

# Self-employment in craft making – a career change towards personal sustainability.

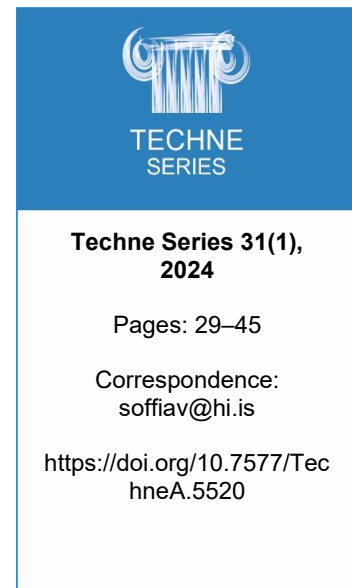
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*Contemporary crafts are experiencing a vigorous revival not only as bearers of cultural heritage and meaningful leisure activity, but increasingly as a career choice. According to UNESCO, the creative economy is now one of the world's most rapidly growing sectors. Recent statistics show that this is apparent in the Icelandic economy. With the rise in precarity of work and challenges in career development, people are seeking meaningful and sustainable careers, as is evidenced by an increase in self-employment and micro-entrepreneurship. The main research question of this study was: How do contemporary craft makers in Iceland make sense of taking up and maintaining financially risky self-employment? Data collection and analysis was therefore focused on motives and shared meaning. The primary empirical data consists of fifteen semi-standardized interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted. The constant comparison method was also applied. Needs for authenticity, autonomy, and self-determination, along with passion for creating, were important motives. Negative career shocks were an unexpectedly common motive. Three main themes were developed to describe how participants reasoned their career choice: a second chance, a natural choice, and an act of agency. The analysis revealed craft knowledge as a valuable resource for participants seeking personal sustainability through self-employment. The study adds to an understanding of the value of crafts and craft knowledge in contemporary society.*

Keywords: craft knowledge, self-employment, personal sustainability, career sustainability, career shocks

## Introduction

Crafts have become a mainstream cultural and economic phenomenon (McIntyre, 2020). The creative economy is now one of the world's most rapidly growing sectors (UNESCO, n.d.b.) and self-employment is common in the field globally (Ratnam, 2014). This also seems to be the case in Iceland. According to economic indicators, self-employment rates are considerably higher in the creative sector in Iceland than in other sectors (Statistic Iceland, n.d.). Accurate statistics on motivations, frequency and economical scope of craft making have not been accessible (Sigurðardóttir & Young, 2011). However, a recent quantitative inquiry showed that 22% of the population stated that they had turned to crafts for income at one time or another in their lifetime (Social Research Institute, 2020). Since craft making is known to be time-consuming and poorly paid labour (Luckman, 2015), questions arise about why so many choose it as a livelihood. The purpose of this study is therefore to gain in-depth contextualised



understanding of how fifteen contemporary craft makers in Iceland make sense of taking up and maintaining self-employment in craft making. This article thus focuses on their expressed meanings and motives aiming to generate some in-depth understanding of their career choice. The study's theoretical background partly builds on the psychology realm within career development theory (e.g. Akkermans et al., 2018; Blustein et al., 2016). It also draws on perspectives regarding sustainability on a personal level (Hunecke, 2013; Parodi & Tamm, 2018) and crafts' potential for self-empowerment and enhancement of well-being (e.g. Corkhill et al., 2014; Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2020).

### **Contemporary crafts**

In this article, the concept of craft stands for practice and artifact (Korn, 2013) as well as both designing and making processes in which experience-based know-how and hand-controlled tools and machines are used (Pöllänen, 2013; Sennett, 2008). Craft makers are those who work with ideology, aesthetics and design in different craft disciplines (UK Craft Council, 2010) and have specialized in knowledge and procedures that are less based on automation or specifications (Sennett, 2008). Such craft knowledge has been defined as a personal and unconscious tacit knowledge embedded in practice, not easily expressed or transmitted in words but rather through experience (Dormer, 1997/2019, p. 228–229).

The role of contemporary crafts is multifaceted, local and global, societal and personal (Niedderer & Townsend, 2018). As such, crafts can foster versatile personal values and multiple meanings (Hemmings, 2018; Kouhia, 2012) and fulfil personal and social needs as well as functional ones (Niedderer & Townsend, 2018). Since industrialization, every craft revival has reflected the present ideology and socio-economic climate and needs no nostalgic romanticising to explain its contemporary relevance (Peach, 2013). In that regard I would particularly like to point out crafts' potential for enhancing personal and social sustainability and slow living. This potential has been considered a counterbalance to the unease people experience in a rapidly changing and stressful society (Mascia-Lees, 2020). Numerous researchers (e.g. Corkhill et al., 2014; Gauntlett 2011; Pöllänen, 2015a, 2015b; Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2020; Richards 2007) have discussed how creative activities such as crafts have potential for multiple psychological benefits, among them self-empowerment and enhancement of well-being. Also, for reducing stress for those who enjoy it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kirketerp, 2020; Sjöberg & Porko-Hudd, 2019) and as a means of self-actualization and experience of belonging (Kenning, 2015; Pöllänen, 2013; Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2020). Peter Korn (2013), an active practitioner himself, has even suggested that 'contemporary crafts, being economically marginal, is created primarily to address the spiritual needs of its makers' (p. 30).

### **Contemporary career development**

Precarious and unpredictable labour markets have made contemporary career development increasingly complex (e.g. Blustein et al., 2016; Guichard, 2013). Trying to keep up with constantly changing demands on competences and feeling controlled by work-life conditions (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2020), people desire careers that can provide a 'subjectively meaningful experience' (Steger et al., 2012, p. 322) and sustainability.

In general terms, sustainability refers to environmental, economic and social aspects of sustainable development. This implies that resources must only be sourced to meet needs in such a way that it does not prevent possibilities for needs to be met in the future (UNESCO, n.d.a.). The concept of human sustainability (Holling, 2001) or *personal sustainability* stands for living in a way that is sustainable for earth, society and oneself (Parodi & Tamm, 2018). Sustainable development overall is mainly defined negatively, focusing on the importance of abstinence and abnegation (Hunecke, 2013). On a more personal level, a lifestyle of personal

sustainability focuses on active change processes motivated by increasing subjective well-being rather than morals. An individual's possibilities for maintaining personal sustainability rely on virtuous agentic participation as a contributor of sustainable culture (Parodi & Tamm, 2018).

As a contributor to a lifestyle of personal sustainability, *career sustainability* is an important concept (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). In this article I draw on Greenhaus and Kossek's (2014) notions that career sustainability, determined by a personal perception, must provide a sense of well-being and security and be successfully integrated into one's personal and family life. As Blustein (2006) has argued, a sustainable career must also give scope for self-determination and provide opportunities for autonomy, connectedness, competence and value congruence, as well as allowing maintenance of authenticity (see also Blustein et al., 2016; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007).

The sustainability of one's career can be challenged in many ways. Among these are chance events that impact individual career trajectories, recently termed *career shocks* (Akkermans et al., 2018; Seibert et al., 2013). These are often unexpected, major career or life events (e.g., job loss, health problems, promotions) (Nalis et al., 2021) that prompt an active reconsideration of one's career (Akkermans, Rodrigues et al., 2021). Career shocks often require development of new career paths (Seibert et al., 2016) and are known to trigger transitions between employment and *self-employment* and entrepreneurship (Akkermans, Collings et al., 2021; Rummel, et al., 2021). Taking up self-employment in your field of passion after experiencing a career shock is considered a form of proactive career crafting towards a meaningful and sustainable career (De Vos et al., 2019).

Self-employment in cultural work as an enabling choice has long had its attraction, being a flexible, often home-based activity (Luckman, 2015). With social media as a marketing tool, the renaissance of the artisan way of production and the handmade (Luckman, 2015; Peach, 2013), and a growing global market (Luckman, 2015; Ratnam, 2014; McIntyre, 2020), self-employment in crafts has for many become a realistic career option (e.g. Gauntlett, 2011; Luckman, 2015; Ratnam, 2014). However, self-employment in the creative sector requires hard work and is considered financially risky (Luckman & Andrew, 2018). In general, a passion for creating is a common motive for building a career within the creative sector, where passion is often valued over financial security (England, 2022). Other well-known positive motives are early interests and experiences (Taylor & Littleton, 2016) with craft making or 'growing up in a creative habitus' (Luckman & Andrew, 2020, p. 54).

## **Method**

The aim of this study was to seek answers about how contemporary craft makers in Iceland make sense of taking up and maintaining such financially risky self-employment. The study thus focused on participants' expressed meanings, experiences, and motives. The purpose was to gain in-depth contextualised understanding of their career choice and experiences thereof.

This article presents findings from research conducted in Iceland between May 2019 and April 2020. It is primarily based on data from qualitative, semi-standardized in-depth interviews (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018) with 15 self-employed contemporary craft makers. The methodological framework is exploratory, based on the epistemological notion of social constructionism (Gergen e.g., 2015) that knowledge is constructed through individuals' interactions through use of language. According to the analytical approach applied, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019), the world is only partially knowable because 'meaning and interpretation are always situated practices' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 6). The analytical process is therefore designed to make the most of the active researchers' inescapable subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA also gives the researcher considerable freedom to apply their desired theoretical background (Braun & Clarke, 2006),

thus offering both flexibility and practical means to construct situated knowledge and deepen the exploration of meanings.

To ensure that participants would be able to provide substantial contributions to the inquiry, they were selected from a purposeful sample (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) or through snowball sampling (Charmaz, 2014). The recruiting criteria were being an established maker and having been self-employed in crafts for five years or longer. All participants were renowned for their craft making in Iceland. Participants, who have been given pseudonyms, included 12 women (Árún, Lísá, Erla, Helga, Hanna, Edda, Dís, Jóna, Svava, Harpa, Sólveig and Anna) and three men (Emil, Karl and Sveinn). Recruitment took place through social media accounts or email. Prior to the interviews, participants were sent some information about the study. Participation was anonymous and agreed to by signing an informed consent form (Crezwell & Poth, 2018). The interviews took place in participants' workshops, which in all cases but two were located at their homes in different locations in Iceland. They lasted from 80–110 minutes and were digitally recorded and stored on a NAGRA Ares-M II device until transcribed and then deleted.

Participants were asked to talk about why they took up self-employment in crafts and what that experience has meant for them. All participants were also asked about their age, years of practice, whether they had any education and/or early experiences in the creative field and what their occupation had been before they took up self-employment. After five interviews had been conducted, direct questions about career shocks and/or experiences of precarity of work were added (see Table 1). Otherwise, an indicative question criterion was used to allow the discussion to develop according to the participants' responses (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

To support the analysis, some information on demographic characteristics, experiences and responses from the interviews is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Summary of relevant background information, experiences, and responses.*

Participant	Prior education in the creative	Creative habitus/early interest	Experience precarity/career shock	Back to school after experiencing precarity/career shock	Age	Years of practice	Prior occupation
Árún	x	x	x	o	38	11	Performing arts
Lísá	x	x	x	x	43	12	Teacher
Erla	x	x	x	o	45	10	Performing arts
Helga	o	x	x	o	44	7	Academic
Emil	o	x	x	o	62	32	Worker
Hanna	o	x	x	o	51	6	Teacher
Edda	x	o	o	-	62	9	Teacher
Karl	x	x	x	o	64	10	Teacher
Sveinn	o	x	x	x	34	5	Worker
Dís	x	x	x	o	41	5	CEO
Jóna	o	x	x	o	53	13	Teacher
Svava	o	x	x	o	43	15	Health professional
Harpa	x	x	o	-	54	18	Worker
Sólveig	x	o	o	-	64	43	-
Anna	o	x	x	o	41	9	Academic

x = yes, o = no, - = not applicable.

The transcribed interviews amount to 243 pages in Word. Quotes have been translated from Icelandic to English by the author. The analysis was conducted in six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2022), partly parallel to data collection and partly afterwards. During phase one, the printed transcriptions were first read individually for familiarization. Since the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2014) was also used as one means of enabling the researcher’s reflection, the reading as well as initial coding was done shortly after each interview. The main research question was kept in mind during initial coding. After comparing each new interview with the prior ones, further data collection was then adjusted accordingly. During the second phase, transcriptions were first read as a whole to get an overview. Then they were read repeatedly while further coded and compared internally with research questions and the theoretical background in mind as some code labels and initial themes started to take shape. Coding was conducted manually, gradually capturing and interpreting the assumptions underpinning the surface meanings. In phases three to five, themes and subthemes were developed, refined, and defined by categorizing codes into larger patterns of meaning. In phase six, the analysis, discussions and conclusions were written up. The process of developing the themes is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

*Phased process of theme development*

<b>Phase 1</b> <b>Initial coding</b> with RQ in mind  (examples of codes)	<b>Phase 2</b> <b>Initial themes</b> developed with RQ and theoretical background in mind	<b>Phase 3 &amp; 4</b> <b>Further development of themes</b>	<b>Phase 5</b> <b>Refinement</b> and definition of themes and subthemes
job loss/reduced work capacity/illness lack of connectedness excess demands/not good enough competence mismatch insecurity/stress not in control unappreciated forced to adapt a second chance	IT1 positive take on experienced precarity of work and unsustainable employment/career	1 Career shock as a blessing in disguise/’an opportunity of a lifetime’	T1  <b>A second change</b>  Subthemes: a. Unsustainable employment  b. Career shocks  c. A blessing in disguise
time mental space reconsideration/purpose I’m a maker/belonging rebirth/well-being	IT2 Having time leading to becoming myself/the one I was always meant to be	2 & 3  Shared notions of identity-and value congruence. A strong sense of belonging and experienced well-being as well as experiences of making and career being meaningful.	T2  <b>A natural choice</b>  Subthemes: a. Identity congruence and connectedness  b. Meaningful making
family of makers role models creative habitus tradition/heritage need for creativity personal knowledge resources (social) connectedness purpose/meaning	IT3 Craft knowledge/family tradition as a resource/a path to follow/a way to live		
long hours financial strain insecurity at first passion self-determination in control	IT4 Hard work, financially risky/straining but worth it/personally sustainable	4 & 5 Shared notions of self-empowerment through active agency.	T3  <b>An act of agency</b>  Subthemes: a. Meeting needs

autonomy Workshops/identity active agency personal sustainability experienced well-being success career sustainability purpose/happiness	IT5 Self-employment as a remedy for the precariousness of work/life	Experienced success/career sustainability/personal sustainability	b. Home sweet home  c. Passion first
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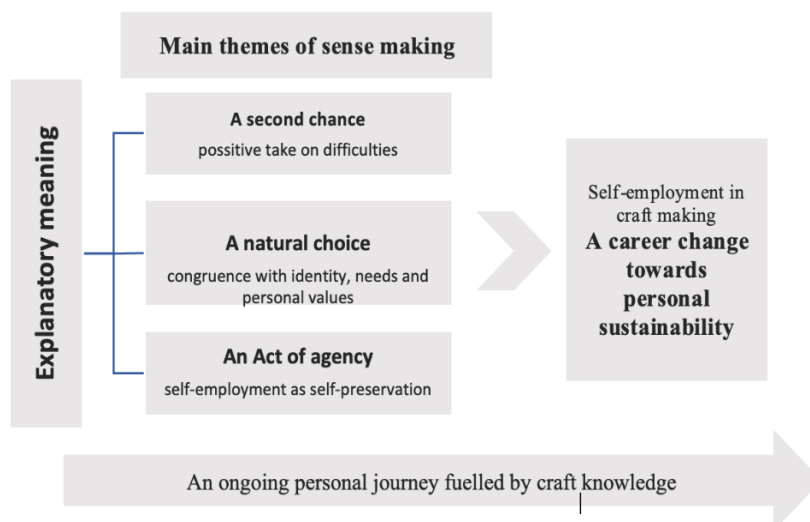
Before I present my analysis, let me explain my subjectivity and pre-conceptions. As an active craft maker raised by craftsmen and craft makers, a love for crafts is embedded in my very being. Prior to the study, I had the romantic idea that participants were a group of courageous heart followers ignoring financial risk. Accordingly, to begin with I did not ask about negative aspects such as financial risk and long hours. However, since I kept a journal to constantly reflect on my approach and interpretations throughout the research process, my subjectivity should not be considered a bias but an asset to the inquiry at hand. It also enhanced my accessibility and enabled me to generate contextualised knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### Making sense of self-employment in craft making

The aim of this study was to gain in-depth contextualised understanding of the career choice of 15 contemporary craft makers in Iceland. Systematically analysing their stories, I looked for participants’ motives and shared patterns of meaning. The three main themes (Table 2) developed in that process show participants shared Explanatory meaning (see Figure 1) that answers the research question. After experiencing unsustainable employment, the craft makers made further career choices actively in accordance to their Identity, needs and values. Their actions come together in balance, featuring self-employment as a career change towards personal sustainability in life and career. That is how participants make sense of self-employment in such a financially risky self-employment as craft making.

**Figure 1.**

*Participants’ explanatory meaning.*



Three main themes and eight subthemes (Table 2) were developed from the data. Main theme (1) A second chance; subthemes: unsustainable employment, career shocks and, a blessing in disguise. Theme (2) A natural choice; subthemes: identity congruence and connectedness, and meaningful making. Theme (3) An act of agency; subthemes: meeting needs, home sweet home,

and passion first. The first main theme and following subthemes explain why participants decided to set ahead for this journey of taking up self-employment in craft making. The second explains how they knew where to set course. And the third describes, as they reflect on their journey, what has made it worth it to take it on.

According to my analysis, unsustainable employment and negative career shocks were the main pushing motives for participants to take up self-employment in craft making. Identity and value congruence became their priority after they had had the opportunity to look within and reconsider their needs and preferences regarding their work and career. Identity congruence and connectedness were the strongest pulling motives. In that context, participants explained how becoming a craft maker was a natural choice that allowed them to fulfil their needs for passion and creativity and to experience competence and connectedness through work that they find meaningful. Also, that despite long hours and financial risk, self-employment for them had been a life-changing self-preserving experience, as it enabled them to also fulfil their needs for autonomy and self-determination. I would therefore like to suggest that in this agentic process, craft knowledge embedded in participants' creative habitus has proven to be a valuable resource, a fuel that has enabled them to keep moving towards personal sustainability and well-being.

### **A second chance**

In this first main theme and its subthemes, it is explicit that employment was unsustainable for participants. It is also evident how their positive attitude under those difficult conditions was key to solving their troubles. In the process of subjectively constructing some meaning from negative career shocks, participants perceived them as a second chance. Losing a job or getting sick gave them an opportunity to pause and look inward for what would better suit their preferences and psychological needs as they further developed their careers.

### ***Unsustainable employment***

The majority of the participants (12/15) in this study describe experiencing precarious and unsustainable employment (Table 1). The unsustainability is characterised by a lack of known essential elements of career sustainability and meaningfulness of work and career. Among them are stressful work conditions, excessive demands and a sense of insecurity. The participants also talked about a lack of personal and social connectedness. Not having opportunities to experience competence and self-determination was a part of their complaints, as we can interpret from the following expert:

I was feeling stuck doing things that were not fitting me, not within my circle of interest, a pointless job that had no meaning other than for me to make the rent. And I also wanted to do something I was good at for a change. (Sveinn)

The missing social connectedness is also apparent, for example, where Edda talked about how work itself had no purpose or meaning: 'I had little in common with my colleagues and the job had nothing to do with my idea of how I wanted to spend my days.' These are some of the factor elements that Blustein et al. (2016) have pointed out in their definition of unsustainable work and employment (see also Blustein, 2006).

In many (9) of the excerpts supporting the theme of unsustainable employment, the feeling of insecurity is evident. Early on, I noticed that the unsustainability of prior employment that participants were describing seemed to largely fall into the category of unsustainability of work from a personal or psychological perspective as Blustein et al. (2016) have defined it, rather than the ILO (1999) definition of a socioeconomic aspect. However, many (7) participants

spoke about stressful conditions and excessive demands. The overall notion in those cases was feeling unappreciated at work while trying to please and fulfil the needs of others rather than your own. In this I recognise what Bergmo-Prvulovic (2020) describes as a feeling of not being in control of your personal life, which is a common challenge in contemporary career development. One example of this would be how Hanna explains that: ‘Being a teacher demands all you’ve got. I had no energy when I came home. Still, it felt as if it was not enough.’ This following excerpt also bears witness to the unsustainability and precarity experienced while employed:

I produced great work, but it was never enough. They wanted me to move, I couldn’t, I had kids in school ... I got another even more prestigious job right away. It was horrible. There was never any time to breathe. There was this endless stimulus. The more I did, the more they demanded of me. I had to find my way out. (Dis)

### ***Career shocks***

One of the strongest motives for taking up self-employment in crafts for participants was a negative unexpected external event. Due to my pre-assumptions, I was surprised to realise that they were talking about what Nalis et al. (2021) have defined as career shocks. The career shocks reported were being laid off work, losing work capacity, and divorce. Like many who get exposed by such an experience, the 11 participants that experienced this felt they had to actively reconsider their careers (Akkermans, Rodrigues et al., 2021). Jóna, a teacher at the time, explained that her first thought when she was laid off was: ‘I need to look into something different, I can’t go back to teaching.’ None of them used the term ‘shock’, but I sensed that the meaning of it was there. Árún, for instance, got fired while pregnant. She simply stated that: ‘You can’t trust anything.’ The experience of shock is almost tangible, and the lack of trust is obvious:

I was a teacher for 25 years and was let go when all hell broke loose in the economic crisis in 2008. There were some changes in the staff being made and I was asked if I would consider taking leave, a study permit, at my age, can you imagine, and it was past the application deadline! ... Then soon after that I got injured, and then they hired this young girl in my position, permanently. Can you imagine?! (Karl)

According to Braun & Clarke (2022), it is important to keep in mind that knowledge based on lived experiences is to be developed in a situated context. For example, as I analysed multiple stories about different kinds of career shocks, the context of participants’ personal lives mattered greatly. I started to realise that some of the shocks that participants experienced would theoretically be classified as negative but were perceived by them as positive. Anna, for example, explained to me how she experienced losing her high-paying job as a relief:

My husband was working strange hours and there I was with the kids, trying to make it work and keep my boss happy and all of it just became too much somehow. If I’m honest, I was relieved when he called me in that day about the downsizing in the department.

Also, while two of the three divorcees among participants told me that they felt they were forced to make career changes, the third, Hanna, talked about her career shock in a different way. She explained how she experienced gaining the courage and opportunity to make her career changes following the divorce:

I had been thinking about giving up teaching for some time, but I never saw it as something I would act upon out of fear really, and my ex had convinced me it was madness, financially, to take up craft making. After the divorce I had to move. I saw that as an opportunity I never had before. I was unstoppable when I realised, I could do what I wanted.



Anna's and Hanna's stories seem to fit well with what Bergmo-Prvulovic (2020) talks about in terms of people feeling controlled by work-life conditions today. Also, with how Greenhaus & Kossek (2014) explain people's difficulties integrating work and family life as one aspect of unsustainability of careers.

Almost half (7) of the participants suffered reduced work capacity due to illness or an accident. Four of those who gained their full capacity again were in an active employment relationship but decided not to return to their prior jobs. As they told their stories, I sensed a clear notion of loss and difficulty. But also a transition from despair to active agency as a prominent thread there. Hanna exemplified this when she said: 'I had this accident. I simply said to myself, you can do it Hanna.' In the following excerpt, desperation swiftly turns into active agency:

Then it happens that I have two accidents in a year. I was unable to work, and I decided to go back to school and this time study something that would make me happy. I realised I would have to make my own fate.

### ***A blessing in disguise***

Through the analysis process, I noticed that the majority (8/11) of those who experienced career shocks talked about them as fortunate incidents. Svava, for instance, tells a story about how 'lucky' she was to become ill and experience the 'force of creativity' come back to life for her. Erla speaks of a 'rebirth' after her sickness and Karl explains it as a 'second change':

You may have been dreaming of something for a long time and then losing your health and everything collapsing on you becomes this great opportunity. I got a second chance, that's what it was. The job loss...yes, I got time to think and speculate.

It is not unheard of for a career shock to be perceived as a blessing in disguise (see e.g. Zikic & Klehe, 2006), as apparent here. What McAdams (e.g. 2013) has shown, about how people often narrate negative life events into a personal myth of success and redemption also comes to mind.

### **A natural choice**

Identity congruence, authenticity and meaningful work, as well as perceived well-being through making processes, were important positive motives for participants to take up self-employment in craft making. Not only for those who had experienced career shocks, but for all participants in this study. Throughout the dataset, I found the second theme of explanatory meaning, that of natural choice. According to my analysis, the choice of becoming a craft maker for a living came naturally, so to speak, since it has a strong identity congruence based on participants' creative habitus and fulfilled their needs for authenticity, creativity, connectedness and meaningful work.

### ***Identity congruence and connectedness***

The analysis revealed that most participants (13/15) shared a background of experiences in the creative realm (see Table 1). After experiencing a career shock, 11 participants turned actively to that background for further development of their careers. Five of them also had prior education in the creative sector, but interestingly, only three of those were educated in something directly connected with the making of objects. However, as is so often the case for people in the creative sector according to Dormer (1997/2019), the participants seemed to have developed a strong sense of identity as makers.

It was there, in my heart, ever since I was little. I remember when I was a kid, maybe nine or ten, I used to love watching the grownups make things with their hands. Sometimes I think about why I spent all that

time teaching. But of course, I majored in music education, so my heart was there all along, in the creative. This was an obvious choice for me. (Lísa)

Practically everyone in my closest family is a craftsperson or an artist of some sort. My degree was in fine arts but the training part of it was hands on practical, making everything from scrats. So I don't think about myself as an artist, only. I'm just as much of a craftsman. This is me being me, a maker of things. (Sólveig)

This way of clearly identifying themselves as makers from an early age seems to play a big part in participants' sensemaking. According to Savickas (e.g. 2005), family is an acknowledged influential factor in individual career development and creative habitus (Luckman & Andrew, 2020) and early experiences often motivate people to develop creative careers (Taylor & Littleton, 2016). Accordingly, in the analysis I took notice of the fact that most (12) participants mentioned their parents and grandparents as impactful role models and many (9) of them grew up with professional craftsmen.

I had great role models in crafts. My stepmom and my great grandmother, the knitting foremothers, I call them. Dad was also a trained carpenter, but he fixed everything that needed fixing in the home, plumbing and tiles and he even built some furniture too. My mother's parents were like that too. I've always admired people who are sufficient like that. (Svava)

All participants talked about connectedness that they experienced as craft makers. Some (2) said that they had never been so closely in touch with themselves and their personal values. Many (9) also mentioned the importance of cultural continuity through their making. Identity congruence and authenticity, though, was one of their strongest motives, and also the impetus that helped them maintain their careers. In that context, adaptability is an interesting concept. It is known to be an important characteristic for coping with the complexities of contemporary career development (Savickas, 2005). According to my analysis, when adaptation was necessary, instead of making typical changes such as upgrading their knowledge and skills through formal education, identity congruence became the participants' priority. An unexpected finding is that only two participants went back to school, one for further education within the field of making and one as a first-time student in the sector. Other participants actively reached out for formerly obtained craft knowledge embedded in their creative habitus (see Table 1). This is particularly interesting since despite the importance of the ability to adapt (even change), simultaneously maintaining your authenticity (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007) is key to job satisfaction (Savickas, 2005) and the sustainability of one's career.

### ***Meaningful making***

All participants talked about their career in craft making as meaningful. Most of them (10) also explained how making itself is an important aspect of the experienced meaningfulness and how passionate they feel about both craft and making. Meaning for them stems from being socially responsible in their use of materials and recycling in their making, as well as from their communications within craft communities, both online and face to face. I also noticed that meaning was derived from fulfilling their own needs for passion and creativity through craft making. This was one of the primary ways in which they made sense of their career choice. Some are quite explicit about this:

There was always that tradition and passion for creating in my family. In fact, this was almost like a calling for me I needed to answer. When I'm not creating something, I'm thinking about it. Making, for me, is the reason I get up in the morning. Performing didn't do it for me in the same way, I was doing that for the audience more. What I make exists with the buyer for a long time. I both get to enjoy making it and they get to have it and make their lives more beautiful. (Árún)

Joy, fulfilment, and well-being through the making itself are concepts that became clear to me through the analysis. All participants described some sense of experienced satisfaction and well-being related to their making. Sveinn did so almost poetically:

The work I'm doing now is noble ... I've had my best moments when working manually ... this realisation didn't come easy to me, I thought such jobs insignificant and worthless. But then I found so much zen in craft making, doing things again and again in total acceptance being happy doing what you were meant for.

Considering participants' descriptions of how getting engaged in meaningful and passionate work in congruence with their identities has met their personal needs, it seems evident that becoming a craft maker for them felt like a natural choice.

### **An act of agency**

At earlier stages of the analysis, I realised that taking up self-employment was perhaps, if anything, an act of agency. In this third theme in their explanatory meaning, participants accounted for how they actively built a career, at home, prioritising their passion and psychological needs. According to my interpretation, their sense-making thus helps participants frame their career choice not as the forced reaction of a victim, but as the sensible act of an agent.

### **Meeting needs**

By taking up and maintaining self-employment, the craft makers both distanced themselves from external precarity and met their different psychological needs. According to my analysis, the need for autonomy and sense of security was an important motive for participants in this study.

Now I answer to no one but myself. I don't owe anyone anything other than money to the bank and it's up to me whether I stand or fall. I can't get fired, I can quit or change course, hire or fire just as I need. And if I need to work extra I'll do it with a smile on my face – no one else is going to make my future but me. (Helga)

As Akkermans, Rodrigues et al. (2021) have explained, choosing to build a career within your field of interest and passion is an act of individual agency. As I started following the prominent agentic thread, earlier interpreted as a response to difficulties, I understood that by taking up self-employment in craft making, participants were not only developing a passion-based career path but doing so as De Vos et al. (2019) have described as proactively.

The craft makers also described how self-employment enabled them to fulfil their need for self-determination, which manifested in being in control of their time and subjects at work. Anna explained: 'It's most important that I can control my hours and at the same time do what I love.' Also, for some of them this was not a matter of preference or convenience but necessity, as in Emil's case: 'Since my illness, I must be able to make a living on my own terms, based on my strengths. It makes a world of difference to be self-employed.' An additional need met by participants' self-employment, according to my analysis, is that it provides opportunities to experience competence. Dís, for example, was very clear about this when she said: 'Now I can finally feel as if I am good at what I do and be productive and proud of myself.'

### **Home sweet home**

Yet another beneficial factor of self-employment that participants talked about is working at home. There were no excerpts in the data suggesting challenges with balancing working at home and family life. On the contrary, findings show that it provides participants with a sense

of experienced personal sustainability through perceived well-being and belonging. It took me a while to realise what that might indicate. According to my analysis, this could stem from participants' experienced sense of being in their right place, so to speak, both spiritually and literally. The terms 'home' and 'belonging', to Sveinn, for instance, clearly have a deep meaning:

I had been abroad for three weeks and when I came home, I went straight to my workshop just to smell it. I was like aaaah, the smell of my work in my nostrils, and this was the middle of the night and I hadn't even brought the suitcases upstairs yet.

Many (8) participants talk about their workshops in a similar way. Emil describes feeling free there, Erla said she would rather sell her car than her studio and Edda talked about her workshop as her own 'private little heaven'.

### ***Passion first***

Passion for craft making is an important reasoning in participants' explanatory meaning. Across the dataset are excerpts that show how self-employment in craft making makes sense to participants, as they stated that they were better off and happier being self-employed despite long hours and the financial strain. According to England (2022), balancing passionate work and the need to make a living is a commonly known challenge for the self-employed in the creative sector. All participants spoke of such challenges and all but three met them with other sources of income than commercial production to some degree. Income sources mentioned included teaching, non-creative employment, grants, and their spouse's income. It seems, though, that prioritising passion above financial gain, which, as England (2022) has demonstrated, is very common among people in the creative sector, applies to the participants in this study.

I'm just happier this way, I can't explain, just happy with what I have now and sometimes when I wake up I can't believe how fabulous this is. This is challenging in many ways, but it gives me stability. I worry about money of course ... Crafts are my tree of life, I've planted it and now I can bloom and grow again.  
(Lísa)

Other excerpts also suggest that the benefits of self-employment rise above the financial risk and the hard work that it takes to make a living of handmade goods. Or as Árún explained: 'Being self-employed makes it possible for me to make a living and simultaneously maintain my self-respect and sanity.' This analysis thus shows that self-employment in craft making seemed to have been an act of self-preservation for the participants in this study. Despite the financial risk and heavy workload it has allowed them to feel self-reliant and in control of their lives. Also according to Parodi's & Todd's (2018) definition, provided that sense of security and well-being that comes with actively living life in a way that was sustainable for themselves.

## **Discussion**

This analysis is based on a study within a group of nationally renowned craft makers of their times. This might raise questions about whether the selection skews the results. Those chosen must be considered likelier than others, less successful yet fit for the recruiting criteria, to have a positive attitude towards the subject at hand. Also, while this study addressed financial risks and heavy workload, it did not address other possible disadvantages of self-employment. There is some overlap across themes in my interpretation. Perceived well-being after the career change is the most common. Fulfilment of different psychological needs is also widespread, as is experienced connectedness through congruence with values and identity. That said, as a whole, the findings and analysis add to my main conclusion, that participants make sense of their self-

employment in craft making as a career change towards a sustainable lifestyle and career. Also, when considering the rigour of my interpretation of participants' sensible and fulfilling career choices, bear in mind that an online inquiry in December 2023 revealed that all fifteen of them were still self-employed craft makers. This study thus provides useful contextualised knowledge about the experiences of craft makers who claim to have managed to succeed in a fast-growing and unexplored occupation.

Prior employment was experienced and described by participants in this study as what Blustein et al. (2016) have defined as unsustainable from a psychological perspective. It had been experienced as unsustainable because it failed to provide a sense of well-being and security and be successfully integrated into their personal and family lives (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Self-employment in craft making, on the other hand, according to my analysis, has proven to be a sustainable career choice allowing for self-determination, autonomy, connectedness, competence and authenticity (Blustein, 2006; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). So, as Peter Korn (2013) once argued in general about makers, the fulfilment of psychological or spiritual needs seems to have mattered greatly for participants as a motive for making their career change and maintaining it.

Career shock became one of the key concepts in this study in an unexpected way. As Akkermans et al. (2018) have claimed, career shocks are a well-known challenge to contemporary career development of individuals (see also Seibert et al., 2013) and known pushing motives for self-employment (Akkermans, Collings et al., 2021). What was unexpected, however, was the frequency. The unexpectedness also lies in my assumption that a group of renowned masters within their field must have made this their career choice early in their lives. In this context it is also noteworthy that even though all participants spoke of this need for creativity and an early interest as a strong motive, taking up self-employment in crafts was a major career change rather than a job change for all but one of them. This means that most of them did not decide to build a career within their field of passion and interest until they experienced a career shock. Contemporary career development theory has questioned (e.g. Blustein, 2006; Blustein et al., 2016) the suggested overemphasis on individual's career adaptability as a response to the precarity of a neoliberal labour market. In order to adapt, for instance, after a career shock, people are expected to update their competences and skills, preferably through formal education. The participants in this study did not do that. Instead, they reached out for an already acquired resource of craft knowledge, claiming success.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have analysed empirical data that show that participants' reasons for taking up self-employment in craft making were not just to make a living but to do so in a manner that enabled them to maintain a sustainable lifestyle. That is how participants make sense of self-employment in such a financially risky occupation as craft making. In their reasoning, though, personal sustainability is not merely an effect of a particular cause, but rather an ongoing empowering journey fuelled by craft knowledge. The main contribution of this study is therefore an added understanding of how crafts and craft knowledge can be a resource and vehicle towards personal sustainability and a meaningful life and career for those interested and passionate about it.

Social media and a growing global market for crafts have provided realistic career opportunities in contemporary society (e.g. Luckman & Andrews, 2020; Ratnam, 2014). Despite this, the findings of this study show that even those resourced with craft knowledge and creative habitus have not considered craft making as a career option from early on. This prompts questions about social discourse and attitudes towards the role and value of crafts and craft knowledge in

general, and perhaps particularly when it comes to the influences it may have on people's study and career choices. It is therefore important to investigate further what those findings indicate about what potential craft knowledge might hold for individuals' career development in the future.

### **Declaration of interest**

The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the article and reports no conflicts of interest.

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