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‘I never want to go back to being that person’ – tattoos as embodiment of strength and identities in the aftermath of abuse



Charlotte Dann

# To start...

- ◉ Previous work considering conformity and agency centred on women and fashion trends
- ◉ PhD - The feminine ideal, flawed: A qualitative exploration of identities, performativity and representations of tattooed women in the UK

This research explores:

- ◉ The ways in which women draw strength from their tattoos, and embody identities through their tattooed bodies, after overcoming abuse
- ◉ The ways in which tattoos can provide meaning and symbolism, with respect to the ways that society required justification for tattoos on the bodies of women

# Intersectionality

- ◉ Women's experiences of violence are overlooked, ignored, misrepresented or silenced (Crenshaw, 2008)
- ◉ Experiences will differ through being a woman, through being of a certain class, and also, through being tattooed (Nash, 2008)
- ◉ Each of these – in addition to many others – adds a new layer to the ways in which lives are experienced

# Embodiment & identities

- ◉ Femininity is something that has been constructed in a heteronormative world to determine how women should feel, behave, and be (Butler, 1990)
- ◉ Young (2001) discusses the creation of practices of body modification that challenge oppressive hegemonic boundaries, especially beauty, gender and sexuality
- ◉ Young, (2005) comments on how through the use of their bodies, identities and embodiment bond together, and gender is expressed through comportment

# Tattoos in research

- ◉ The popularity of tattoos is ever increasing within our society, with research suggesting almost 1 in 5 adults in the UK has a tattoo (Williams, Thomas & Christensen, 2014)
- ◉ Despite their popularity and seeming acceptance in mainstream society, the traditional, negative stereotype for those who bear tattoos is still held (Roberts, 2012)
- ◉ Tattooed women are viewed as promiscuous, heavy drinkers and unattractive (Swami & Furnham, 2007)

# Mental health / self harm literature

- ◎ Tattoos on the bodies of women are often framed negatively wounds, and seen as wounded bodies (Riley, 2002)
- ◎ Seeing tattoos as self-inflicted wounds lacks acknowledgement for complexities in individual narratives (Craighead, 2011)
- ◎ 'Anomalous bodies can be understood as threatening to the social order' (Pitts, 2003, pg.41)

# Interviewee One

'the one I've got on my side is a bird, cus my second name [is the same as a bird] and it's that bird and it's a cage with an open door because I was in a really abusive relationship and I felt like he put me in a box, I couldn't be who I wanted to be (pause) when I finally realised, and got rid of him, and I was like so much better in myself I was like, I want to celebrate this, I never want to go back to being that person, so I got that to remind myself and to be proud of myself every day, for walking away (pause) but the others, I got them because I like them, and, they have built me to be more confident, because like I said the conversation starters, the when people are looking at you, before like I thought they're looking at my legs because they're horrible, but now I think ahh, they're doing it because they're looking at my tattoos and what's there'



# Interviewee one & research

- ◉ The skin as a container (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010)
- ◉ Tattoos enable people to express who they are, display what they have overcome and state how they see themselves within their social world (Anderson, 2014)
- ◉ Rejection of the 'status quo' (Dukes & Stein, 2011)

# Interviewee Two

‘Erm and then I’ve got my sons name, erm and then I’ve got a script, do you want me to read it out? “at some point there will hardly be any one about and it will most likely be just me and you”. I had a bit of crap going on so I just got it done...It’s stuck with me ever since because no matter what happens in your life like, to me like you know, it’s a quote about me and my son, because it will always be me and him’

# Interviewee two & research

- ◎ Skin as modified (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010)
- ◎ Promoting positive self image after stress (Stitz and Pierce, 2013)
- ◎ 'Reading' someone through their skin (MacCormack, 2006)

# Interviewee Three

'I come from an Italian family, so having my belly button pierced, and having my tattoo, obviously didn't go down very well. Erm, well nor did having my son young...erm I lived in a hostel in Peterborough and my son was, he was walking so he was only just walking so he wasn't very old, and erm some guys there, you, you have to get on with people in there to sort of survive well no not survive that the wrong word that sounds like a prison (pause) just to cope with life, and erm, two of my girlfriends that were there well their partners had bought a tattoo kit and was like right who's first, so erm after a bottle of cider and a bit of gentle persuasion it was my very first one'

# Interviewee three & research

- ◎ Skin as projection surface (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010)
- ◎ Serves as a vehicle to mark the passage into adulthood; independence (Kang & Jones, 2007)
- ◎ A reflection of moral character (Mun, Janigo & Johnson, 2012)

# In summary

- ◉ Tattoos enable these women to communicate in a way in which they perhaps do not feel that they are able, and the tattoos represent a symbol of strength for which they are now able to move on and build upon.
- ◉ Further research exploring the intersections with mental health is needed
- ◉ Tattoos can embody strength and identities following from abuse, rather than being seen as abuse itself

# Thank you



# Any questions?