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Embodiment and excess: Constructions of tattooed mothers in the UK

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Introduction

The rise in the popularity of tattoos over the past decade is evident, with recent figures suggesting that 1 in 5 people in the UK have a tattoo (YouGov, 2015). Tattoos are often perceived as a 'masculine practice', heavily raced and classed (Sargent & Corse, 2013), and represented negatively on women's bodies. Tattooed women have been constructed as unattractive, promiscuous and loud (Swami & Furnham, 2007) as well as being linked to displaying aggressive behaviour (Swami et al., 2015). Stereotypes that centre on tattooed bodies are not the only ideologies formed for how women should or should not 'be' – there is also the example of mothering. In UK newspapers, there are discourses produced that centre on ideal motherhood – the way to act, to behave, to dress amongst other things (Hadfield, Rudoie, & Sanderson-Mann, 2007). Young mothers are often vilified for their 'poor choice' to become a mother so young. They are subject to constant surveillance and scrutiny for how they live, including decisions about the 'right' way to spend their money. For these women, choosing to spend money on a tattoo becomes the subject of debate

because, as tattoos do not serve the benefit of the child, they would be

considered another one of those bad choices (McDermott & Graham, 2005). In this paper, we explore the class based focus on tattooed mother's bodies, and unpack the constructions of these bodies as discussed by tattooed mothers. We argue that the discursive policing of the tattooed mother is achieved, at least in part, through a construction of a sense of a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to be a tattooed mother.

The art of tattooing, and particularly being a tattooed woman, challenges dominant middle class constructs of femininity. The Western ideal of femininity is positioned as white and privileged, and mostly excludes body modifications (Holland & Harpin, 2013; Jackson & Vares, 2013). The tattoo has previously been constructed as a way of resisting hegemonic values onto the feminine body (DeMello, 2000). This idea rests on the presumption that tattooing is agentic, and that tattoos enable women to resist oppressive societal norms of embodied femininity (Pitts, 2003). However, this sense of the agentic tattooed body is a partial story, and it is clear that women often remain stigmatised for (and by) these choices (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). For women, tattoos can connect to an aspect of the self, providing visual representations of who they are (Craighead, 2011), as well as taking on meaning for social roles in the future, such as mothering (Mun, Janigo, & Johnson, 2012). The tattooing of children's names on the body of the mother, for example, physically makes permanent the bond between mother and child, and becomes part of her identity (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). We argue that tattoos enable women to challenge the construction of 'mother', and how that role is defined (Kang & Jones, 2007).

Tattoos are a reflection not just of the self as 'woman', but the self as 'mother', and these choices, often constituted as poor, are made in relation to the role of being a mother (Thompson, 2015). Constructions of recklessness and irresponsibility are produced with the literature that considers tattooed mothers. Discourses of tattoos and motherhood are dominant in the discussion of the 'chav', a term which relates to the white, working class (Tyler, 2008). This negative construction vilifies women, at least in part by problematizing their choices as 'bad'. Stereotypically, these choices include being a teenage mother (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009), more specifically a bad mother who lacks control, and displays a body of excess, which includes tattoos (Adams & Raisborough, 2011). This construction has an effect on the way that motherhood is experienced, as those who are tattooed are likely to experience negativity (Inckle, 2009), and be subject to stereotypical constructions of 'other' motherhood. In contrast, recent shifts in the way that tattoos are described has repositioned them as a commodity - a consumer product (Kang & Jones, 2007), a piece of art to value (Craighead, 2011). This opens up a discursive space in which some forms of tattoos (small, discreet and delicate tattoos) can be reconstructed as consistent with white, middle class femininity, as long as they conform to a 'right' way to be tattooed (Sturgis, 2014).

Overall, the research presented above shows the dominant constructions of tattooed motherhood, and also explores how tattoos can be 'done' in the 'right' way. Key areas such as class, gender and age serve as markers within which the right 'choices' can be made with respect to being tattooed

as a mother. By unpacking the dominant discourses that are presented, it allows us to understand how tattooed mothers are co/re/produced in the UK.

Method

For this qualitative research, a selection of mothers were chosen from a larger PhD research sample, looking at the construction and representations of tattooed women. Within this total sample of fourteen, the accounts of four tattooed mothers were chosen, allowing an in depth exploration of the ways that tattooed mothers produce their own identities, and how they produce discourses of other tattooed mothers. The women varied in age, from early twenties to late fifties, and came from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. The women were interviewed at length, with questions focussing on the tattoos they have, what they think of tattooed women, and also, how they understand and construct their own femininities. The women's names have been removed from the extracts and replaced with pseudonyms.

The approach to discourse analysis that was utilised for this research followed the analytic steps of Parker (1992), working through the identification of object and subject positions within the interview transcripts, and moving on to consider the production of meanings of tattoos, the production of ideal motherhood, and the regulation of tattooed mothers bodies. The analysis that is presented provides insights into tattooed mothers constructed within the transcripts – as Parker (1992)

notes, discourse is 'a system of statements which constructs an object' (p. 5). Therefore, the discourse presented enables an exploration for how tattooed mothers' bodies are constructed within the UK context. Specifically, attention is given to specific examples the women provide of their tattoos, as well as the stereotypes they discuss, with a means for exploring what these function to produce.

Analysis

The analysis presented here explores how motherhood becomes objectified through the tattoos the women have, showing the importance of the meaning of the tattoo. Being a mother is embodied in part through the tattoo – the role is embedded in the skin. There are undertones of policing not just as a tattooed woman, but in respect to the transition to a tattooed mother, with class based constructions of motherhood emerging through the transcripts.

Motherhood as embedded in the skin

As we have discussed above, tattoos on the bodies of mothers can symbolise a bond between mother and child. Consider the following extract:

No, no, erm, it's only got my name and my son's name and a rose, that was that was it (pause) erm but yes I would like it covering over but I would like the names back [Ruth]

The extract shows the importance of the content of the tattoo, especially in relation to her child. Her son is reproduced as an object on her skin, with

the physical name being more important than the imagery surrounding it. There is a simplicity in the way that she describes the tattoo – ‘only’ – suggesting that it only includes what is important. The rose, whilst signifying a feminine choice, is something she ‘would like covering over’ – but would still like to keep the name. This shows that the surrounding imagery is not what carries the meaning; the imagery surrounding the tattoo can evolve and develop with the body as time passes (Kosut, 2000), but the permanence of her child's name represents the permanence of her role as mother. The tattoo is positioned as physical marker of motherhood, with the name representing a sense of ownership, and pride in its display. Her son will always be a part of her through the tattoo – he is hers. They are tied together as mother and son, and this is also represented through the tattoo. Name tattoos on women have also been discussed in relation to the exchange of value of the female body for men (MacCormack, 2006), usually as partners, signifying male ownership over their body rather than agency on the part of the woman. For a woman to tattoo her body with the name of her child produces a different understanding of ownership, over their body and their embodiment of the role of mother. The embedding of her son's name in the tattoo explicitly links his name to her body.

However, name tattoos have not always been socially constructed as desirable, especially in relation to names of partners (Kang & Jones, 2007) with this specific idea falling out of fashion. This sentiment is echoed by Irene, who discusses the way she embodies motherhood through her tattoo, in the ‘right’ way:

I definitely will have his name [son] on me, but I just don't know how I'd have it, like I just think like just having a name written down, I just don't find it classy, I'd put it into a tattoo like them [points to tattoo with grandparent's initials in], like you wouldn't know, but that's how I like my tattoos like based around it, like I'd have his initials, and then some flowers...I wouldn't ever want just a name
[Irene]

Here, the definitive statement that the participant makes in relation to having her son's name tattooed on her denotes a wanting to embed motherhood onto the skin, but in the 'right' way. For the tattoo to be done 'right', she wants it designed as though 'you wouldn't know', so the tattoo becomes private for her, with her skin not so easy to 'read' by others (Fenske, 2007). In this sense, motherhood is a role that is personal to her, and not outwardly obvious through her body. With less focus on just the name, there is less of a production of ownership, and more a construction of 'good' femininity through a meaningful tattoo design.

In addition, what is being perpetuated by the participant stating that they wouldn't even want 'just a name', and would want a design around it, is the construction of middle-class femininity and tattoos being considered as 'art'. The re-writing of tattoos as 'artwork' to invest in rather than simply a 'tattoo' both resists the class based positioning as other (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005), and reinscribes it, by making certain kinds of tattoos accessible to and acceptable for middle class women.

A tattoo that signifies meaning to the wearer is often cited as justification for the decision to get tattooed (Doss & Hubbard, 2009; Madfis & Arford, 2013; Thompson, 2015). In the extract below, one participant discusses the meaning of her tattoo, as both symbolic of her self-identity, and the links to motherhood:

but this one, on my arm, I only got recently, it's a phoenix, I was kind of wanting something representative of my children so kind of meaningful but not their names or something (laughs) so obvious, so I was kind of looking at three little humming birds, but then I kind of had a bit of a life change, and erm, I was doing some reading, on coping with relationship break ups (laughs), and now I can't remember exactly but she mentioned this kind of phase, and named it the phoenix, so it kind of came from that really, so, it's meaningful to me, coming up, stronger, and I have three flowers in it one for each child [Annie]

Of interest here is the transformative process that is detailed within the tattoo – the imagery of the phoenix is symbolic of change, evolution, and growth, and embeds this positive growth onto her skin and part of her identity (Dukes & Stein, 2014). She implies that thought has gone into the tattoo by ‘doing some reading’, reinforcing the production of a ‘good’, educated choice. There is a contrast of herself as a strong and powerful phoenix, positioned with her young children as small, delicate flowers, produces imagery of a strong mother caring for her small children. The

three flowers are 'just right' in representing her children – any more or less than this number would impact of the meaning of her tattoo. The tattoo directly links to her role as a mother, positioned in a visible location on the arm for all to see – this reads: I am a strong mother.

Whilst this participant links motherhood to her tattoo, there is an implicit sense of a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to represent this. She laughs off the notion of child's names as being too 'obvious', suggesting that this is a 'wrong' way to show motherhood through a tattoo. The names could be linked to that of a partner, and in this regard, names on the body are often depicted as a tattoo faux pas (Telegraph, 2012). In relation to being the names being obviously relating to children, it produces a construction of the children being commodified as a consumer product onto the body – the tattoo signifying ownership, rather than a relationship. The visibility of such consumer markers is often related to class, and the 'chav' space of 'commodity consumption' (Tyler, 2008, p. 21).

Embodying motherhood in the 'right' way was a reoccurring theme within the interviews, with meaning being an important justification for a tattoo. The symbolism of the family represented through a tattoo can be seen in the short extract below:

I would have another tattoo if it means something, the butterflies, like four butterflies for my family, the four of us, but that was it
[Maud]

Here, she positions herself as authentic in respect to her tattoo choices (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2007), as her tattoos need to 'mean something'. The symbolic meaning behind the tattoo is constructed as a 'good choice', as the tattoo holds personal importance for her. The design itself, a butterfly, is a feminine representation of the family, relating not just to the tattooed body as a mother, but also constructed as 'good femininity' (Roberts, 2012). The stance of 'that was it' as finality for tattoos on her body is explicit in stating an end to her tattoo journey. This constitutes tattoos with meaning as being 'right choices', as well as reinforcing a construction of 'good' femininity, and motherhood, as this is not *excessive* tattoo consumption.

In summary, the extracts analysed here produce a complex construction of the tattooed female body, as interwoven with the role of mother. There is a strong construction of motherhood being tattooed in the 'right' way, with working class constructions of the tattooed mother being constituted as excessive, obvious, and making 'wrong' choices. The ways that meaning and design are produced as symbols of motherhood are important in constructing a representation of a 'good' mother.

Tropes of the tattooed mother

The adjustment to motherhood has been noted as influential in the development of women's identities (Laney, Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2015; Mulherin & Johnstone, 2015), noting how the sense of self can become lost, and redevelop over time once becoming a mother. In places

in this research, some of the women discussed their perceptions of other tattooed mothers, addressing tattoos and mothering as interrelated topics. By discussing their constructions of other tattooed mothers, they reinforced their position as a tattooed mother as the 'right' way to be. Consider the extract below:

Yes I have changed my opinion that's what I was trying to explain, me, alright then this sounds really wrong, a woman from a rough area covered in tattoos loads of kids by different dads those are the type of people you expect it (pause) but now you see more girls coming in that have obviously come from a well, erm, well bought up family, and they've got tattoos, so, you've got two different (end)
[Maud]

What is interesting here is starting with a supposed shift in construction of tattooed mothers, following from her own experience of being tattooed. The start point embeds tattooed mothers in the working class, and positioned as bad, making 'poor choices' (Dickson et al, 2014). The imagery produced from the 'rough area' suggests poverty, crime, and not an ideal upbringing for children. This is followed up by the loaded sentence 'covered in tattoos loads of kids by different dads', which addresses two separate points, linked together by a stereotypical trope of working class tattooed mothers. First, the heavy coverage of tattoos relates to a less than feminine body, suggesting to an unappealing woman (Swami, 2011). Second, the multiple children reference relates to this woman as a mother, also less appealing

in her supposed sexual availability (Swami & Furnham, 2007). The key that links these two points together as relating to the body of a tattooed woman and mother is that of *excess*. The notion of excess is represented within 'chav' culture, and is regarded as stereotypical behaviour within this working class trope (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009). The end point of the shift is that tattoos are acceptable on women as they are now seen in those from a 'well bought up family', which positions the two points at odds with each other, as though tattoos do not belong within this 'good' construction.

As she discusses this production of the 'other' tattooed woman, she is positioning herself as doing it in the 'right' way – she has two children, rather than 'loads', they have the same dad who is her married partner, rather than 'different dads', and she has one small tattoo on her foot, not 'covered in tattoos'. The example that she provides is an extreme, one that is the opposite of how she sees herself. Through the provision of this example, she reinforces constructions of good mothering as well as how to be acceptable as a tattooed woman.

Another participant also pertains to this trope, again linking the number and visibility of tattoos to the number of children, and the suggestion of sexual availability of the woman. The ways that both of these cases are presented are singular, not considered as the norm for mothering, and therefore 'othered' as representing something 'bad':

there's a lady round the corner from me who's got tattoos on her face and her neck, and she's got like quite a lot of kids but she's also got quite a lot of tattoos [Irene]

The language used within this extract is loaded with the production of excess – 'quite a lot of kids' and 'quite a lot of tattoos', placing them together in a meaningful way. Similar to the previous extract, the reference to the excessive tattoos suggests that they are too much, too 'tacky' to represent 'good' femininity, and the excess of children denotes a lack of good mothering due to the number who are within her care. The face and the neck areas are specifically mentioned here, positioned as the extreme in tattoo placement, as this is considered a taboo area (MacCormack, 2006), and produces negative constructions relating to the potential employability (or lack thereof) of the individual (Timming, 2015).

The women position themselves as separate to these 'other women' depicted in these extracts, and construct their representations of motherhood as 'done right'. By discussing tropes of tattooed mothers in relation to excess, they reinforce 'good' constructions of mothers as having dainty, small and feminine tattoos, and caring for a small number of children with a married partner, or as little partners as possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ways that mother's bodies are policed does not change with the addition of tattoos. Just as there are 'right' and 'wrong' ways to 'do' motherhood, there are 'right' and 'wrong' ways to engage with tattoos

as a mother. Working class constructions are produced for those women whose tattoos are too loud and 'obvious', whilst at the same time, reinforce middle class productions of the 'right' way to 'do' tattooed motherhood. All of the mothers who were interviewed produced constructions of tattooed mother's bodies in a similar manner, regulating the body and how it should be 'properly' presented.

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