4). This managing of multiple roles is common within practice-based research. Jarivs (1999) states that practitioner-researchers play two roles; practitioner (*textile designer*, *designer facilitator*) and researcher.

My training as a *textile designer* allowed me to think through making, starting with visual research developing ideas into tools such as a flower loom (seen in Figure 3) and later into interactive textiles.

Making was used to think, create and reflect in line with an RtD approach. Prototypes were used to move ideas forward within workshops by acting as social objects (Simon, 2010; Robertson, 2019b) and inspiration for future creations. Ingold (2013) states that “thinking through making, is a process of making and it generates knowledge”. Thinking and reflecting through making is an integral part of design practice Korn (2013). My research practice in all three studies included physically making interactive textiles using a variety of processes and techniques such as screen printing, laser cutting, 3D printing and embroidery using a mixture of traditional and e-textile materials and components.

Building on experience as a facilitator of workshops in previous jobs (such as running enterprise workshops or teaching sailing) I adopted a *designer facilitator* role which linked both my practice and research. This enabled me to think through sharing and listening to participants and stakeholders both when designing the studies and facilitating activities.

I designed and facilitated workshops and events (Workshops for Study 1 and 3, an exhibition for Study 2 and craft bombs for Study 3). Designers can bring a variety of skills to facilitation, such as empathy, listening, observation, and collaboration, bringing stakeholders, ideas and opinions together (Tan, 2012). In addition to this, designers can offer visual ways of presenting and representing ideas.

Alongside these two roles which came from previous experience, the skills I was gaining throughout the process of the PhD allowed me to adopt a new role; *person-centred researcher*. I used this role to think through observing, gathering, analysing and writing. I found the person-centred approach essential for working with DFC's as it recognises personhood, identifies the participants as 'experts' and allows relationships and trust to be built between all involved. A person-centred approach is created through healthy relationships between researchers, participants and in this case, their wider dementia friendly community and builds on (McCormack & McCance, 2016). This additional role shaped my identity as a researcher and as (Nartey, 2021) highlights was built from all of the experience and influences I experienced during the process. This includes both how I navigated my own wellbeing and emotional work but also how I collaborated with the communities.





Figure 4. Researcher roles

## 5. Conclusion

When embarking on a PhD there is lots to consider (Garcia, 2020), this paper intends to build on previous calls for reflection's on doctoral experiences (Nartey, 2021) and highlight the need to consider candidate wellbeing at the beginning of the journey especially when working on sensitive subjects. I have explored how as a researcher I managed my wellbeing and provided suggestions for future students to consider. Alongside this I have reflected on my experience working with those living with dementia and their communities and the emotional work this required (Robertson et al., 2022). In addition, I have presented how my previous experience and the process of the PhD itself shaped my approach ultimately providing a deeper insight into how and why I conducted my PhD the way I did. This offers PhD students permission to explore and reflect on the different elements which shape their research (wellbeing, personal/professional experience and emotional work) which are equally as important as their scholarly understanding of ethics, methodology and data gathering/analysis.

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