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Meaning-making in women's tattooed bodies

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Abstract

Tattooed women's practices of resistance and conformity are constituted within social, cultural, and historical contexts that produce normative values around "good" and "bad" tattoos. Tattoos enable the performance of multiple femininities, constructing the female body in a way that is personal and meaningful to that individual and opening an agentic space in which they can do so. The vast majority of research that is available on tattoos concerns mostly men or, at least, does not fully understand the implications of specific gendered discourses that regulate the (feminine) body. In this paper, we argue that meaning-making for women's tattoos serves to function as legitimating, producing tattooed feminine bodies as more acceptable. We argue for a closer examination of the regulatory discourses that feed into the choices that women make in relation to their tattooed bodies.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Dominant discourses of femininity regulate women, establishing expectation about how to dress, act, and behave (Lawler, 2005). Femininity is not a "one size fits all" concept – there are many ways of embodying femininities. Walter (2010) suggests that a sense of choice is key to Western women's experiences of femininity – they can choose to conform to or resist stereotypes of womanliness. This neoliberal construct is not a straightforward force for good, however. Whilst choice sounds like a positive construct, it is first always a constrained choice. In addition, as McRobbie (2009) has pointed out, choice itself has become a regulative construct. Therefore, the choices that women make are already restricted to what is acceptable and oppressed within culturally restricted boundaries. Feminine styles of clothing and dress, for example, are entrenched in classed gender boundaries, with more subtle and sophisticated styles being associated with middle-class women (Kuleva, 2015). In reference to tattoos, we find

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that the way that women adorn their bodies with tattoos feeds into the complex picture of how they simultaneously conform to and/or resist against these boundaries.

Tattoos on the body represent a rich and diverse cultural and social history of the wearer and will differ from person to person. Tattooed women's practices of resistance and conformity are constituted within social, cultural, and historical contexts that produce normative values around "good" and "bad" tattoos. In neoliberal culture, women navigate complex classed and gendered constructions of the feminine tattooed body, for which others read their bodies as good or not. Women are held accountable for their bodies in terms of what is deemed as acceptable in appearance and behaviour; even hegemonic notions of femininity are projected onto women's bodies that have been adorned with tattoos (Thomas, 2012), thus producing further complexities. Through becoming tattooed, however, women are able to challenge some of the oppressions imposed upon the body –

> *simultaneously occupying competing spaces of object, subject and process; practices of the commodification of the body and embodied subversion become complex sites for the re/negotiation of femininities and constructed feminine beauty standards. (Craighead, 2011, p. 45)*

In this regard, tattoos enable the performance of multiple femininities, constructing a complex negotiation between conformity and resistance that is imbued with regulated choice. The vast majority of research that is available on tattooed bodies concerns mostly men (Cronin, 2001; Goldstein, 2007; Guéguen, 2012) or, at least, does not fully understand the implications that gender has with regard to body adornment (Horne, Knox, Zusman, & Zusman, 2007; Manuel & Sheehan, 2007). Literature fails to understand the specific gendered discourses that regulate the feminine body.

In this paper, we argue the position that meaning-making for women's tattoos serves to function as legitimating, producing tattooed feminine bodies as more acceptable. Whilst tattooing is no longer solely related to men, the ways that the gendered discourses are produced on the bodies of women specifically needs careful examination. For tattooed women, the meaningful tattoo allows for the "right" kind of construction of the tattooed feminine body, through a navigation of adherence to cultural and social norms, the performance of the right kind of femininity, and a production of authenticity, which is personal. We argue for a closer examination of the regulatory discourses that feed into the choice that women make in relation to their tattooed bodies (and how these choices are governed).

2 | MEANINGFUL TATTOOS AS ADHERING TO SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS

Tattoos form a part of many cultures around the world, but in Western society, they produce their own social and cultural meanings. These meanings are governed by social and cultural norms, whereby doing tattoos the "right" way therefore constructs the wearer a "good" person (Dann, 2018). We found that when tattoos are contextualised through meaning, it produces a more acceptable body, especially in relation to women.

Social and cultural norms relating to tattooed feminine bodies have regulative elements, allowing for both conformity to and resistance against them (Foucault, 1976). However, what must be noted is that the norms relating to tattooed feminine bodies have and are changing over time, and whilst something may have been acceptable at one time, it may not be now. In this sense, norms lend themselves to social trends, including those relating to fashion. In exploring meanings of the fashionable tattoo, Kjeldgaad and Bengtsson (2005) find that tattoos are

> *comparable to other consumption practices where people seek to beautify their bodies according to current fashion norms. (p. 172)*

Tattoos that may have been produced as meaningful at one time for the women may now be seen as a relic of a past time period – though that time period has elapsed, the body is left with the tattoo and is open to reinscription in relation to meaning from others. An example of this can be seen through the "tramp stamp" (Dann, Callaghan, & Fellin, 2016) – a tattoo on the lower part of a woman's back, a trending location a decade ago, but now is seen as an embarrassing

memento linked to promiscuity and negative associations. It must be noted that there is no equivalent derogatory term for tattoos on the bodies of men – this is key for understanding why meaning-making is more central for women's bodies.

Meaning-making serves a number of functions, both for the wearer and for those who the tattoos are communicated to. Tattoos that have a personal connection or hold meaning for the wearer are positioned as more acceptable (Kang & Jones, 2007), as the tattoo is seen to have a purpose and is not seen as mere decoration. In Western societies, meaningful tattoos are often expressed as symbols of remembrance for family members, mementos of important life events, or unique expressions of the self (DeMello, 2000). The issue is that, despite meaning to the wearer, this may not be evident to others. As tattoos are not often associated with traditional constructions of "good" femininity (Swami & Furnham, 2007), the design, location, and size of a tattoo provide a construction of femininity that is acceptable or not. Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn (2004) highlight small, dainty, and feminine designs as such examples that are read as feminine. Within gendered discourses of women's bodies, the "right" choice should be made in relation to the tattoo, such as personal narratives (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009), and whereby feminine imagery supports the meaningful, feminine tattoo as the "right" way for women to "do" a tattoo.

Regardless of the gendered nature that tattoo imagery can suggest (Doss & Hubbard, 2009), thinking more broadly, tattoos themselves are not always deemed as appropriate for women. There is plenty of research that indicates people's perceptions of visibly tattooed women are negative – promiscuous, heavy drinkers, unattractive (Swami & Furnham, 2007). In reference to McRobbie's (2009) work, this illustrates how gendered discourses materialise through the female body – social discourses of "good" femininity and tattooed bodies intertwine, producing gender-specific connotations. The perceptions of tattoos on women's bodies by others form part of the discourse that produces meaning as important in justifying, and therefore accepting, tattooed feminine bodies. Therefore, regardless of how the women conform to and/or resist against dominant constructions of femininities, they are still governed in respect to appropriate tattoo choices.

3 | MEANING AS PERFORMING "GOOD" FEMININITY

In producing the tattoo as meaningful, women serve to construct a sense of self that is "good" – they are able to demonstrate "good femininity" through their tattoo choices. In particular relation to women's tattooed bodies, this is demonstrated through the links to care roles and the family, the "marking" of the body with family names, as well as success via representations of strength when considering mental health.

The meaning of the tattoos is often bound up in personal narratives – of family, community, of belonging – narratives bound up in gendered discourses of care and of belonging. These echo an "ethic of care" (Gilligan, 1977), which enables women to position their tattoos as feminine and "appropriate." In this way, women's positioning as caring and loyal to family tradition becomes etched on their skin. The focus on family tradition helps them navigate a positive subject position, aligned with "good femininity." To look after the family, to care, and to nurture are considered feminine traits (MacRae, 1995). The emphasis on meaning also fits clearly with the idea of the self-regulating, therapeutic subject (Guilfoyle, 2016; Rose, 1998). Further, this focus on meaning positions tattoos as reflected choices, not empty decoration, underscoring the current neoliberal construct of the choosing subject.

The reflected choice extends beyond the self too, as the tattoo itself provides a permanent link to a specific community (DeMello, 2000), be that family, a group to identify with, or friends, and provides a sense of belonging. The tattoo takes on significance following a possible event, or memory, by becoming an emblem and a physical manifestation of something to remember (Kosut, 2000). This emblem serves as a stable and permanent reminder of relationships, of change, and of important events. In this respect, the wearer can produce a detailed and specific narrative that justifies the importance of their tattoo to others. Tattoos can offer a method of communication for those who cannot easily put their emotions into words (Kosut, 2000), rendering the body as articulate. Tattoos are a snapshot of a person's life at a particular time (Fisher, 2002), creating visual memories that detail a particular person, time, or event. Fisher (2002) also notes how tattoos have been described as a totem, symbolising something of importance

to the individual, and even "patching up" metaphorical holes that a person may feel with regard to their self-concept. Through tattoos, the embodied practice of gender can be narrated.

There are, however, tattoos relating to family and care roles that are often not positioned as good or meaningful in the appropriate way for women. The marking of women's bodies with the names of men is a tradition held within gangs, with women being marked as the "property of" their husbands (Thompson, 2015). Regardless of who the name belongs to, it is read by others as follows: This body is owned. This is despite the fact that there is a tradition for men to also tattoo their bodies with the names of women within hearts or roses (Steward, 2008); this is positioned as heartfelt – like young son's inscribing "mom" on their bodies (DeMello, 2014) – rather than an emblem of ownership. This is also seen cross-culturally, with women described as "marking" their skin with the names of their partners (Ellis, 2008). The name of a partner is seen as too obvious – readable, suggesting ownership, and had a history as a working-class emblem of commitment (DeMello, 2014). For a tattoo to be done "right," women's family-related tattoos are constructed as most appropriate when they are not identifiable by name but are instead represented through imagery (Fenske, 2007). This is another way in which women are regulated – as mothers and as partners – in the consideration for their tattoo choices. The "good" tattoo becomes emblematic of good womanhood, tied into their role as carer, partner, mother, and friend (Gilligan, 1982).

The importance of meaningful tattoos can also be seen in literature focusing on mental health (Pitts, 1999), and the potential therapeutic nature of the tattoo. In relation to bodily scars, the tattoo then becomes a part of the transformative and therapeutic process, which enables the therapeutic subject to discuss their mental health in a way that is more socially acceptable, rather than just referring to a scar, for example. In addition, the tattoo can become symbolic of everything that was happening at the time that the tattoo was obtained – the meaning of the tattoo becomes contextually located, a reflection of the passage of time, and therefore, as a form of self-care that serves as a marker of strength (Rose, 1998). Through a therapeutic discourse of confession and personal growth (Rose, 1999), the personally meaningful tattoo enables women to position themselves as "good citizens" (McRobbie, 2004) making good tattoo choices. Rather than being a form of self-harm, as tattoos have previously been positioned, tattoos are reproduced as a form of *self-care*, demonstrating the achievement of good well-being, as opposed to mental health issues, and, furthermore, success as a "good woman" (Miller & Rose, 1997).

4 | MEANINGFUL TATTOOS AS AUTHENTIC

A further important discursive formation relates to the way that women draw on an idea of "meaningfulness" to justify their tattoos in producing an authentic sense of self. In recent research (Dann, 2018), women have described the shared social meaning of their tattoos as symbols of their connection to others, expressing their sense of belonging and of bonding with family and friends. In this sense, women describe their tattoos as meaningful symbols of belonging and community, positioning them as important markers of identity and connection, permanently inscribing their relationships and narratives of relationships onto their skin. The construction of meaning in women's talk about tattoos functions as a way of *justifying authenticity*. The women use meaning to negotiate their positioning as authentic and good tattooed women.

In communicating authenticity, Patterson and Schroeder (2010) emphasise the communicative potential of the body and discuss how the storytelling narrative plays into a discursive imperative for tattoos to be *authentic* to the wearer. This enables the construction of an authentic (and by extension *inauthentic*) tattooed self, with associations of "goodness," personal integrity, and morality (Schwarz, 2016). By self-positioning as "authentically tattooed," as well as the tattoo being produced as art, an individual might avert the more negative associations of tattooing. In this sense, tattoos are done "right" if they hold meaning to the wearer, and also, that a tattoo without meaning does not produce an authentic sense of self – it comes to represent trends in society, rather than the person (Riley & Cahill, 2005). The notion of authenticity here functions to legitimate the importance of meaning in tattoos and produces a construction of "tackiness" (Dann et al., 2016) in those who do not get their tattoos for the "right" reasons.

In specific relation to the gendered discourses concerned with tattoos that hold meaning, women are able to articulate this meaning in relation to personal narratives surrounding their tattoos. By telling the story of the tattoo through their narratives, women are able to construct the meaning of the tattoo that is personal to them *within* talk – the story itself may not be entirely evident just by looking at the tattoo. The communication needed to understand that tattoo *requires* communication with the woman, not just the non-verbal communication gleaned from seeing the tattoo. It is within these narratives that the meaning can be understood.

In this sense, the tattoo comes to represent a personal way of being, demonstrating a sense of self to be produced in a particular (authentic) way and, by extension, producing a good citizen (McRobbie, 2004). If these personal narratives are not told, a viewer of the tattoos would not necessarily understand the reasoning for the tattoos, or the significance they have in who they relate to and why they were obtained in the first place. Rather than the tattoos being misunderstood, as some research details tattoo imagery can be (Doss & Hubbard, 2009), the narratives that run alongside the tattoos *enhance* their meaning and understanding in a personal way.

Overall, personal narratives are produced as important in relation to tattooed women, and whilst they may be able to choose the tattoo that they feel best represents their story, the stories that are being produced in dialogue are significant to the wearer. These stories are reconstituted in talk over time, showing their contextual and historical locatedness, which underscores the multiplicity of meanings produced in talk. Whilst the imagery might suggest things about the wearer, it is through the co/construction of the stories relating to the tattoos that personal meaning becomes evident. The narratives serve to highlight how tattoos are representative of a certain historical and personal context – reflection back on these times shows the multiplicity of meanings, rather than meaning being one static notion and shows the other things that may influence tattoo choices that had not necessarily been considered at the time (though, we see trends in hindsight). These permanent markers allow a reflection on past experiences, which justifies their being through positioning the women as reflective, good, and therapeutic subjects.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Through the focus on personal meaning, stories evoke a sense of the authenticity of the person *through* the tattoo. In this way, tattoos that have meaning are produced as the "right" way to do a tattoo, as they are personal to the wearer. Tattoos also represent family tradition and show belonging within a family, whether that be as an emblem of what other family members have, visibly showing links, or if it is through carrying on traditions within family that has continued over generations. Tattooed women navigate both an individual subject position, with their tattoos representing their authentic selves, and also a communal position, producing a sense of belonging. It is the multiplicity in meanings produced through gender-specific discourses that create a complex picture for understanding women's bodies.

Producing personal narratives through the skin serves to function as a justifiable means of expression for the women and the important things in their lives that they have represented through their tattoos. The personal narratives that they wish to share must hold an element of meaning to the wearer for them to be justified, therefore showing the regulative discourses of meaning in women's tattoos. Women themselves often deploy the construct of "authenticity" to make sense of their tattoos, whether the meaning they produce relates to family, belonging, or the expression of femininity. Tattoos and the meanings ascribed to them enable women to position themselves as simultaneously conforming to ideals of femininity as well as resisting them. Though importantly, we must understand the societal discourses that regulate women's choices here.

In relation to issues concerning mental health, the move away from stigmatised views has led to tattoos being produced as indicative not of spoiled womanhood but, rather, as emblematic of the "good woman." It does not seem accidental that this sense of personally meaningful tattoos is often achieved through links to family and care. The "authentic" tattoo is a relational object, embedded in personal narratives and the positioning of strength and survival through pain.

In this position paper, we have explored the argument that details some of the complexities surrounding meaning-making in tattooed women. The main point to focus on is that meaning is not a single component – it is built up

through several gender-specific discourses centred around family, health, and good femininity. Through the construction of tattoos being meaningful to the women, it produces an authenticity relating not just to the tattoo but also to the wearer, which makes the tattoos more acceptable to others. However, this is not to say that the production of authenticity is free from the social and cultural constraints placed on women and their bodies – there are still expectations relating to tattoo imagery, size, and location, which allow for a resistance against and/or conformity to contextually located expectations of women. Finally, whilst this paper has discussed some of the complexities that relate to women's bodies, it has not fully explored other appropriate intersections that also form the web of regulation for women, such as class, race, and sexuality. This paper has explored some of the complexities of gendered discourses, covering important areas such as caregiving, family, and belonging. Through taking an intersectional perspective, further research can explore these topic areas as they are interwoven with classed and racialised discourses. If we are to further understand how women conform to and/or resist against regulatory norms, we need to pay attention to the wider societal and cultural discourses within which they sit.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

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