

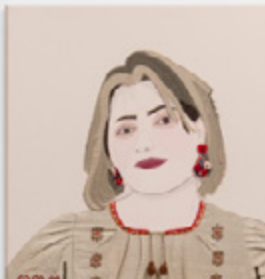
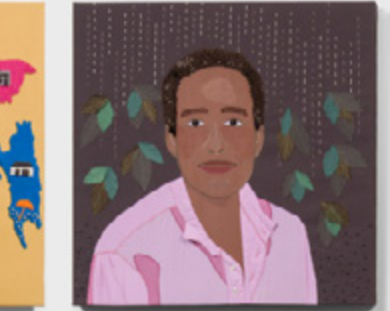
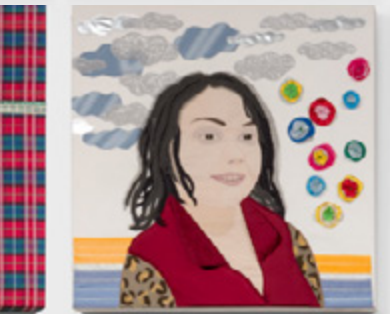
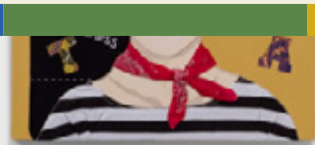


# Traces: Stories of Migration

Exploring the impact of a participatory art project on the identity, sense of belonging and self-development of first and second-generation migrants



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“Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology of being, but of becoming.”

– *Stuart Hall*

# Contents

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| <b>1</b>  | <b>Chapter 1. Introduction</b>  |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>                                       |
| 7         | 2.1 Migration Within The UK   |
| 9         | 2.2 Migration Challenges  |
| 13        | 2.3 Arts Engagement   |
| <b>15</b> | <b>Chapter 3: The Study Aims</b>  |
| <b>18</b> | <b>Chapter 4: Method</b>  |
| 19        | 4.1 Presentation of <i>Traces: Stories of Migration</i> engagement        |
| 19        | 4.2 Participant Interviews  |
| 19        | 4.3 Materials and Research Design   |
| 21        | 4.4 Procedure   |
| 21        | 4.5 Data Analysis   |
| 21        | 4.6 Reflexivity   |
| <b>23</b> | <b>Chapter 5: Results and Discussion</b>                                  |
| 25        | 5.1 Super-Ordinate Theme I: Exploring Identity, Discovering Self          |
| 29        | 5.2 Super-Ordinate Theme II: Community Connection and Collective Identity |
| 35        | 5.3 Super-Ordinate Theme III: Value of Participatory Art                  |
| <b>41</b> | <b>Chapter 6: Conclusions</b>   |
| <b>45</b> | <b>References</b>   |

1. **Introduction**
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. Method
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# Introduction

1

Human migration is an enduring facet of our existence, exerting a profound impact in shaping the cultural tapestry of nations and their global connections. Migration has played a pivotal role in the United Kingdom, helping foster economic prosperity, augmenting the public service workforce, and enriching the cultural tapestry of the nation.

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Despite its profound contributions and historical significance, recent years have witnessed migration evolve into a sensitive and charged topic within the UK, shaping political discourse, and influencing public sentiment.

Despite its profound contributions and historical significance, recent years have witnessed migration evolve into a sensitive and charged topic within the UK, shaping political discourse, and influencing public sentiment (Burnett, 2017). The 2016 UK Brexit vote serves as a prominent example of this growing anti-migration rhetoric and ideology (Goodman, 2017). The process of migration, whether voluntary or not, is inherently challenging for individuals and families, involving a substantial shift away from one's home country and the complex task of integrating into an unfamiliar environment and culture. This transition can be psychologically taxing, with potential detrimental effects on mental health. The World Health Organisation (2023) highlights that migrants often face higher prevalence rates of common mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This elevated risk is compounded by the prevailing negative societal attitudes towards migration, further amplifying the challenges to the mental well-being of migrants (Teodorowski et al., 2021). With global migration expected to continue to increase (United Nations, 2023), addressing the psychological impact of migration is crucial, not only for the sake of individual migrants but also for the overall mental health landscape within diverse societies.

In response to these challenges, therapeutic interventions such as art therapy have gained recognition for their potential to enhance individual well-being through means such as identity development, reductions in stress, loneliness, depression, anxiety and distress and improvements in mood and self-esteem (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Uttley et al., 2015). Recent research has demonstrated the benefits for individuals who have undergone experiences of migration (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017), underscoring the efficacy of art therapy in this context. Art therapy involves using art as a psychotherapeutic technique to express thoughts and feelings, facilitated by trained therapists in group or individual sessions, employing recognized models of interaction and intervention (Malchiodi, 2003). Despite its proven efficiency, art therapy, like other therapeutic forms, has limitations.



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Some participants may perceive it as “superficial,” “childish,” or “self-indulgent” (Uttley et al.’s 2015). Moreover, challenges related to accessibility, including financial limitations, work constraints, and stigma, can render art therapy unavailable for some individuals (Adoni- Kroyanker et al., 2018). A less explored but promising alternative to art therapy is the socially engaged method of participatory art, defined as engagement with art set up within a recreational, social, or research context with little or no direct therapeutic focus (Rose et al., 2018). Whilst participatory art and art therapy are sometimes positioned against one another, there can be similarities in that artmaking, whether in a participatory or an art therapy context, can both use expressive media and be experienced as therapeutic whether intentional or not (Tsirir et al., 2014). The distinction between the two lies in the context and purpose. Definitions relevant to this research are outlined below.

- **Art Therapy:** Utilizing art as a psychotherapeutic method to convey thoughts and emotions. Facilitated by trained therapists in either group or individual sessions, employing recognized models of interaction and intervention (Malchiodi 2003)
- **Participatory Art:** Placing a central focus on human interaction and the active participation of individuals in the creation and experience of art (Kelly, 2014)
- **Socially Engaged Art or Social Practice:** Derived from the social movements of the 1960s centring on process and site-specificity, making the artist into an individual whose speciality includes working with society in a professional capacity. (Helguera, 2011)

While the primary aim of participatory art is not explicitly therapeutic, studies have revealed that participants derived indirect benefits from these artistic events and groups, as evidenced in both community and research contexts (Tseklevs et al. 2018). Thus, participatory art, without the need for trained therapists, emerges as a potentially more accessible tool for enhancing the mental health of individuals who have experienced migration. Accordingly, this research delves into the impact of participatory art on the well-being and self-concept of first and second-generation migrants.

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A socially engaged practice research project conducted in three phases; community engagement, responsive portraits, and the exhibition of the resulting artefacts.

The study is situated within the framework of *Traces: Stories of Migration*, a socially engaged practice research project conducted in three phases; community engagement, responsive portraits, and the exhibition of the resulting artefacts. It was led by artist and researcher Lucy Orta in partnership with University of the Arts London's Portal Centre for Social Impact and Centre for Sustainable Fashion; and funded by the Arts Council of England, The Portal Trust, and Foundation for Future London. Conducted in three community centres in the boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets in east London, the engagement phase of the project aimed to bring together the memories and experiences of first and second generation migrants through the creative medium of textiles and the making of artefacts termed the Story Cloth. The primary goal was to investigate how cloth and stitch could creatively express and celebrate the diverse cultural and social experiences of migrant communities. The project proposed oral and visual mapping, text-based storytelling and textile-based practice in group settings with trained facilitators as its main methods, where participants shared personal narratives and textile knowledge, ultimately creating unique Story Cloths that figuratively or conceptually depicted familial or personal migration experiences. Rooted in the multicultural history of east London, especially the East End Rag Trade, the project sought to provide a positive space for individuals to engage in a meaningful art activity, connect with their communities, and express thoughts and emotions associated with positive places. The present research specifically seeks to explore how *Traces: Stories of Migration* influenced the well-being and identity of the first and second-generation migrants who took part by delving into an exemplary social engaged and participatory art project grounded in psychological literature, this exploratory study contributes to understanding how the participatory art methods employed by Lucy Orta can positively impact the well-being of migrant communities without necessarily addressing difficult or traumatic memories.

The following sections will begin by examining current migration statistics in the UK and the importance of migration on the country's fashion and textile industry. Subsequently, we will delve into the context of first and second-generation migrations, exploring the intricacies of the migration processes and the potential mental health outcomes. This literature forms the basis for investigating the participatory arts in the context of the mental health of migrants. The elucidation of research methods will encompass qualitative participatory approaches, Interpretive Phenological Analysis (IPA), and data analysis techniques. This will be succeeded by a section dedicated to exploring the research findings. Lastly, an evaluation of the intervention will appraise the potential of arts-based approaches such as *Traces: Stories of Migration* to contribute to the mental health of migrants and migrant communities.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Portraits by Lucy Orta exhibited  
at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards



1. Introduction
2. **Literature Review**
3. The Study Aims
4. Method
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# Literature Review

2

## 2.1 Migration Within The UK

### Defining Migrant Individuals

According to the IOM (2019), the term migrant serves as an overarching concept not explicitly defined in international law, encapsulating the common understanding of an individual who relocates from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for various reasons. It implies a process of uprooting from one location and settling in another. In the context of this research, the term migrant is employed as an umbrella term encompassing individuals who have directly experienced migration or have familial ties to migration. It is important to note that the term migrant in this paper includes the term immigrant, as the latter is selectively used only when referring to individuals who voluntarily migrated from one country to another and permanently resettled in a different cultural context. The distinction is made to avoid exclusionary language that overlooks individuals relocating within the same country or those entering a new country as refugees.

### Migration Figures in the UK

Aligned with global migration trends, migration to the UK has experienced a consistent upward trajectory in recent years. In 2022 the country saw a substantial influx of 1.2 million individuals contributing to a record-breaking net migration of 745,000 (Cheatham, 2023). To compare, net migration was 226,000 in 2019 (Cheatham, 2023). This spike in numbers was primarily driven by the immigration of non-EU nationals, which contributed approximately 66% of total migration (Mathers, 2023). Several factors contributed to the increase in this group, mainly the war in Ukraine, the introduction of a new visa system for Hong Kong Nationals and the Afghan resettlement scheme. The migration of EU nationals remained relatively stable, accounting for 21% of immigration (Mathers, 2023).

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It is evident that addressing the challenges associated with migrating to a new country and mitigating mental health risks remains a pressing and vital need.

There is ongoing debate regarding whether UK migration numbers will adhere to similar patterns. On one hand, The Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests it is too early to determine whether this upward trajectory will persist (Cheatham, 2023). Conversely, the United Nations (UN) anticipates a continued global rise in migration, citing escalating conflicts, the adverse impacts of climate change, and other environmental factors (United Nations, 2023). The uncertainty surrounding future migration patterns underscores the complexity of this evolving global phenomenon. Regardless, it is evident that addressing the challenges associated with migrating to a new country and mitigating mental health risks remains a pressing and vital need.

## Migration within the Fashion and Textile Industry

The UK textile and fashion sector, a dynamic and ever-evolving industry, has been profoundly shaped by successive waves of migration, each contributing unique skills and specialities that have fuelled its growth and innovation. This interplay of diverse influences has rendered the industry heavily reliant on international talent, fostering collaboration and benefiting from the freedom of movement (Turner, 2021). As quoted by Daniel Rubin of The Dune Group, “It is difficult to think of an industry that has been more affected by immigration” (Thomson, 2020).

At the centre of this vibrant history lies the East End, a longstanding home to ‘The Rag Trade’ for over 250 years. This district serves as a living testament to the enduring legacy of migration on the UK’s textile and fashion landscape, showcasing the vital role played by diverse communities in shaping the industry. Originating in the 1700s with French Huguenot refugees, who brought with them expert weaving skills, ‘The Rag Trade’ has evolved through subsequent waves of migration (Thompson, 2020). In 1881 The French Huguenot weavers made way for around 100,000 Jewish migrants, who left an indelible mark on the area’s tailoring and shoe legacy. Entrepreneurs from this community, mainly from Eastern European countries, founded businesses integral to British fashion, with iconic brands like Marks & Spencer’s and Dune established by Polish and Russian Jewish migrants during this period. The narrative extends into the 20th century with the arrival of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi families to the UK. These communities have not only added cultural richness but have also been instrumental in shaping the landscape of today’s fashion retail giants. Retail brands such as Quiz and Boohoo, thriving in the contemporary market, owe their existence to the entrepreneurial spirit and creativity brought by these migrant groups (Thompson, 2020).

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In the broader context, the cumulative effect of migration on the UK fashion industry cannot be overstated. Many of today’s biggest brands and retailers are led by individuals who were not British born, or by their descendants. The rich mosaic of skills, experiences, and cultural influences brought by migrants has not only shaped the aesthetics and artisanry of British fashion but has also infused it with fresh ideas and entrepreneurialism. As the industry continues to evolve, it remains imperative to recognize and celebrate the lasting contributions of migrant communities that have woven themselves into the fabric of the UK’s vibrant fashion landscape (Thompson, 2020).

## 2.2 Migration Challenges

The migration process entails substantial challenges. While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these challenges and their impact on migrants, the current research primarily centres on acculturation and autobiographical memory. These crucial aspects play a significant role, offering a contextual understanding of how participatory art could influence and bring benefits to migrant communities.

### Acculturation

Acculturation, intricately linked with the migration experience, plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' identities as they navigate through the process of adapting to a new cultural milieu. Defined by Berry (2015) as a “dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members,” acculturation involves the dynamic interplay between the native and host cultures. In the context of international migration, acculturation constitutes the adaptive process in which individuals adapt and reshape their thinking to align with new culture and environment (Matsumoto & Juang, 2023). This transformative journey, particularly pronounced in international migration, challenges individuals to adjust their thinking and reshape their cultural identity (Sam & Berry, 2016). Central to Berry's acculturation model (2015) are two dimensions influential to individuals' adaptation to a new culture: 1) the decision to either retain or reject their native culture and 2) the inclination to embrace or resist the new culture. The interplay of these factors gives rise to four distinct acculturation strategies:

1. **Assimilation:** Occurs when migrants sever ties with their heritage culture, opting instead to establish connections with the dominant culture in the host country.
2. **Separation:** Involves maintaining one's heritage culture while deliberately avoiding engagement with the dominant culture.
3. **Marginalization:** Emerges when migrants neither uphold connections with their heritage culture nor integrate with the culture of their new environment.
4. **Integration:** Encompasses the preservation of one's own culture alongside active participation in the new host culture

Acculturation can lead to different psychological distresses, one relating to the loss of identity (Guler & Berman, 2019). The acculturation process results in the construction and reconstruction of one's cultural identity (Bhugra, 2004). Cultural identity, comprising elements such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, dietary habits, language, and social class, is a fundamental aspect



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
 Story Cloths by participants  
 exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
 Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

The process of reshaping cultural identity during acculturation is often fraught with stress, triggering grief reactions and contributing to adverse mental health outcomes.

of one's identity, which is the totality of one's perception of self (Bhugra, 2004). The migration journey necessitates a reevaluation of these identity components, given the loss of familiar cultural norms and support systems (Guler & Berman, 2019). Acculturation can result in the assimilation of values, customs, beliefs, and language by a minority group within a majority community resulting in an individual's cultural identity undergoing significant changes or even be lost as they integrate into the host society.

The process of reshaping cultural identity during acculturation is often fraught with stress, triggering grief reactions and contributing to adverse mental health outcomes, including heightened anxiety, diminished self-esteem, alienation, and loneliness (i.e., Montgomery, 2008). Post-migration stressors, such as culture shock and conflict, can exacerbate feelings of cultural confusion, further intensifying experiences of alienation, isolation, and depression (Bhugra, 2004). Host societies' attitudes, encompassing racism and compounded by stressors like unemployment, achievement gaps, financial hardships, legal concerns, poor housing, and limited opportunities for advancement, compound the challenges of acculturation, amplifying mental health problems among already vulnerable individuals.

Research highlights that developing a community and establishing supporting social engagements can help mitigate the negative impacts of migration (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Moreover, during this transition period giving migrants the opportunity to explore and understand themselves in their new surroundings can be extremely beneficial in elevating some of the negative effects of acculturation and cultural identity reprisals (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Rong and Fitchet (2008) also state that it is beneficial for migrants to acknowledge the effects that their migration experience had on their identities to mitigate some of the negative psychological stressors and live a more successful life in their host country. Taken together these

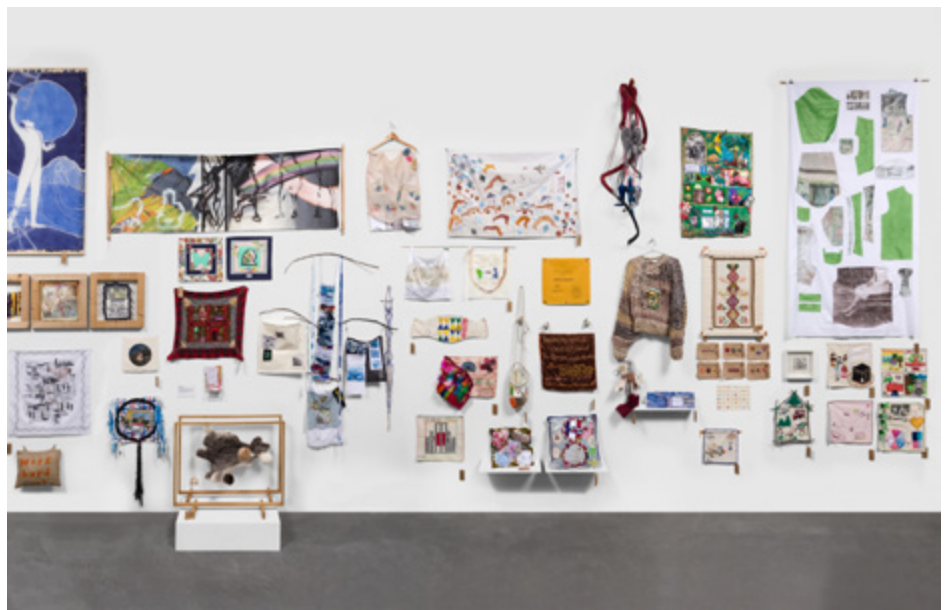
finding suggests that participatory art may offer valuable benefits to migrants by providing a safe space for individuals to share their migration journeys with others who have undergone similar experiences, which this may foster a sense of empathy and belonging among like-minded individuals. In addition, the process of creating artwork may be beneficial to help migrants communicate their complex experiences of acculturation, reflect on their migration experiences, challenges they may have experienced and effects it all may have had on their identity development.

Moreover, integration and assimilation play pivotal roles in mitigating feelings of loss and grief as migrants embrace aspects of the majority culture. Fostering an appreciation for the immigrant's culture among individuals from the dominant culture not only enhances understanding but also addresses the unique needs of those who have migrated (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Thus, participatory art, has the potential to enhance the well-being of migrants by positively influencing the perception of migrant communities within host societies. Sharing Story Cloths to members of the host community can play a pivotal role in fostering empathy and understanding towards the journeys and experiences migrants undergo. By displaying these narratives, Story Cloths have the potential to build positive attitudes and perspectives towards migration within local community. This process, in turn, may contribute to a more supportive and inclusive acculturative environment, thereby mitigating acculturative stress for migrants.

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*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards



### **Autobiography memory**

The examination of autobiographical reasoning and self-event connections in the literature further sheds light on the intricate link between past events, such as migration, and an individual's sense of self. Autobiographical reasoning describes the "activity of creating relations between different parts of one's past, present, and future life and one's personality and development" (Habermas, 2011, p. 27). According to the literature, as individuals engage in the reflective process of autobiographical reasoning, drawing conclusions about their identity, the creation of narrative coherence fosters a sense of self-continuity and a coherent narrative identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In McAdams's Theory of Personality (1993) personality comprises of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity. Within the theory, autobiographical memory, particularly self-defining memories (SDMs), plays a crucial role in shaping

individual's narrative identity. As individuals engage in the reflective process of autobiographical reasoning, drawing conclusions about their identity, the creation of narrative coherence fosters a sense of self-continuity. In the context of migration, this understanding is vital, as it reveals the intricate link between past events and one's sense of self. It is also important for exploring how textile craft, and more specifically the form of Story Cloths, may positively influence the mental health of migrants by providing tangible connections to their migration narratives.

Transitioning to the realm of textile narratives and craft, artistic and storytelling activities offer avenues for individuals to make sense of their lives and foster well-being. Engaging in creative activities, including textile practice, has been linked to meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction (Malchiodi, 2002). Notably, narrative psychology and narrative therapy underscore the positive impact of telling and reframing past stories on well-being and mental health (McAdams, 2020). Representing past experiences through tactual making, such as textile craft, can contribute to shaping one's sense of self and place in the world (Pöllänen, 2015). It helps people get in touch with and connect to their personal subjective experiences.

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## 2.3 Arts Engagement

### **Socially Engaged Art**

Social practice or socially engaged art encompasses various artistic forms that engage people and communities in discussions, partnerships, and/or social interactions, where the community are the subject. Specifically, social practice can be described as “art that’s socially engaged, where the social interaction is, at some level, the art itself” (Finkelpearl, 2013, p. 416). The participatory aspect of socially engaged practice is essential, emphasising the creative process over the resulting artworks.

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Creative visual artistic endeavours, including textile practice, have been correlated with processes such as meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction.

In contrast to traditional art history, socially engaged art prioritizes effecting change through the process of art making rather than relying on completed artworks. It extends beyond conventional venues, delving into actual social contexts and often bridging social disciplines. These projects are typically undertaken in specific social and cultural settings referred to as communities, emphasizing the importance of understanding the social context in collaboration with participants and larger audiences. Conversation and collaboration serve as primary mediums in socially engaged art practices, fostering productive exchanges and the potential for social changes. Active participation of community members in creating the work distinguishes socially engaged art, expanding social relationships, and promoting empowerment, criticality, and sustainability.

In the context of migration, the socially engaged practice of participatory art emerges as a promising avenue for bolstering the mental health of migrant communities. Socially engaged practices can effectively delve into migrant stories through participatory events within the community, providing individuals with opportunities to make sense of their lives and promoting overall well-being. Creative visual artistic endeavours, including textile practice, have been correlated with processes such as meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction (Ford et al., 2021; Malchiodi, 2002).

Moreover, socially engaged practices play a pivotal role in the therapeutic potential of participatory art for migrants. Aligned with activism, these practices address political issues and foster meaningful dialogues within communities. Artists engaged in social and participatory practices invest considerable time in assimilating into specific communities, underscoring the embedded and collaborative nature of the artistic process. This integration enables artists to work collectively towards common goals, raise awareness, and enhance both the physical and psychological well-being of communities, mitigating the negative impacts of migration (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). During the transitional period, offering migrants the opportunity to explore and understand themselves in their new surroundings can be immensely beneficial in alleviating some of the adverse effects of acculturation and cultural identity reprisals (Doker, 1998)





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Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

## **Participatory Art**

Participatory art emerges as a unique subset of socially engaged practices. Placing a central focus on human interaction and social discourse (Kelly, 2014). Participatory art involves the active participation of individuals beyond the artist or art collective in the creation and experience of art. It shifts away from the traditional model of a passive audience consuming a finished product, fostering a more inclusive and interactive approach (Kelly, 2014).

The participatory art process can take various forms, ranging from collective creation, where a diverse group contributes to shaping the artwork, to participatory actions that are considered art in themselves. Although this broad umbrella term encompasses a spectrum of artistic practices, the common thread is the emphasis on collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences as integral components of the artistic endeavour. As a result of this, participatory art challenges traditional notions of authorship and the role of the artist, democratizing the creative process and making it more accessible to a wider audience. It goes beyond the confines of traditional art spaces, often venturing into real-world social contexts and engaging with diverse communities. The resulting artworks, while significant, are not always the primary focus; instead, equal importance is placed on the collaborative process, fostering a sense of shared ownership and collective creativity.

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. **The Study Aims**
4. Method
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# The Study Aims

3

Taking into consideration the literature discussed, the aim of this research is to explore the use of participatory art, employing textiles as a medium, with people who experienced migration themselves or within their families. The framework of phenomenology has been selected to underpin this study. Specifically, IPA method will be applied due to its focus on capturing the lived experiences.

To explore this enquiry, the research interviews individuals who actively participated in *Traces: Stories of Migration*. As previously mentioned, *Traces: Stories of Migration* is a social engagement research-practice project devised by Professor Orta at the University of the Arts London (UAL), whereby first and second-generation migrants participated in a series of workshops which used textile practice as a storytelling device to visually portray familial or personal migration experiences within the context of the east London area and the historic east London rag trade. The Story Cloths, and Lucy Orta's responsive Portraits were then displayed in two galleries (Nunnery Gallery and London College of Fashion, UAL East Bank) within the east London area. The research specifically looks to explore the impact of participatory art on the migrant experience of first and second generation migrants.

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First and second generation migrants participated in a series of workshops which used textile practice as a storytelling device to visually portray familial or personal migration experiences.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. **Method**
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# Method

4

## 4.1 Presentation of *Traces: Stories of Migration* engagement

The community engagement phase of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project engaged 77 residents from the London Boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets, recruited by the Portal Centre for Social Impact and community partner organisations through mailing lists, poster campaigns, social media, and word-of-mouth. Four workshops, each seven weeks in duration, took place in the Bromley by Bow, Rosetta Arts and The Lab E20 community centres. Situating the project within familiar context ensured a locally rooted and shared connection to migrant families or personal migration experiences.

The engagement utilized storytelling and textile practice in workshop settings as its primary methodology, delving into the distinctive expressive potential offered by creating textile artefacts. The weekly sessions became inclusive spaces where storytelling intersected with tactual creativity. Participants crafted pictorial narratives translating this into textile Story Cloths. The sharing of traditional craft knowledge and textile skills played pivotal roles in shaping these individual Story Cloths.

With creative freedom unrestricted by a prescribed format, each participant expressed their migration journey using hand techniques such as appliqué, embroidery, crochet, knitting and block printing to realise a two or three dimensional Story Cloth. Embracing an embedded and situated approach (Mazzarella et al., 2023), the workshop facilitated deep listening and idea generation aligned with participants' intentions. This intuitive approach evolved organically, guided by each participant's unique artistic expression.

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Each participant expressed their migration journey using hand techniques such as appliqué, embroidery, crochet, knitting and block printing to realise a two or three dimensional Story Cloth.

## 4.2 Participant Interviews

Sampling was purposive whereby first and second-generation migrants who were involved in the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project were recruited for the current research. After obtaining written consent from their participants, the project coordinator shared their contact details with the researchers. A total of 8 participants took part. All participants were 18 or older and signed a consent form before participating.

## 4.3 Materials and Research Design

As the focus of the current research is to explore migrants' lived experiences of *Traces: Stories of Migration* workshops and exhibition, a qualitative study based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected. Phenomenology, a philosophical and research approach



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops June 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

that focuses on the study of human consciousness and the structures of experience, aims to understand, and describe the essence of human experiences from the perspective of the individuals who are having them (Smith & Osborn, 2014). Therefore, IPA was considered the most suitable research design and data analysis method for this study. Aligned with Smith and Osborn's (2014) recommendations for an IPA, semi-structured interview schedules were used as they facilitate smooth interviewing practice whilst enabling helping capture rich, in-depth stories and experiences told by the participants. The interview structures were informed by existing literature to ensure the relevance of the questions.

Two schedules were employed to explore participants' lived experiences in *Traces: Stories of Migration*: 1) concentrating on the impact of the workshops and Story Cloth creation on participants' sense of self and well-being, and 2) delving into their experiences of both the workshops and Story Cloth creation, as well as the process of exhibiting their work in the exhibitions. The schedules each consisted of 10 open-ended questions developed to uncover as much information about the participant's experience in *Traces: Stories of Migration* and exhibiting their work in subsequent exhibitions. Open-ended questions were utilised as they provided the flexibility to have an open discussion, by tailoring questions and conversation to each participant's unique experiences, enabling more scope for the participants to express their perceptions and feelings in their own voice (Sarantakos, 2012).

## 4.4 Procedure

The experiment was approved by the Psychology Ethics Review Panel (PERP). Participants all took part in the *Traces: Stories of Migration* workshops and exhibitions and were invited to voluntarily take part in the research through email. Before their involvement, each participant received an information sheet and signed a consent form. They were reminded of their right to take breaks, stop the interview, or withdraw at any time.

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Questions and their sequence were tailored to each participant to allow them to share their stories without being influenced by the researcher's preconceptions.

The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online and recorded using Microsoft Teams (<https://teams.microsoft.com/>). Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. Following the collection of basic demographic information, participants were led through the interview schedule. Following Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance, the schedule was not prescriptive but served as a tool for the researcher to guide the conversation. Questions and their sequence were tailored to each participant to allow them to share their stories without being influenced by the researcher's preconceptions. Prompts like "can you give a further example" were used in response to participant replies (Bryman, 2023). At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed orally and by email.

## 4.5 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using the six-step IPA analysis approach outlined by Smith et al., (2009) as a reference. These steps involved: 1) thorough reading and re-reading the transcripts, 2) initial notations, 3) identification of emerging themes, 4) exploration of connections among these emergent themes, 5) transitioning to the next case and 6) identifying patterns across themes. To ensure the extraction of themes and theories directly from participants' interviews and not influenced by the researcher's preconceptions, a hermeneutic approach was adopted (Smith et al., 2009). Prior to analysis, the researcher transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim. The analysis begun with the in-depth reading and re-reading of each individual interview transcript to establish familiarity, with initial thoughts and ideas documented. The transcripts were subsequently inputted into NVivo data analysis software (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo>) for initial phase of line-by-line coding. Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual coding levels (Smith et al., 2009) enabled the transition from a descriptive to an interpretative understanding of comments within the transcripts. This coding process led to the identification of preliminary themes present across transcripts. Following this, similarities between different themes identified, and those connecting across the transcripts were clustered, resulting in the emergence of 10 themes. These 10 themes were then grouped by abstraction (Smith et al., 2009), leading to the development of three superordinate themes relevant to the research question.

## 4.6 Reflexivity

In the context of the present research, the primary researcher holds dual British/Australian nationality and has undergone personal migration experiences, relocating from the UK to the United States and back. The move back to the UK resulted in negative psychological issues due to acculturation challenges and a reluctance to relocate. The researcher, being acutely aware of her own migration-related sentiments, actively worked to "bracket" or minimize preconceptions about the phenomenon based on her



prior experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Despite efforts to mitigate bias, there remains a risk of the researcher's personal feelings influencing the interview process and subsequent analysis, acknowledging that biases may persist (Dodgson, 2019).

Moreover, during the interviews, participants were informed of the researchers' own migration experiences, aiming to foster more in-depth conversations by conveying a shared understanding. To mitigate bias in data analysis, a bottom-up approach was taken, with initial interview interpretations preceding the application of relevant theories. This process, aligning with Milton's (2004) vision of IPA validity, emphasizes "persuasiveness through grounded examples via interpretative inspection rather than firm conclusions" (p.287).

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops November 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. Method
- 5. Results and Discussion**
6. Conclusions  
References

# Results and Discussion

5

Guided by the principles of an IPA analysis, Table 1 below provides a summary of the super-ordinate themes and sub-themes.

**Table 1**

| <b>Super-ordinate themes and sub-themes</b>         |
|---|
| <b>Exploring identity, discovering self</b>         |
| Being a Migrant                                     |
| Sense of Self                                       |
| <b>Community connection and collective identity</b> |
| Sense of Belonging                                  |
| Understanding within the Community                  |
| Learning from and Teaching Each other               |
| <b>Value of participatory art</b>                   |
| Process of Remembering                              |
| Self-development, Learning and Inspiration          |
| Giving Voice  |
| Process of Making                                   |

The following sections cover the three super-ordinate themes and provide evidence based on the participants' own words to support the findings.

## 5.1 Super-Ordinate Theme I: Exploring Identity, Discovering Self

The first super-ordinate theme centres on participants' exploration of their cultural and personal identities during *Traces: Stories of Migration*. This initiative serves as a medium for individuals to reconnect with their migration journeys, fostering a profound connection with their heritage and cultural identity. Within this theme, the first sub-theme, 'Being a Migrant,' delves into the deep-seated influence of migration on shaping participants' identities. In parallel, the second sub-theme, titled, 'Sense of Self,' analyses how the entire journey of creating and exhibiting their story clothes significantly impacted participants' understanding and perception of self. It illuminates the transformative effects of the project on individuals' self-awareness, contributing to a more profound and enriched sense of self.

### Subtheme 1: Being a Migrant

This subtheme explores the profound impact of migration on participants' identities, emphasizing the pivotal role of migration experiences and heritage in shaping their sense of self. While all participants acknowledged and identified themselves as migrants, the nuanced impact of this on their identity and life becomes apparent.

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While all participants acknowledged and identified themselves as migrants, the nuanced impact of this on their identity and life becomes apparent.

*P3: I was born here, but my upbringing was very much like French or Sri Lankan like because my parents are not English, so you know the stories, they told me or read to me, or like the food they make, or the family I saw, it was very different. So, I think it's important because like, for you to understand like, the more you understand about those cultures, the more you understand about your parents and why they brought you up like that.*

*P1: It's part of my story, so I embrace it and it was quite like a celebration to me*

*P4: I mean I would still think of London, now, not even Birmingham or Wolverhampton. I've spent most of my life and I like to think as London as my home. But the more I... Because my husband's family are in India, he takes me back to India every year. The more I go there, the more I'm feeling more at ease there. It's a really strange feeling but, I think with, so much has been highlighted in this country about immigration, about refugees coming over, I'm getting very disillusioned. It's almost like I just need to maybe leave, sometimes [laugh].*

*P5: Like with my hair and my different hairstyles, it was kind of like, you know, my race was like "OK you're different to us."*

The recognition that migration transcends conventional narratives highlights P3's understanding of the multifaceted nature of migration, presenting a nuanced exploration of self.

P3's narrative epitomizes a dual cultural connection, being born in one place but raised with strong French and Sri Lankan cultural influences due to their migrant parents. Her upbringing, vividly described as "very much like French or Sri Lankan," underscores the complex interplay between birthplace and cultural heritage (Bery, 2015). The mention of stories, food, and family creates a rich cultural tapestry through which P3 constructs their identity, emphasizing the distinctiveness of their upbringing compared to their mainstream English culture. P3's reflective nature reveals an awareness of the importance of understanding these cultures, offering depth into the role of cultural background in shaping familial relationships and identity. The recognition that migration transcends conventional narratives highlights P3's understanding of the multifaceted nature of migration, presenting a nuanced exploration of self. In addition, this connection to cultural practices aligns with prior literature on the role of cultural continuity in maintaining a positive sense of self (Sam & Barry, 2004).

P1 P4 and P5 provide diverse perspectives on the impact of migration experiences on their life narratives, aligning with McAdams' (1993) model of personality, where life narratives are integral to one's personality. P1 embraces migration as an integral part of her story, finding it a cause for celebration. On the contrary, P5 conveys a journey marked by the societal perceptions and acculturation challenges that accompany migrant status. Her use of terms like "initially" highlights pivotal moments acknowledging her migrant identity, aligning with Pasupathi et al.'s (2007) emphasis on autobiographical reasoning and self-event connections. The differing response also shed light on the distinction between first and second-generation migrants in their perceptions of being a migrant. Second-generation migrants, born to immigrant parents like P4 and P5, navigate a dynamic identity, living "between" two cultures (Bhugra, 2004). Their sense of self extends beyond heritage, introducing acculturation complexities not experienced by their parents. The distinction between first and second-generation migrants emerges, highlighting the dynamic identity of the latter living "between" two cultures and the effects this can have in terms of constructing a cultural identity (Bhugra, 2004).



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

Moreover, the responses of P5 and P4 bring into light the role of society in identity development (Bhugra, 200). Prior research states that aspects such as race and gender can have huge importance in an individual's identity since they can play a major role in almost all social situations (Frideres, 2002). This is supported by P4 who stated "I was born in this country, and I'm integrated

and I'm really British, but really, my colour still tells me that I am not part of this community" P4's statement shows the tension between self-perception and societal categorization. She thought of herself as British however due to societal perceptions underwent a process of realisation whereby the UK is not where she is from nor 'belongs. Moreover, the participant's responses bring into light the hardships faced by migrant grounds within the UK. P4 perceived herself as English however she had to re-evaluate and re-appraise her cultural identity because of society not viewing her as an ingroup. These statements shed light on how host society attitudes, including racism, can exacerbate the challenges of acculturation (Bhugra, 2004). P5's statement further highlights the difficulty of being a migrant can be considering these societal attitudes towards diverse individuals can be.

*P5: ...but growing up it was kind of difficult over there. Over here, I mean, yeah, I had like, there's lots of different forms of racism.*

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P5's poignant statement unveils the intricate challenges faced by migrants and underscores the societal impact on individual experiences.

P5's poignant statement unveils the intricate challenges faced by migrants and underscores the societal impact on individual experiences. While not explicitly discussed, the influence of host society attitudes on self-perception is evident, potentially contributing to re-evaluations of cultural identity and, subsequently, mental health considerations.

In summary, this subtheme aligns with existing literature, emphasizing the enduring impact of migration on identity. Through reflective processes and autobiographical reasoning, individuals navigate the complexities of their past and present, contributing to the dynamic nature of self-concept.

## **Subtheme 2: Sense of Self**

This subtheme encapsulates participants' transformative journey towards establishing a stronger sense of self, evolving through the process of revisiting and/or learning about their migration narratives, and translating these stories into tangible Story Cloths. Expanding upon the preceding theme, which underscored the significance of being a migrant, this subtheme delves into the impact of the storytelling workshops and the creation of Story Cloths on participants, examining how these activities played a pivotal role in fostering a deeper and more enriched sense of self.

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed a profound desire to understand their migration histories and trace what is significant to them.

*P5: Relating to the workshops... Sort of like awakens that in me about I need to put something down on a cloth for myself so that I can trace what's important to me about my migration story...*

*P4: It's really, it's really good for me. Aw... I don't know what the word is. It's almost like I've found myself? [laugh]. I know this is like, really going deep, but I do feel that doing this, bring it on the cloth, really allowed me to really understand who I really am and where I am in society today and how it helps me getting acceptance in, in where I am now, it's that sense of acceptance in my, in my, in my wellbeing and, yeah*

*P8: I found myself cause I have a very different kind of story.*

Many participants expressed how storytelling and creating a Story Cloth representing their or their family's journey helped them grasp the diverse aspects influencing their sense of self. P4's quote really exemplifies this. Throughout her interview, she spoke about the struggle she underwent in terms of feeling as though she has two identities: one British and one of a migrant. She struggled with the societal categorization and how this really influenced her identity confusion. However, when asked how the storytelling workshops and process of putting her story into a physical story cloth impacted her, she explained how she has found herself. This process of finding oneself through exploring their story is echoed in P8. This resonates with prior literature emphasizing the therapeutic and identity-affirming nature of storytelling. These findings also align with Pöllänen (2015) who states that representing past experiences through tactile making, such as textile craft, can contribute to shaping one's sense of self and place in the world.

*P4: Oh, 100%. 100%, yeah definitely, in a positive way. And almost an acceptance way. I know I keep using that word... But I do feel, uhm... yes that, that of, yeah coming along the journey with them, I feel like I found myself, I feel like I've found my place in this, in this world.*

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It underscores the importance of cultural and communal connections in shaping a positive and resilient self-concept amidst the complexities of migration.

Participant 5 also discovered a sense of self during this process, asserting, "Because I was born here, I feel that London is my home." While acknowledging the impact of migration on her upbringing, going through her mother's story and her mother's cultural identity led her to the conclusion that she is a Londoner. Although she recognises the influence of her mother's culture on her "British meal one day, Caribbean meal the other day," reflecting on her mother's past and making the Story Cloth on her mother's narrative made her conclude that she is a Londoner, it is where she is born and where she identifies with. This sense of self, as revealed through participants' narratives, echoes existing literature on the transformative power of storytelling and understanding one's migration journey. It also aligns with research by Rong and Fitchet (2008) who state that it is beneficial for migrants to acknowledge the effects that their migration experience had on their identities to mitigate some of the negative psychological stressors and live a more successful life in their host country.

It underscores the importance of cultural and communal connections in shaping a positive and resilient self-concept amidst the complexities of migration.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza*



## 5.2 Super-Ordinate Theme II: Community Connection and Collective Identity

The project and its subsequent exhibitions served as catalysts for diverse community engagement, forging connections among individuals of various ages, backgrounds, and life experiences. Despite the inherent challenges in connecting with others, as observed in contexts such as teaching (Karalis & Raikou, 2020), all participants emphasized the significance of being part of a group. This overarching theme not only underscores the profound influence of both external (wider community) and internal (workshop members) community connections but also illuminates the evolution of a collective identity through the shared journey of *Traces: Stories of Migration*.

### Subtheme 1: Sense of Belonging

Through their interactions, participants experienced two distinct types of connections: 1) a strong bond with fellow workshop participants and 2) a sense of connection with the broader migrant community. The following quotes serve to exemplify the profound links they established with each other:

*P1: What I found really amazing was to find other people from all ages, from all background, sharing their lives. And finding things in common with them, you know. There are some people that have been through similar kind of experience whether it's with cancer, with illness with bereavement, or with different places they went in the world or they come from. And it's kind of I could identify with them. And, it's always nice to know about other people and their lives.*

*P2: I like to meet the people... I like to meet... Because you know I don't have much friends in here, too many friends, and I like to see different people. To make friends [laugh] or just to meet and we talk together, we did a story about our lives you know. And it's good. It's good to meet other people, different people.*

*P3: We were all very excited to see each other because we had heard each other's stories*

*P6: And then being part of Traces made me feel really joined up and in affinity with other migrants. Londoners cause I'm, I definitely identify as a Londoner.*

*P7: And because it was so, comfortable. Everybody was so accommodating and so I just pushed through my negative feelings.*

*P8: I feel more connected to other members of the community.*





*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

When speaking about the other project members they met, all participants expressed a tone of enjoyment. This sentiment was echoed by P3's use of the inclusive pronoun "we," indicating complete integration of fellow participants into her workshop experience. Both P1 and P3 used impactful language, such as "very excited" and "really amazing," emphasizing the positive impact of the shared experience. The responses support prior research, highlighting the role of community and social engagement in mitigating negative impacts of migration (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

In contrast to the potential alienation and loneliness that can arise during the acculturation process, participating in *Traces: Stories of Migration* appeared to cultivate a strong sense of belonging among participants. This sense of belonging appeared to emanate from a range of factors, with particular emphasis on 1) a shared identity as migrants, and 2) the act of sharing personal migration stories. The common identification as migrants appeared to create a shared bond, a notion supported by research emphasizing the role of similarities enhance interpersonal connections. This concept also the Social Identity perspective, suggesting that feelings of group belonging stem from perceived intragroup similarities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The shared identity appeared to facilitate bonding between participants, as illustrated by P6's use of the phrase "other migrants," signifying her identification and connection with fellow migrants. The act of sharing migration stories appeared to nurture a bond of empathy,

connection, and cohesion, emphasizing a collective journey despite diverse experiences. This observation is consistent with psychological research that recognises storytelling as a tool for creating and solidifying social bonds, thereby facilitating social cohesion (Mellmann, 2012). P3's quote "We were all very excited to see each other because we had heard each other's stories" highlights the significance of this shared experience in facilitating cohesion. The shared vulnerability involved in disclosing personal migration stories, coupled with the shared context of living in the same community, seemed to fortify a sense of belonging, emphasizing that participants were not alone in their respective journeys.

Moreover, the design and execution of *Traces* workshops emerged as a key factor in creating these participant connections, as highlighted by P8 and P1:

*P8: But I've got through that, and I don't... I would have not done that without, you know, without the support and the sort of collaborative feeling in the workshop.*

*P1: Yeah, yeah. I'm a very social person on one hand, but on the other hand I'm very shy, so I don't necessarily talk freely to people. But the workshop was set in a way that we were doing things at the same time: the sewing, the textile etc, and sharing our ideas. So, it was ok not to talk but it was ok also to share our ideas. And I shared my life with them openly. I felt comfortable enough to do that. That was great. So, the ladies that were there and helping us, made us feel comfortable enough to do that.*

*P1: And I loved talking to the people as well who organised all the workshops who were really welcoming, and open-minded and encouraging us to share our views, and talk a lot about our piece and helped us. And think about how we would want to present our textile piece. And that was not easy for people who were, who have, I have no idea about textile and fashion etc. Hum, so getting their support, that was great as well.*

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Both participants praised the group's supportive and inclusive atmosphere, highlighting the workshop's effectiveness in fostering strong interpersonal connections.

Like P3, P1 utilised the pronoun "us," emphasising a profound sense of belonging within the group. Both participants praised the group's supportive and inclusive atmosphere, highlighting the workshop's effectiveness in fostering strong interpersonal connections. Considering the personal and often challenging nature of sharing stories, especially those related to personal life events, the group's welcoming ambience emerged as pivotal to the success and cohesion of its members. P1's statement: "but on the other hand, I'm very shy, so I don't necessarily talk freely to people," emphasizes the importance of overcoming shyness. Other participants echoed the challenge of shyness and difficulty initiating friendships. This challenge was heightened by participants expressing the personal and significant nature of their stories, coupled with the fact that they had never shared them with others before. For example, P7 described her story as "intimate and personal." The workshop's thoughtful design which created a safe and open space, appeared to be a critical factor in helping participants overcome fears and share their stories openly. P1's statement, "I shared my life with them openly," stands as a testament to the workshop's success in fostering an atmosphere conducive to vulnerability and connection.

The benefits of the workshop's openness in building connections are supported by Hall (2009), who identified factors such as freedom to participate without fear of criticism as contributing to a sense of belonging. Research has also found that a feeling of belonging is associated with connection,

attachment, membership, and relatedness (Ryan, 1995). These aspects are demonstrated by P3's sense of being cared for during sessions and further elaborated by P5 regarding the feeling of being linked to other participants.

Relating back to participatory art, this medium serves as a significant avenue for fostering resident creativity. However, they often face challenges related to crafting initiatives that genuinely empower communities by addressing a spectrum of issues and grasping nuanced local perspectives. Central to this empowerment is the cultivation of a collective and creative process, prominently achieved through collaborative workshops. P8's quote underscores the pivotal role of mutual support and sense of belonging within the group, particularly in aiding individuals like participant P8 to overcome psychological barriers during the creative journey. This highlights the workshops' effectiveness in not only fostering individual growth but also establishing a robust sense of rapport and community engagement, solidifying their impact within the participatory art framework.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops November 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

## **Subtheme 2: Understanding Within the Community**

This subtheme directly ties into the impact of the exhibitions. Participants expressed hopes that the exhibition would foster a sense of understanding within the community regarding the vast experiences of their fellow community members.

*P7: There is always this divide, and I know, yeah, it's being able to see yourself and kind of understand everyone in your community and what they've gone through in their individual journeys. I think hopefully we'll bring a more connected society.*

*P8: A big part of the exhibition was to really get the wider community to come see and get a better understanding of the people that live in their community.*

P7's insight sheds light on the existing divide within the community, emphasizing the importance of understanding the unique journeys of fellow community members. By expressing the hope for a more connected society, P7 underscores the transformative potential of exhibitions like *Traces: Stories of Migration* in bridging gaps and fostering understanding. Similarly, P8 addresses a key objective of the exhibition, aiming to

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Fostering an appreciation for the migrant's culture among individuals from the dominant culture not only enhances understanding but also addresses the unique needs of those who have migrated.

encourage the broader community to actively participate and gain a deeper understanding of their neighbours. The emphasis on fostering understanding through the exhibition highlights a perceived need for increased awareness and empathy within the community.

Relating back to research, this echoes the benefits of shared understanding and integration in mitigating feelings of loss and grief during the acculturation process. Fostering an appreciation for the migrant's culture among individuals from the dominant culture not only enhances understanding but also addresses the unique needs of those who have migrated (Sam & Berry, 2016). Participatory art, such as sharing Story Cloths with members of the host community, plays a pivotal role in fostering empathy and understanding towards the journeys and experiences migrants undergo. By displaying these narratives in an exhibition, the Story Cloths have the potential to build positive attitudes and perspectives towards migration within the local community. This, in turn, may contribute to a more supportive and inclusive acculturative environment, mitigating acculturative stress for migrants.

### Subtheme 3: Learning from and Teaching Each Other

This sub-theme explores the central role of collaboration and mutual learning within the workshop, exploring how participants shared and gained insights that enriched their personal narratives while crafting their Story Cloths.

*P1: So, it came with the support of, of one of the ladies. She was kind of saying well, this symbol would fit with that and that in your representation and in the end that's true, I ended up with just a few things, and it actually came together really nicely and I'm happy with it.*

*P2: I even helped the people as well. You need to help. If they need for something, for some reason, I like to help, you know [chuckle].*

*P4: I think being there every week and seeing the other skills that everybody else brought to the table, the printing with the painting, the other hand embroidery skills, and there's one where we transferred photographs onto a cloth. So, from that I gained an immense amount of knowledge, that I can take away as well.*

*P4: Although I brought my own skill to the table, I think I took more away from it.*

P1's narrative underscores the collaborative essence of the project. She acknowledges the pivotal support she received from a fellow participant who helped her navigate the representation of symbols on her Story Cloth. The collaborative effort not only streamlined her creative process but also contributed to a cohesive and satisfying outcome. This highlights the interconnectedness and support present within the *Traces* group, creating an environment conducive to meaningful storytelling.

In a similar vein, P2 sheds light on the reciprocity of assistance within the workshop. Expressing a willingness to help others, P2 emphasizes the importance of mutual aid and community spirit. Her proficiency in various handicrafts allowed her to contribute valuable skills to the group, fostering an environment where participants actively supported one another. This reciprocity adds another layer to the inclusivity and care evident within the community of participants.

The reflections of both P1 and P2 depict a collaborative and caring environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their skills as well as weakness. This environment is further emphasized in P4's quote, where she acknowledges the substantial contribution of the group to her learning. Despite her role as a teacher, P4 recognizes that the workshop provided her with valuable insights and perspectives through the shared experiences and expertise of other participants.

*P7: That really opened up a whole new way of just thinking about London really for me.*

P7's statement introduces a transformative aspect to the learning process, suggesting that engaging with fellow participants opened up new perspectives about London for her. This change in perception is indicative of the profound impact of collective exploration and understanding within the group. Kellas et al.'s (2020) study on group interactions aligns with this, indicating that shared experiences and adopting others' perspectives contribute to individuals' well-being. P7's experience of exchanging with other participants is framed as a positive and enlightening journey, emphasizing the power of group dynamics in collectively making sense of their pasts and fostering a supportive environment for personal growth.

In summary, Subtheme 3 highlights the collaborative nature of the workshop, where participants not only share their stories but actively engage in a reciprocal process of learning and teaching, creating a space that nurtures empathy, understanding, and personal development.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops June 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



## 5.3 Super-Ordinate Theme III: Value of Participatory Art

Collating the above and considering the interviews, this theme examines the value of participatory art through four subthemes: Process of Remembering, Process of Making, Self-Development and Learning, and Giving Voice.

### **Subtheme 1: Process of Remembering**

Drawing from the psychological literature on autobiographical memory, this subtheme delves into the participants' experiences of remembering during the storytelling workshops and the creative process, exploring how engaging in autobiographical reasoning via the creation of Story Cloths may have facilitated a deeper understanding of their past experiences and contributed to shaping or understanding their identities.

*P5: It was really nice because it brought me and my mum closer, asking her the questions and kind of finding... making her share her memories which she had kind of locked up.*

*P1: Because it made me reflect on my past experiences, and I enjoyed that very much.*

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The act of asking questions and delving into memories facilitated a closeness that extended beyond the creative process.

P5's account reveals the impact of the workshop on her understanding of her migration past and relationship with her mother. The act of asking questions and delving into memories facilitated a closeness that extended beyond the creative process. It also helped P5 learn about her mother, as exemplified in her quote "it was lovely you know, finding things about her dad, her relationship with her father." P1 similarly expresses the significance of reflecting on past experiences, suggesting that the reflective process allowed for a different angle of exploration in understanding her migration experiences. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of providing migrants with opportunities to explore and understand themselves in a new cultural context, mitigating the negative effects of acculturation and cultural identity reprisals (Doker, 1998)

P1 further expounds on the transformative nature of the workshop, sharing how the textile workshops served as a pivotal state in her personal journey.

*P1: Like I said, because it helped me think of my past. I've been through lots and lots of traumas, experiences, like everybody else, I guess. A lot of experiences in my life. I've been through... you know.... I'm going through bereavement and loss and doing that piece of textile made me think of the past and come to term with my first marriage and come to term with bereavement.... The textile*

*kind of was a stage that I needed to do in a way. In my journey. And it helped me just close that little gap I needed to do.*

P1 explained how her perspective on migration changed over time and how she realized it during the workshop. This reconnection with the past, interpreted as engaging in autobiographical reasoning, allowed her to come to terms with past traumas, bereavement, and her first marriage, leading to a change in self-perception. This aligns with Hamermas and Bluck's (2000) findings emphasizing how autobiographical reasoning aids individuals in making sense of their past and shaping their identity. The workshop, by activating autobiographical reasoning, becomes a catalyst for a shift in self-perception, contributing to the closure of emotional gaps and aiding participants in their journeys of self-discovery and recovery.

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The act of remembering and revisiting experiences, as illustrated in P1's quote, demonstrates how these processes can facilitate closure and healing.

Moreover, P1's narrative underscores the accessible nature of the memory recall process for participants, suggesting that engaging in autobiographical reasoning was a readily accessible and therapeutic process for most. The act of remembering and revisiting experiences, as illustrated in P1's quote, demonstrates how these processes can facilitate closure and healing. This aligns with prior research highlighting the significance of self-reflection and self-awareness in the recovery from difficult and traumatic experiences (Levy, 1998).

*P4: Reflecting about how much my mum had sort of like, had this impact on me in my childhood and still does now, and I do, I do, I mean I do respect my mum and I love her for, being a mum. But, I struggle with that relationship because, this cloth, even more so now because since I've been doing this cloth, it's brought back all those feelings from my childhood, it's really strange.*

P4's reflection on her relationship with her mother demonstrates the intricate link between the act of creating Story Cloths and emotional recall. The cloth, serving as a tangible representation of her memories, brings forth complex feelings from her childhood. This illustrates how the process of creating Story Cloths can be emotionally charged, acting as a catalyst for the recollection of past emotions and experiences.

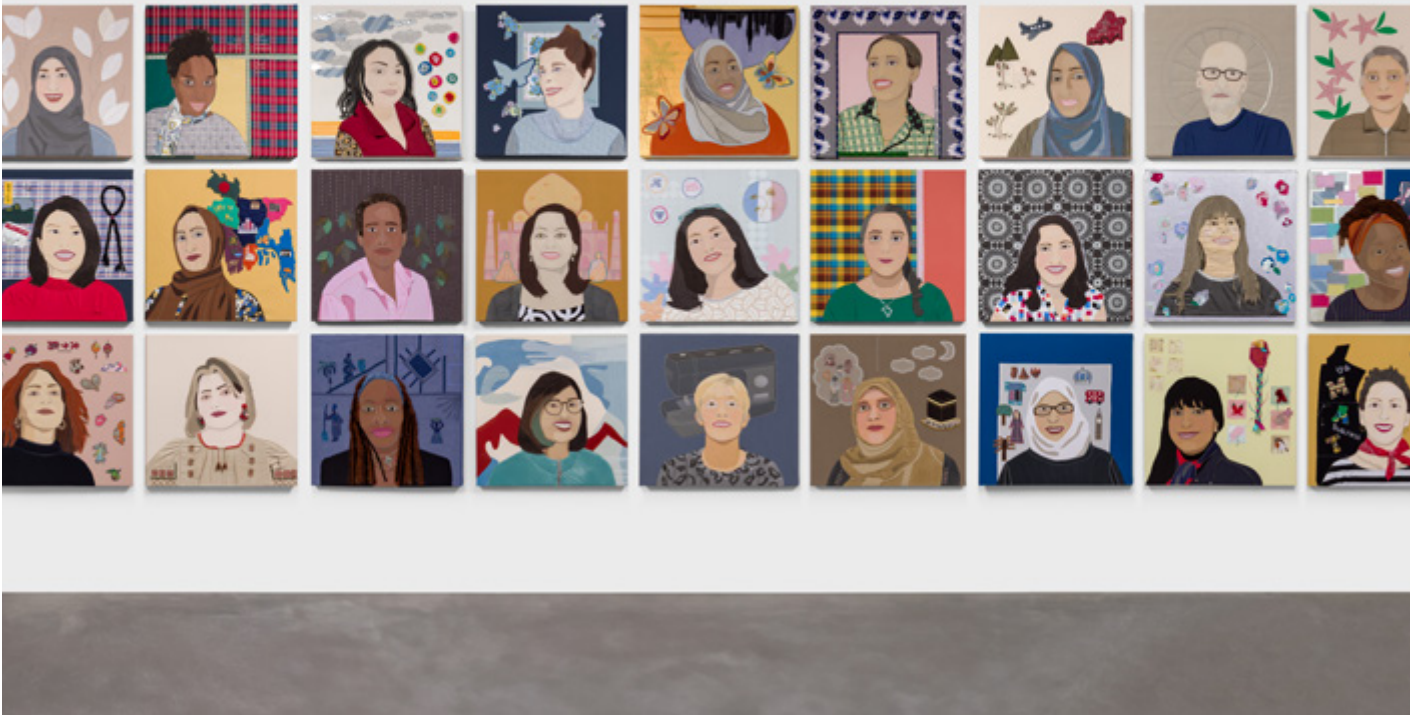
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By incorporating autobiographical reasoning and creative expression, these sessions provide individuals with a space not only to remember their past experiences but also to reinterpret them in ways that foster personal growth and emotional healing.

In summary, this subtheme highlights the therapeutic and transformative potential of participatory art workshops. By incorporating autobiographical reasoning and creative expression, these sessions provide individuals with a space not only to remember their past experiences but also to reinterpret them in ways that foster personal growth and emotional healing. The combination of artistic expression and introspective processes underscores the profound impact that participatory art can have on individuals' well-being and sense of identity.

## **Subtheme 2: Self-Development, Learning and Inspiration**

This subtheme further delves into the transformative aspect of participatory art, focusing on self-development, learning and inspiration within the context of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project. The exploration of personal migration experiences not only provided participants with valuable insights but also catalysed a deeper understanding of their identity and ignited creative passions. The experiences within the workshop, despite the challenges faced, inspired many participants to further explore their migration journeys and creative endeavours beyond the project's scope.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
 Portraits by Lucy Orta exhibited  
 at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
 Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

For example, P1’s statement, “It was an opportunity for me to explore my migration again, from a different angle,” indicates that the workshop served as a platform for participants to reflect and gain new perspectives on their migration experiences, leading to personal growth and self-discovery. This aligns with the transformative potential of participatory art, acting as a catalyst for self-development and learning. The project encouraged participants to revisit and reinterpret their migration stories, contributing to personal growth and a deeper understanding of their cultural identity.

Participants acknowledged the challenges inherent in the project, both psychologically and artistically, as they translated their thoughts and feelings into tangible works. Regarding the psychological difficulties, the personal nature of the stories added pressure to accurately represent them. However, as participants shared how they overcame these challenges, there was a noticeable sense of joy in their voices. For instance:

*P8: I think being brave enough to actually make my work... But I got through it.*

*P1: So, coming back home and thinking about how I could interpret my mind on the piece of cloth. That was a challenge. I cannot [inaudible] but too many ideas but to actually make it into one project. It was a really great experience.*

*P4: What I did find very hard at first, it’s, because it’s so important, I wanted to get it right.*

Overcoming such challenges holds psychological significance. Research indicates that navigating challenging experiences can lead to positive



psychological growth, fostering a deeper sense of self and purpose (Kuo, 2014). The ability to overcome obstacles contributes to resilience, acting as a protective factor against depression and anxiety. In the context of migration, cultivating resilience becomes crucial in mitigating the impact of acculturation and other factors, including negative attitudes from the host culture (Kuo, 2014).

*P1: I do. I do. I do definitely feel proud about it*

*P7: I'm excited to have it back as well and to have it in my own house. It will be something that I'll give to my daughter and I'm hoping that she will now continue adding to the generations that come afterwards.*

Moreover, participants expressed pride and inspiration from the project. P1's and P7's sense of pride, suggests that the creative process and successful completion of the artwork contributed to a positive sense of self-worth. Many participants expressed an interest in continuing their artistic practice, highlighting the inspiration drawn from overcoming challenges and discovering new creative interests. For example:

*P6: It felt really relaxing. It felt really encouraging. And it felt like I'd want to continue. I'd want to continue. I'd want to continue and being able to create something.*

*P7: Seeing the course through has made me feel more comfortable and made me realise that there's no wrong, there's no right when it comes to art, it's just about creating your vision and even your own vision can change and it's just about allowing the process to take part rather than panicking that something is right or wrong or give up. So I do feel more confident in that saying. Yea, I'm more confident sitting down at home and trying stuff.*

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The transformative journey within the project not only empowered individuals to navigate challenges but also ignited a passion for continued exploration and creative expression.

In summary, this subtheme underscores the multifaceted impact of participatory art on participants' lives, encompassing self-development, learning, and inspiration. The transformative journey within the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project not only empowered individuals to navigate challenges but also ignited a passion for continued exploration and creative expression. The psychological literature on resilience and positive growth aligns with the observed benefits, highlighting the potential of participatory art in fostering well-being and personal development.

### **Subtheme 3: Giving Voice**

This subtheme accentuates the empowering role of participatory art in providing individuals with a platform to give voice to their migration experiences. The creation of Story Cloths and active engagement in the project allowed participants to express their narratives both verbally and visually, offering a meaningful outlet for their experiences.

P8's reflection, "It will be nice like... perhaps feeling identified," encapsulates the potential impact of the project in breaking the silence surrounding certain aspects of migration experiences. By providing a voice to these memories, participants not only empowered themselves but also contributed to a collective narrative that challenges societal perceptions.

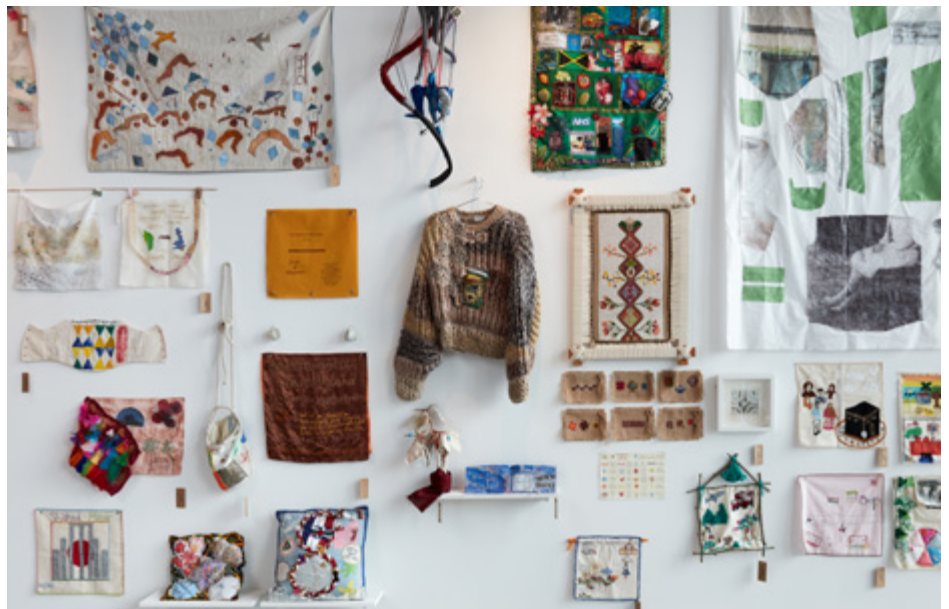
P1 further illustrates the theme of giving voice, stating, “Because for many years I’ve kept, uhm, the sadness and pain inside of me.” This highlights the cathartic nature of the project, allowing participants to articulate and share emotions that were previously internalized. The act of verbalizing and visually representing their experiences becomes a transformative process that not only facilitates personal healing but also adds layers to the broader discourse on migration.

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By breaking the silence around certain aspects of migration, participants become agents of change, challenging stereotypes, and fostering understanding within society.

The subtheme suggests that, beyond personal catharsis, the act of giving voice contributes to a broader social dialogue. By breaking the silence around certain aspects of migration, participants become agents of change, challenging stereotypes, and fostering understanding within society. This was exemplified in Subtheme 2: Understanding within the community. This aligns with the notion that participatory art can serve as a catalyst for societal change by amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives.

In essence, Subtheme 3 emphasizes the transformative power of participatory art in providing individuals with a platform to give voice to their migration experiences. It not only facilitates personal expression and healing but also contributes to a larger narrative that challenges societal perceptions and fosters a more inclusive understanding of migration.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

#### **Subtheme 4: Process of Making**

This subtheme delves into the significance of the process of making within *Traces: Stories of Migration*, shedding light on the effects that emerge from the act of creation. The participants’ accounts reveal the intricate interplay between therapeutic and self-reflective aspects entwined with the tangible act of crafting their Story Cloths. This emphasizes the crucial role of the process of making in participatory art projects and aligns with the broader understanding in socially engaged practices, participatory art, and art therapy that values the journey of creation over the final product.

The notion that the process involved in creating the piece of art is more valuable than the outcome aligns with literature in participatory art, where the emphasis on the experiential and communal aspects is paramount. This approach recognizes the transformative potential embedded in the act of creation itself, fostering personal growth and communal connection.

- P1: Because it made me reflect on my past experiences and I enjoyed very much the doing things. So, coming back home and thinking about how I could interpret my mind on the piece of cloth.*
- P1: Once I started, I didn't think of anything else. I was so focused on my task. It helped escape. It's like an escape.*
- P1: But the workshop was set in a way that we were doing things at the same time: the sewing, the textile etc, and sharing our ideas. So, it was ok not to talk but it was ok also to share our ideas. And, I shared my life with them openly.*
- P4: I know this is like, really going deep, but I do feel that doing this, bringing it onto the cloth, really allowed me to really understand who I really am and where I am in society today and how it helps me getting acceptance in, in where I am now, it's that send of acceptance in my, in my wellbeing and yea.*
- P3: It was a really good focus, it was interesting like, to try and make it a visual thing.*

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Here, the act of creating serves as a catalyst for reflection, providing participants with an avenue to revisit their past experiences while deriving joy from the creative process.

P1's reflections underscore the dual nature of the process: "Because it made me reflect on my past experiences, and I enjoyed very much the doing things. So, coming back home and thinking about how I could interpret my mind on the piece of cloth." Here, the act of creating serves as a catalyst for reflection, providing participants with an avenue to revisit their past experiences while deriving joy from the creative process. Additionally, P1 notes, "I didn't think of anything else. I was so focused on my task. It helped escape. It's like an escape." This immersive quality of the creative endeavour acts as a form of temporary detachment from external concerns, offering participants a meditative space for self-exploration, which may have helped facilitated the positive effects documented above.

P4's reflections delve into the psychological impact: "I know this is like, really going deep, but I do feel that doing this, bringing it onto the cloth, really allowed me to really understand who I really am and where I am in society today and how it helps me get acceptance in my well-being." This articulates how the act of translating personal experiences onto fabric becomes a vehicle for self-discovery, identity exploration, and societal acceptance. Such sentiments echo findings in psychological literature that highlight the therapeutic benefits of creative expression.

P3 contributes to the subtheme by emphasizing the focus and interest generated by the process: "It was a really good focus; it was interesting to try and make it a visual thing." The act of making, in this context, transforms into a method of translating personal narratives into a tangible and visually expressive form, enhancing the participants' connection with their own stories.

In summary, Subtheme 4 underscores the transformative power embedded in the process of making within the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project. The act of creation is not merely a means of artistic expression but a dynamic and therapeutic process that intertwines personal reflection, communal engagement, and self-discovery. This subtheme aligns with the broader literature on participatory art, acknowledging the intrinsic value of the journey of creation and the transformative potential inherent in the process itself.

1. Introduction
  2. Literature Review
  3. The Study Aims
  4. Method
  5. Results and Discussion
  6. **Conclusions**
- References

# Conclusions

6

Human migration, a longstanding aspect of our existence, intricately weaves into the cultural fabric of nations, shaping their global connections. In the United Kingdom, migration has been instrumental in fostering economic prosperity, contributing to the public service workforce, and enriching the nation's cultural diversity.

Despite its historical significance, recent years have seen migration become a sensitive topic, influencing political discourse in the UK. This research specifically explores the impact of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project on the well-being and identity of first and second generation migrants in east London.

The findings of this research underscore the impact of migration within the context of participatory art, particularly examining the use of textile craft and storytelling devices. The themes unearthed in this research align with literature exploring the challenges of migration. Acculturation, a central aspect of the migration process, emerges as a crucial element influencing participant's identity formation. The participants' narratives, especially within the sub-theme "Being a Migrant," echo the acculturation strategies outlined by Berry (2015). The struggles of assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration, as discussed in the literature, are apparent in the personal stories shared during the project. The process of reshaping cultural identity, particularly related to feelings of loss and grief, mirrors the challenges highlighted by Guler and Berman (2019) and Bhugra (2004). Acculturation's psychological distresses, including identity loss and mental health concerns, are corroborated by the participants' experiences, emphasizing the need for supportive interventions like participatory art.

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The participants' engagement with storytelling and revisiting their migration narratives facilitated a deeper understanding of their origins, contributing to a profound sense of self.

Findings within the sub-themes "Being a Migrant" and "Sense of Self" align with the literature on autobiographical reasoning explored in the literature review section of this research. The participants' engagement with storytelling and revisiting their migration narratives facilitated a deeper understanding of their origins, contributing to a profound sense of self. The role of textile craft, particularly making Story Cloths, in providing tangible connections to migration narratives resonates with the literature on meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction through creative activities (Malchiodi, 2002). The research findings extend the understanding of how participatory art, specifically textile craft, positively influences the mental health of migrants by providing avenues for autobiographical reasoning and self-event connections.

Socially engaged practices, discussed in the literature, find real-world application in the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project. The collaborative nature of socially engaged art, focusing on human interaction and social discourse, aligns with the community connection and collective identity theme. The participants expressed how the project fostered a sense of belonging and understanding within the community, countering feelings of alienation—a sentiment also highlighted in the literature. The potential of participatory art, especially Story Cloths, to bridge gaps between different community members echoes the literature on fostering appreciation for immigrant cultures among individuals from the dominant culture. Research revealed that the workshops facilitated a collaborative, inclusive, and interactive approach. The emphasis on the process over the resulting artworks, shared experiences, and democratizing the creative process aligns with the participatory nature of the research initiative. The convergence of the historical narrative of migration within the fashion and textile industry and the contemporary findings of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project highlights the enduring influence of migration on creative practices.

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The study underscores the transformative potential of creative expression, especially in the form of storytelling and textile crafts, as a means of navigating the complex landscape of migration.

The implications of these findings are substantial for participatory art initiatives. The study underscores the transformative potential of creative expression, especially in the form of storytelling and textile crafts, as a means of navigating the complex landscape of migration. Beyond individual self-discovery, the communal engagement facilitated by projects like *Traces: Stories of Migration* holds promise for enhancing the well-being of migrant populations. Participatory creative practices and textile crafts, as illustrated in this study, can serve as powerful storytelling devices to visualize the movement of people. The creation of Story Cloths emerged as a tangible and visual representation of individual migration narratives. These artifacts not only encapsulate personal stories but also become a collective visual archive, contributing to a broader understanding of the diverse journeys within the migrant community.

In conclusion, this study not only contributes to the understanding of migration's impact but also underscores the crucial role of participatory art in navigating identity complexities, fostering community bonds, and challenging societal narratives. The findings highlight that the artistic process, particularly through participatory creative practices and textile crafts, significantly influences migrants' self-concept and well-being. Illustrated by the success of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project, participatory art emerges as a powerful tool, enabling individuals to navigate their migrant identities, form meaningful community connections, and contribute to a broader comprehension of migration experiences. The lessons learned emphasize the ongoing importance of utilizing participatory art for promoting inclusivity, resilience, and a more connected society, fostering both community and individual self-expression through visualizations like Story Cloths.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Portraits by Lucy Orta exhibited  
at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

1. Introduction
  2. Literature Review
  3. The Study Aims
  4. Method
  5. Results and Discussion
  6. Conclusions
- References**

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**Professor Lucy Orta** is a visual artist with a socially engaged practice spanning three decades. Lucy has held the Chair of Art and the Environment at the University of the Arts London since 2013, she is a member of the university's Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) and Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN). Her practice research investigates the interrelations between the individual body and community structures, exploring their diverse identities and means of cohabitation. She uses the mediums of drawing, textiles, photography, film and performance to realise singular bodies of work that include *Refuge Wear* and *Body Architecture*, portable and autonomous habitats that reflect on issues of mobility and human survival; *Nexus Architecture*, clothing and accessories that shape modular and collective bodies through the metaphor of the social link; and *Lifeguard*, wearable structures that portray both human vulnerability and resilience. Lucy has developed projects with a wide range of vulnerable groups such as prison residents, refugees and asylum seekers, homeless and care hostel residents. Recent projects *Traces: Stories of Migration* and *Banner Processions* incorporate participatory and inclusive methods that empower participants through creative practice. Her artwork has been exhibited globally in contemporary art museums and biennales and it can be found in public and private collections.

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