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**The tattooed client – a phenomenological exploration of  
symbolic representations in Self-concept**

By

**Leana Hughes**

Dissertation submitted to the University of Chester for the Degree of Master of Arts  
(Clinical Counselling) in part fulfilment of the Modular Programme in Clinical  
Counselling

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## **Abstract**

This study's primary research questions sought to explore *Tattoo Narratives* as an alternative approach to understanding a client's phenomenological sense of Self. I was also interested in understanding why some clients choose to immortalise significant life events with tattoos and the personal meaning they attach to it. The intension of this study was to examine whether any knowledge produced is of benefit to a counsellor, working with a tattooed client. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed in an in-depth study of a small sample of tattooed counsellors. Three master themes emerged, detailed by eight interlinking super-ordinate themes. Master themes were Self, Tattoo Narratives and Meaning Making of the Tattoo Narrative.

*Keywords: Tattoo Narrative, Phenomenology, Sense of Self, Meaning Making, counselling, life events*

## **Declaration**

This work is original and has not been previously submitted in support of any other qualification.

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I would like to extend my immense gratitude to my dissertation supervisor, Mr Tony Parnell for his guidance and support. I would like to thank my participants for placing their trust in my hands to tell their story.

This dissertation would have not been possible without the support and patience from my family.

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband, Phil.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

**CCT** - Consumer Culture Theory

**BACP** - British Association of Counsellors and  
Psychotherapists

**IPA** – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**TN** – Tattoo Narrative

**MM** – Meaning Making

**PD** – Personal Development

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# **The tattooed client – a phenomenological exploration of symbolic representations in Self-concept**

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Rogers (1961) reminds us of the unique opportunity we have as counsellors, to form intimate therapeutic relationships with clients from all walks of life. We encounter individuals that differ from us in age, race, gender, faith, values, social backgrounds and life experiences. Clients employ a variety of narratives to express themselves, of sharing who they are, in life and in the counselling room. Giddens (1991) contends that the 'identity' of the self is not a stagnant generic phenomenon, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (Giddens, 1991, p.52). The paramount part of our training and personal development as counsellors is to explore our own attitudinal perceptions, pre-conceived ideas and limitations to working with individuals that identify themselves differently to ourselves. I might not understand why anyone would want to have their tongue surgically split to give the appearance of a snake tongue, whereas I will adorn my own body with tattoos. Paradoxically, my mother cannot see why on earth I would want to mutilate my body with permanent ink, but she wears earrings. As counsellors we need to have unconditional positive regard and a non-judgemental attitude to all facets of our client (Merry, 2002). For trainee counsellors, this research highlights that there are still uncharted ways of exploring a client's expression of Self in a Person-Centred way.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to bring an explicit and new conversation to counselling research. Body Modification is an ever-expanding form of expression. My focus fell on the use of tattoos as an extension of a reflexive Self-concept. Informing counsellors on how Body Art or Body Modification creates dialogue, capable of producing the richest discourse and phenomenological exploration of a person's idea of identity, socio-culture and self-expression. Illuminating the potential for a missed opportunity that talking about a client's tattoo can offer. The understanding of semiotics in tattoo design might not be new to the tattooed client, but it can be a fascinating and alternative dimension for a counsellor to work with. I have a great personal interest in tattoos. I carry a back piece that reflects transitions in my own life. This study developed from my own reflexivity and meaning that I attach to my growing tattoo. From speaking about my tattoo to others, I came to understand that many tattooed people see their tattoos as part of their identity narrative. My rationale for examining 'tattoo narratives' (DeMello, 2000; Kosut, 2000) was to connect the tattoo community with the counsellor that might not have contact with many tattooed people – who might not understand why a person would have a tattoo or who have never considered using a client's tattoo as a way of making psychological contact. Clients in everyday life explore a variety of topics in the counselling room – grief and mourning; transition; examining Self and identity. Tattooed people in everyday life talk about similar topics, but through non-verbal embodied semiotics. Through this study, I hope I managed to shine light on why a person would choose to carry a permanent reminder of life events or losses. If our identity Narrative is informed by our Sense of Self, a tattoo could be explained as a visual presentation.

It is evident that there is a lack of UK-based literature on the contemporary subject matter of linking Tattoo Narratives with the understanding of personal meaning making and phenomenology. Counselling literature does not cover the topic of Body Modification as a form of Self-concept exploration. Available UK based qualitative researches on tattoos placed focus on a host of different avenues of identity theory from what I had interest in. Schroeber and Patterson's focus of inquiry related tattoos to the understanding of embodied identity within Consumer Culture Theory (Schroeber and Patterson, 2010). Interestingly, my research did highlight similar findings to the work of John Follett's investigation of permanence in terms of tattoo consumption and identity creation (Follett, 2009), although Follett's work also related his findings in terms of CCT. My interest lay with the lived experience of the participant's sense of self and the utility a tattoo plays in that identity construction. Conducting this research, reminded me of our ability as humans to change and construct our self-concept as we grow and develop. Identity narratives flow out of our sense of who we are and how we experience ourselves in everyday life. Heidegger viewed the Self as a human construction, a way of Being in the World (Dasein). Without an interpretive stance or a context in which we exist, there is no consciousness (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to our experience of who we are and in turn cuts off our Identity Narrative, Sense of Self and (for some) Tattoo Narrative. And as we are in constant flow we have the opportunity to rewrite our identity narrative all the time (Rogers, 1961). It was a privilege to immerse myself into four individuals' tattoo narrative.

My role was to interpret and report on my revolutionary findings to counselling-based research. Chapter 2 reflects available literature and previous research in the field of

tattoos and Self. In Chapter 3, I have discussed my chosen methodology, including ethical considerations and validity. Findings and the discussion of it completes Chapters 4 and 5, followed by Chapter 6 as the Concluding statement. A list of abbreviations and tables used throughout this dissertation has been listed prior to the table of content.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Based on the Research Questions I have proposed, I provide the literature related to this study. My core reading was based on Tattoo Narratives (DeMello 2000; Aguirre 2008; Kosut 2000), Phenomenological Sense of Self (McDonald and Wearing, 2013; Alcina, 2008) and the attachment of personal meaning to tattoos (Johnson, 2007; Park, 2010; Neimeyer., 2001). At this point I need to be clear that interpretations of Meaning Making are not the focus of my study. It is about the lived experience of the participants in their tattooed skins.

My research strategy on EBSCOHost, GoogleScholar, Wiley Online Library and ProQuest included a variety of tattoo-based searches, but found that much of the research produced psychiatric journals, linking tattooing to psychopathological disorders (Caplan, et al. 1996; Lemma, 2010) or constructions of social deviance (Thomas, 2012; Goode and Vail, 2008). There is a multitude of entries that focus on anthropological and ritualistic/mutilative practices (Hewitt, 1997; Sanders and Veil, 2008) or the quantitative quests of examining personality characteristics between body-modified and non-modified individuals (Wohlrab, et al. 2007). By marginalising tattooed individuals to these categories, the evidence suggests that the previous wave of researchers have failed to identify or acknowledge the current contemporary tattoo community and how its members relate to socio-cultural-familial factors, their sense of Self and the discourse with which they communicate (DeMello,2000).

### **2.1 Justification/Rationale for this type of Research**

In conducting my searches it became evident that there is a lack of UK-based literature on the contemporary subject matter of linking Tattoo Narratives with the

understanding of personal meaning making and phenomenology. As tattoos can tap into aspects of culture, social identity and trends, it is important that we have a view from a UK perspective. This lack of UK based research situates my research and highlights the relevance of my study. Also, as this subject is also not covered in any counselling literature found, it has an important contribution to make to the discussion of understanding expressions of Self-concept. For the complete list of searches in the area of tattoos, phenomenology, Sense of Self or Identity and Meaning making, please refer to appendix 1.

## **2.2 Historical Perspective**

As there is already a vast amount of research and reading material on the history of tattoos, and as my interest focusses on modern day tattoo wearers, I will only give a brief historical overview post 1980. DeMello accurately summed up the shift that happened post 1980 in North America as the *Tattoo Renaissance*. Tattoos were mostly worn by the lower-class, deviant, sailors or tribes (Pitts, 2003; Klesse, 2000). The nineties saw a cultural shift to mainstream middle-class America. Tattoos became a symbol for counter-culture or resistance to middle-class values (DeMello, 2000). The skin became a canvas for a more artistic form of personal expression and revolution. Removed from the traditional 'old school' tattoo community, this new wave of middle-class tattoo wearers created a discourse among themselves, communicating the motivations behind their designs and what these tattoos meant to them. DeMello contends that new meaning is created through the sharing of Tattoo Narratives. It creates an opportunity to share and provide a framework for understanding their tattoos, their community and themselves, producing the contemporary tattoo community of today (DeMello, 2000).



## **2.3 Tattoo Narratives**

### **2.3.1 Individualism vs Collectivism**

Evidence seems to suggest that most participants would bring Identity Narratives of Individualism, especially for people wearing custom tattoos (DeMello, 2000; Turner, 2000). The wearer might feel separate from their immediate 'neighbour', especially if their tattoo is a unique piece of art and their 'neighbour' carries no tattoos themselves, but complete individualism is questioned due to the wearer's affiliation to the wider tattoo community. Moerier and colleagues (2011) would argue that this affiliation to a group serves as a source of identification for the individual. Mucraggleton found that few contemporary tattoo wearers linked their tattoos to membership of a specific subculture, even suggesting 'label rejection' as a way to side-step being perceived as part of a group (Muggleton, 1995, p.4). Individuality also comes into question for wearers of traditional tattoos like swallows, anchors or pin up girls, a style that has seen a surge in popularity in recent years, creating a subgenre to traditional tattoos termed, Neo-traditional (Total Tattoo Magazine, 2008). As my study is idiographic in nature, my intention is not to make any claims or take any stances between traditional versus new style of tattooing, but instead, highlighting areas of previous research in addressing tattoos as pieces of individualism or collectivism. DeMello takes tattoo community studies a step further by reporting on the role of the tattoo artist and tattoo magazines' role in 'controlling the borders of community' and therefore elevating their own reputations as artists (DeMello, 2000, p.124), clearly separating members into higher or lower-status groups.

### 2.3.2 Spirituality

Tattoo Narratives can also connect with the discourse of Spirituality, some describing the experience of being tattooed as spiritualistic or ritualistic (Goode and Vail, 2008), especially among the modern primitive community. Originating in the 1970s in California, Modern Primitives is a subculture community that celebrates their sense of freedom to choose their identities, bodies and cultural affiliations (Pitts, 2003; Klesse, 2000). This group largely consists of the body modification community who 'responds to primal urges to *do something* with their bodies' (Fakir Musafar, cited in Klesse, 2000, p.15). This could be any form of *Body Play* (by fire, by suspension or penetration). In this case, the ritualistic, spiritual experience or in some cases, erotic experience offered by penetration. In the context of my study, I am discussing the spiritual connection offered by penetration by tattooing. Evidence seems to suggest a counter argument to the idea of spiritual connection and reasoning behind *Body Play* (Eubanks, 1996; DeMello, 2000). Eubanks contested Modern Primitives' adoption of ritual form of body modification as a "blatant disregard for the history and the context of the symbols and practices involved" (Eubanks, 1996, p.74). DeMello described it as a form of elitism in contemporary tattoo culture, a way to distant the wearer from working-class associations (Pitts, 2003).

The second point of argument is the Modern Primitives' view of changeable identity. According to Pitts, this is questionable because of our deep entrenchment in categories of gender, race, citizenship and sexuality (Pitts, 2003; Klesse, 2000). Friedman (1994), Giddens (1991) contends this modernist viewpoint of choosing and changing identity has done nothing more than create a 'widespread subjective feeling of alienation', describing individuals as being separated from their embeddedness of anything cohesive and meaningful (Friedman, cited in Klesse, p.23). Patterson and

Schroeber's work on tattoos and consumer culture theory considers the tension between considerations of 'consumers as postmodern fragmented selves and consumers as seekers of a coherent sense of self' (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010, p.253).

### 2.3.3 Personal Growth

The most dominant discourse in Tattoo Narrative has been the expression of Personal Growth. This narrative connects with empowerment, spiritual growth, overcoming adversity or trauma (Sarnecki, 2001; Park and Helgeson, 2006). The appraised meaning of the life-changing event is assimilated and forms part of the understanding of the Identity Narrative. It can represent *freedom from* or *overcoming* life events or just celebrating and decorating the beauty of the body (Fischer, 2002).

### 2.3.4 Memorial Tattoos

The Narrative of Memorial tattoos has seen a massive influx over the last 10 years. This is partly encouraged by the media and the growing number of television programmes dedicated to tattoos. It has also created a surge in tattoo-based dissertations in America particularly (Aguirre, 2008; Alcina, 2008; Samuel, 2011; Anastasia, 2009; Littell, 2003)

## **2.4 Phenomenological Sense of Self**

### 2.4.1 Phenomenologically situating Sense of Self

The second research question that informed my literature searches, addressed the exploration of a client's phenomenological Sense of Self. Identity is not a new topic to the counselling field, however I aim to provide an extension to include and connect

the Body Modified to the field of Counselling research. I use the term Phenomenological Sense of Self as to situate myself and my philosophical belief system to Self-theory. I find it important to highlight the delicate process of discussing Self-theory without reference to our understanding of the Self, as Phenomenology IS the suspended view of how I experienced the participant's sense of self and it is NOT about my understanding of a particular behaviouristic theory per se. It is also not about my interpretation of their meaning making.

#### 2.4.2 Socio-cultural influences on Self-theory

Gergen (1995) and Polkinghorne (2001) argued for a reconceptualization of the traditional Maslow and Rogerian theories of Self to include wider humanistic views and beliefs (McDonald and Wearing, 2013). Not that Polkinghorne considered the actualisation tendency theory to be inaccurate, just lacking the sociocultural influence on Self. These researchers advocated Heidegger and Foucault's view of the Self being constituted by its social and cultural conditions (McDonald and Wearing, 2013). With Rogers (1961) viewing the Self in terms of *actual self* (untouched by external influence) and *self-concept* (how each person views themselves), I feel these Self-theories fail to address what Geller termed, the *true self* (Geller, 1982). This is our genetic predisposition to adapt to cultural influences. If we are all born the same - *untouched*, we all have the ability to adapt into the culture into which we are born, and the flexibility to change. Social and cultural impact is there for unavoidable when exploring Selfhood. And as we express our phenomenological sense of who we are to our conscious mind (Horrocks and Jevtic, 1997), we do it in a socially constructed way. To this, Rogers would argue that it is within these modern and culturally defined constructions that we distort and lose sight of our *authentic self* (Rogers,

1961). The *real self* is “something which is comfortably discovered in one’s own experiences, not something imposed upon” (Rogers, 1961, p.114).

As mentioned earlier, identity narratives flow out of our sense of who we are and how we experience ourselves in everyday life. Heidegger viewed the Self as a human construction, a way of Being In the World (*Dasein*). Without an interpretive stance or a context in which we exist, there is no consciousness (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to our experience of who we are and in turn *cuts off* our Identity Narrative, Sense of Self and Tattoo Narrative. If our identity Narrative is informed by our Sense of Self, a tattoo would be a visual presentation. And as we are in constant flow (Rogers, 1961) we have the opportunity to rewrite our identity narrative all the time. Alcina (2008) would argue that Identity is anchored through continuous narrative and that the tattoo is the anchor. According to Giddens (1991), discovering our authentic Self is a process of shedding false self or former beliefs to uncover true Self. The identity of the Self is an on-going routine, sustained by reflexive and conscious awareness (Giddens, 1991). Kosut contends how tattoos are a visual reminder of these parts of Self, current or previous presentations of ourselves that ‘ground our story on the body’ (Kosut, 2000, p.90). My research highlighted a magnitude of statements of tattoo wearers that spoke of each tattoo representing ‘a part of me’, or a ‘particular time in my life’ (Kosut, 2000; Lemma, 2010; Zimmer, 2011; DeMello, 2000, Albin, 2006; Aguirre, 2008). To Giddens (1991), the existential question of self-identity depends how long a person can keep the particular narrative going. When thinking about the permanence of tattoos, it can appear that tattoos are the way of keeping a particular narrative permanent and on-going.

*'As long as we remain preoccupied with questions of identity, we will continue to manipulate our bodies and to 'customise' them to lend form and meaning to our personal and social identities. Body modification marks to body, inscribes it, and so constructs it within psychical, cultural and even political fields'*  
Lemma, A. (2010) p.15.

## **2.5 Meaning making**

### **2.5.1 Self and the Body**

The third question I addressed in this study is examining the meaning people attach to their tattoos. Wittgenstein reminds us of the relation between the Body and Self (Giddens, 1991). The Self is embodied and creates an organic process of thought, meaning making and language (Johnson, 2007). Although the Body is an object in which we dwell, it isn't just a mechanical entity that gets us from A to B. It is through corporeal immersion of everyday interactions with others and our daily tasks that help maintain our sense of Self. In a postmodern culture, Shilling explains how the body has become a "body project" - space for self-expression and transformation. This concept explicates the Western view that the body is a project that needs to be "worked out and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity" in order to make any meaning (Shilling, 1993). This identity reconstruction has in itself become a challenge (Klesse, 2000), but one that has been met by a consumer culture that has provided a marketplace with an array of 'symbolic resources' and merchandise in the maintenance of self-identity and narrative (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010, p.254). Giddens (1991) would contend this drive to identify in our consumer culture, as driven by our detachment from our traditional systems of meaning, forcing us into a state of constant reflexivity and search for present meaning and identity. This puts us in a permanent cycle of identity re-shifting, with the Body as the axis. Erik Erikson (1993) spoke of how our traditions and customs served as anchors for a secure

Sense of Self and sense of belonging – something that has been lost in this modern age of consumer culture.

In the meantime, the body project will continue until a point of accomplishment is reached. With the focus of tattoos as body projects, Pitts discusses fresh tattoo aftercare. Meaning is attached to the feeling of accomplishment in coping with the pain of receiving a tattoo. This is followed by tending to a healing scar. Previous research suggests this to be quite a significant process, especially among post-trauma memorial tattoos (Caruth, 1996). This can be quite a reflexive process, participating in self-care and self-attention (Pitts, 2003) until the scar has healed, similar to perhaps the original injury. This reinforces Caruth's idea that “we are compelled to repeat the trauma in some new, creative setting that will allow for a different, life affirming signification of the event while still bearing witness to it.” (Sarnecki, 2001, p.37). The body project is completed when a feeling embodiedness is reached.

### 2.5.2 Qualitative experience of meaning making

From a qualitative perspective, this ‘feeling’ of completion and the emotion attached to it is in a sense how we experience meaning. It has been notoriously hard to analyse and theorize this subjective stance as philosophers would describe feelings as ‘non-cognitive’ and has no role in *meaning*. Heidegger contended that the quality of being human has been neglected in research, either because it was taken for granted or because the understanding of *Dasein* was inaccessible (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The focus of most theories of meaning and qualitative experience lies with conceptual-propositional skeletal structures of meaning (Johnson, 2007; Bonanno and Keltner, 2004; Neimeyer, 2001). Phenomenology does however not

bypass emotion, feelings and *quality* in meaning making (Aguirre, 2008; Smith and Osborn, 1998; Johnson, 2007). Johnson argues that we cannot “capture qualitative experience in propositions with subject-predicate structure; we tend to downplay the importance of qualities as part of meaning” (Johnson, 2007, p.70). The whole beauty of qualitative experiencing of things and objects is what gives personal meaning to them. The meaning we take from things or events depends on our experiencing and assessing the qualities of that lived experience. The smell when I open my front door and knowing I’m home. There are no words involved in this exercise, just pure subjective connection with what is being experienced and the meaning I take from everyday experiences. In *Tricks of Time*, Muldoon (2006) discusses Merleau-Ponty’s stance that there is no adequate way to capture the essence of “being –in-the-world” (Muldoon, 2006, p.160), rendering the meaning making process as uncertain which has led the cognitivist approach to argue that meaning can only be created through the use of language (White, 2007). “It is the structure of narrative that provides the principle frame of intelligibility for acts of meaning-making” (White, 2007, p.80). Johnson counteracts this argument by exploring personal meaning one can take from staring at a painting or watching a piece of interpretive dance. There are no words involved with this exercise, yet the person would have had a subjective connection and an opportunity to create personal meaning (Johnson, 2007). In my research of tattoos, personal meaning can be incorporated into Johnson’s idea of embodied meaning and art. Participants discussed their individual experiences of Meaning in tattoo design/image; meaning behind the Permanence of a tattoo, Meaning to their Identity formation and how meaning can shift and change.

Unexpected findings that came to light during this research were the important utility of tattoos (Fischer, 2002; Atkinson, 2002; Follett, 2009). Tattoos serve as messages,



memorials, and especially reminders. Participants also reflected the significance of Permanence to the tattoo image, location, narrative and the tattoo message. This reflects Follett's findings of creating a continuation to replace a loss (Follett, 2009). A finding not reflected in previous available research relates to the importance of tattoo location. Previous studies highlight the desire to have memorial tattoos in view (Alcina, 2008). My findings suggest there is also a need to conceal tattoos of such significance, from the actual wearer.

This research study was about creating the potential of expanding identity narrative, by exploring phenomenological tattoo narratives (De Mello, 2000). The purpose of this study was to create a new or alternative window of opportunity in making psychological contact with a tattooed client (Merry, 2002). The understanding of semiotics in tattoo design might not be new to the tattooed client, but it can be a fascinating and alternative dimension for a counsellor to work with if they choose to. This study is relevant as it can inform counsellors on how Body Art or Body Modification creates dialogue, capable of producing the richest discourse and phenomenological exploration of a person's idea of identity, socio-culture and self-expression. My rationale for examining 'tattoo narratives' (DeMello, 2000) was to connect the tattoo community with the counsellor that might not have contact with many tattooed people – who might not understand why a person would have a tattoo. The findings from this study highlight what I was trying to achieve.

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Philosophy and Design

In order to choose the most appropriate research methodology, one needs to explore one's own philosophical beliefs and epistemological assumptions concerning the origins of knowledge (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) and also the kind of knowledge I aimed to produce. Research follows one of two paradigms – positivism and qualitative research. According to Rudestam and Newton (2007) a positivism epistemology maintains that all knowledge is derived from the observation of quantifiable truths about the world and echoes Kirk and Miller's view that "the external world itself determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing" (Kirk and Miller, 1986, p.14). This slightly outdated view has since been disputed by social scientists alike. An alternative view to this debate argues that Positivism is not an appropriate method for the study of society since humans have free will. It is not always possible to explain human behaviour in reference to a particular social law (Macionis and Plummer, 2008). I have illuminated this point in my research on why some people choose to immortalise significant life events with tattoos and the personal meaning they attach to it. This purely scientific research philosophy did not fit with the type of knowledge I aimed to illuminate.

It is my belief that our phenomenological experiences are constructed through our interactions with others and the environment. Our realities are created by the actions, beliefs and cultural histories in which we live (McLeod, 2011). My role as a

researcher is to highlight the quality and texture of what it feels like to carry a tattoo. To elucidate meaning from the participant's experience (Willig, 2008). Qualitative research doesn't set out to find an absolute truth like Positivism. Instead, this holistic approach seeks to understand human experience. Husserl (1970) argued that traditional science distances people from the world of everyday experiences (Newton and Rudestam, 2007). There is a clear distinction between the scientific world and the 'lived world'.

This study will therefore follow a phenomenological genre of the qualitative approach. Phenomenology can be considered as the 'in-between' position on the realist-relativist continuum. This position argues that "while experience is always the product of some level of interpretation and, therefore, constructed (and flexible) rather than determined (and fixed), it is nevertheless 'real' to the person who is having the experience" (Willig, 2008, p.13). Working in this way creates the opportunity for both researcher and collaborator to make sense of the experience in focus. Finlay states, "It offers the individual the opportunity to be witnessed in their experience and allows them to give voice to what they are going through." (Finlay, 2011, p.10).

One element of Phenomenological research is Husserl's idea of epoche (McLeod, 2011). This is the need to bracket all previous understanding of the experience being discussed. Bracketing requires an exploration of the participant's account with curiosity and wonder (Finlay, 2011); being open and non-judgemental to the experience and the participant's account of it, while setting aside my own personal views and experiences (Ashworth, 1996). As a novice researcher, I would need to

give great consideration of what it really means to bracket and also the limitations to what can be bracketed. What I've done, was set aside truth or falsity claims being made by the participant. I also attempted to block thoughts of scientific knowledge, and explanations (Ashworth, 1996, cited in Finlay, 2011) and concentrated purely on my participant's account and my understanding of that account. Willig explains *bracketing* as 'setting aside everything we already think we know' about the topic (Willig, 2008, p.51). Bracketing is the first step towards *Epoche* – the stripping of judgements and assumptions until we are actually fully aware of what is in front of us. Smith and colleagues however warn us that we might not always be aware of all our preconceptions on first-read. 'Reflective practice and cyclical approach to bracketing is there for required' (Smith, *et al.* 2009, p.35).

When I introduce my study to prospective participants, we will have a shared understanding of a specific lived experience, based in shared cultural meanings and these cannot be set aside (Finlay, 2011). All I can do on my part is to engage with each participant's account with an openness, empathy and compassion (Johansson *et al.* 2008) and choosing the most appropriate analysis method to engage with their accounts. As stated previously, this method depends on my own philosophical beliefs and epistemological assumptions on the construction of knowledge.

Gubrium and Holstein (1997) discussed how phenomenology has become a philosophical basis for interpretive research strategies that include ethnographic Inquiry, Grounded Theory, Narrative Inquiry and Hermeneutics (Rudestam and Newton, 2007). These analysis methods all sit along the continuum from low level interpretation, like descriptive analysis, which follows the style of original phenomenologist, Husserl, to high level, theory building, like Grounded Theory

(Finlay, 2011). I believe all these forms of inquiry rely on interpretation to elucidate meaning. However, this statement in itself seems to be an on-going debate in the field of Hermeneutics where one camp argues that text contain meaning independent of the interpreter versus the other camp that sees active interpretation as primary to all understanding (Winograd and Flores, 1986). Heidegger (1962) felt that Husserl's phenomenology was too theory-driven (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). To Heidegger, a person will always live 'intersubjectively' in the world – meaning in constant overlap, relational and shared engagement with the world in Lived Time (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). It is the Hermeneutic stance that I have taken. My aim is to evoke lived experience through the explicit involvement of interpretation (Finlay, 2011) of tattoos and identity.

### 3.2 Sampling and Recruitment

As my area of interest was very specific, I recruited a purposive (non-probability) sampling (Mintz, 2010) of tattooed counsellors. My inclusion criteria were: qualified counsellors or counsellors in training (excluding first year students) of any training background, who have tattoos with significant personal meaning. My rationale for choosing this sample was due to counsellors self-awareness , personal development reached and the already available psychological support if anything was to come up for them, although participants were interviewed as 'people' rather than counsellors. I have excluded first year counselling students as they are usually not in practice yet. They might potentially still be in transition from counselling students to practitioners. This was however not an issue as all the participants that replied, were already qualified and in practise.

I started my participant search by advertising on the BACP *Therapy Today* Noticeboard (see Appendix 2) as well as The Facebook Page of Warrington Collegiate College, *Counselling Recourse* (see Appendix 3). I also sent a paper copy to various training facilities and counselling rooms in the Chester and Liverpool area (for cover letter, see Appendix 4; for my flyer, see Appendix 5). Once prospective participants made initial contact via my university email address, I sent each person a Research Information sheet (see Appendix 6) and an Inclusion Criteria Checklist (see Appendix 7).

For a phenomenological study, my sample size only needs to be 4-5 participants in contrast to a quantitative sampling selection (McLeod, 2011). The rationale for such a small number of participants is because my interest lies in the phenomenological quest for a detailed account of individual experience rather than the amount of interviews (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Willig highlights the intense engagement with each transcript, also the intense analytic procedure to follow (Willig, 2008). Too many participants might have been a risk for a novice researcher that I wasn't prepared to take. Of the 7 counsellors that contacted me, 5 returned their Inclusion checklist and consent. On receipt of each Inclusion checklist (and consent), I assigned each participant with a code name to protect their identity. The inclusion of both men and women, and the participants' geographic variety might add to additional insight. Participant profiles can be found in Table 1 (Appendix 8).

### 3.3 Data Collection

I found the method of semi-structured interviews of data collection most compatible with qualitative research and methods of analysis (Rudestam and Newton, 2007).

Preparation is key in gathering the richest data possible for this idiographic inquiry. Questions were tested and reworked to a point where I felt confident it would act as triggers to help the participant explore their own tattoo journey and how it fits with their identity. I had to be mindful of keeping the right balance between maintaining control of where the interview was going, but also to encourage the participant to engage and find their own meaning in their tattoos (Willig, 2001). According to Smith and colleagues, in depth interviews and reflexive diary keeping are the best means of accessing participant accounts (Smith, *et al.* 2009).

Interviews were arranged at the various offices and college facilities of the participants. All rooms complied with confidentiality and recording needs. All interviews were digitally recorded for transcription. All participants signed the consent form for audio recording (see Appendix 9). As recommended by Barker, Pistrang and Elliott (2002), I prepared an interview schedule (see Appendix 10) to act as my guide. This usefulness of this will come to light in the next session.

### 3.4 Pilot interview

The pilot study was a vital part to my research. This gave me the opportunity to not just practise and refine my semi-structured interview questions, but to work on pacing, develop my timing and to look at practical issues such as the quality of my recording equipment (Rudestam and Newton, 2007). I made it clear to the participant that they will not be part of the research and only part of the piloting. As the pilot reflected and shared their tattoo story, I made little notes and guides on my Interview Schedule. The pilot managed to cover a few questions in one answer, so it was interesting to find ways or restating the questions and linking it to what he/she

already answered. When the interview was completed, I valued feedback regarding my questioning style and manner. I felt relieved and confident when the participant mentioned the surprise felt with everything that came up during the interview.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

When human beings are engaged with an experience of something significant in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening in their lived world. My aim with this study is to reflect on a person's lived experience of what it feels like to live in a tattooed body. I am interested in individual accounts of how it feels, not why it happens. In contrast, quantitative research would try and find associations to explain what happens (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). I have chosen Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA here after) as the most appropriate method of analysis, even though there are a range of methods that would have worked (Willig, 2008). I found IPA aims to engage with the reflections of the person, sharing their lived experience with me. My role as the researcher was to reflect and interpret the experience whilst being aware of the ethical danger of imposing meaning (Willig, 2008). To illustrate Smith's warning, it is a requirement to be aware of the cyclical process of reflexivity and to bracket preconceptions throughout the entire analysis process (Smith *et al.* 2009).

This is a very involved method that requires a thorough audit trail. The first stage was a detailed engagement with one transcript, re-reading it and immersing myself into reflexive thoughts, significant statements made by the participant (Aguirre, 2008). At this stage I started making descriptive notes in black ink and this would be anything from linguistic comments such as use of laughter, tone of voice, degree of fluency (Smith, *et al.* 2009). The second stage unfolded during the third re-read of



the transcripts, writing down *exploratory comments* in blue ink. (Please see an extract of this in Appendix 11). These notes reflected my reflexive thought process. I started to capture quality in experiences and highlighted emerging themes like loss, permanence, etc. (Willig, 2001). Emerging themes were noted in the left column and marked in red. At this stage, I also moved *Linguistic comments* to the left column and highlighted all occurrences in red ink. It is at this conceptual comments stage that personal reflections and interpretations are included. Smith and colleagues note that the life experience being discussed might be beyond our own experiences. In this case, it is important to remember that 'conceptual stage is not about finding answers or explanations; it's about the opening up of a range of provisional meanings' (Smith, *et al.* 2009, p.89).

Stage 3 involved building up a list of emergent themes before moving onto the next script (Please re-refer to Appendix 11). Once this process was completed across all four transcripts, I decided to cut the transcripts and created piles of *super-ordinate themes* (Smith, *et al.* 2009). Each participant's transcript was printed on a different colour paper for ease of identification (Please see Appendix 12 for photographic evidence). This process produced three Master themes.

### 3.6 Validity

As this is a qualitative study, a Validity checklist as used in quantitative research would not be appropriate. A list of guidelines in assessing validity has recently been produced by Lucy Yardley in 2000 (Smith, *et al.* 2009). My study strived to follow these guidelines. I demonstrated sensitivity to the context discussed (Yardley, 2000). I demonstrated my commitment to the research participants by the degree of attentiveness during each interview. I followed this care through after transcription by

offering each participant the opportunity to read and erase any elements that they felt too vulnerable to share. I also demonstrated transparency to the study in my thorough sharing of the step-by-step process of conducting this research paper to both participants and reader (Smith *et al.* 2009). According to Denscombe (2010), this included keeping a reflexive journal and an extensive audit trail (Appendix 13).

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

I conducted my research in line with the BACP Code of Practice and Ethical Guidelines. The topic of discussion was of a personal and significant nature to the participants. I carefully considered the impact this study could have had on the participants. The interview had the potential to lead to post-interview contemplation, resulting in positive, negative or neutral impact. If any impact was made on participants, established support mechanisms were crucial for participant safety if the need for further exploration of the topic arrived. This was the reasoning behind only recruiting 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year counselling students and qualified counsellors.

In order to comply with the BACP Ethical Framework in relation to research, I informed participants that I am still a student and might require supervision and advice regarding ethical issues. I have been allocated a supervisor by the University of Chester. This declaration enhanced transparency and trust with my participants.

I obtained informed consent from each participant before data collection, with the right to withdraw at any stage before the dissertation goes to print. I debriefed participants and offered each a copy of their transcript with the opportunity to erase any parts of the transcript that they felt uncomfortable sharing in print. I was aware semi-structured interviews could bring material up for my participants that they could

not have been prepared for. Only one participant requested a copy of the transcript, but no changes or removal of statements were required.

All data are stored in a safe and secure manner. I will destroy all recordings once the M.A. has been awarded. I will destroy all other documents for the required 5 year period. Each transcript was participant-coded so that individuals couldn't be identified. Participants were informed that interviews will be transcribed and that I might include extracts of it in my research paper.

### 3.8 Limitations

This is a small scale study, conducted by a student, which in itself was a limitation. If time and safety was not an issue, I would have liked to interview a more general tattoo sample (not necessarily from the counselling community) but the safety I feel in my chosen sample was more important to me at this time in my training. As this is a qualitative study, I cannot generalize my findings. This could also be seen as a limitation to this form of research (Willig, 2008).

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In keeping with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the four transcripts were considerably reduced in volume of detail by highlighting emergent themes. It was paramount to highlight the interconnectedness of some pieces of transcript. My role was to start moving away from the script and more towards focussing on my interpretation of their phenomenological experience of what was being discussed. All four transcripts were synthesized and super-ordinate themes emerged. Patterns and connections between emergent themes were organized through abstraction. I chose this technique because I had clusters of themes that fitted under umbrella themes. These became the super-ordinate themes. Three master themes emerged with subsequent sub-themes.

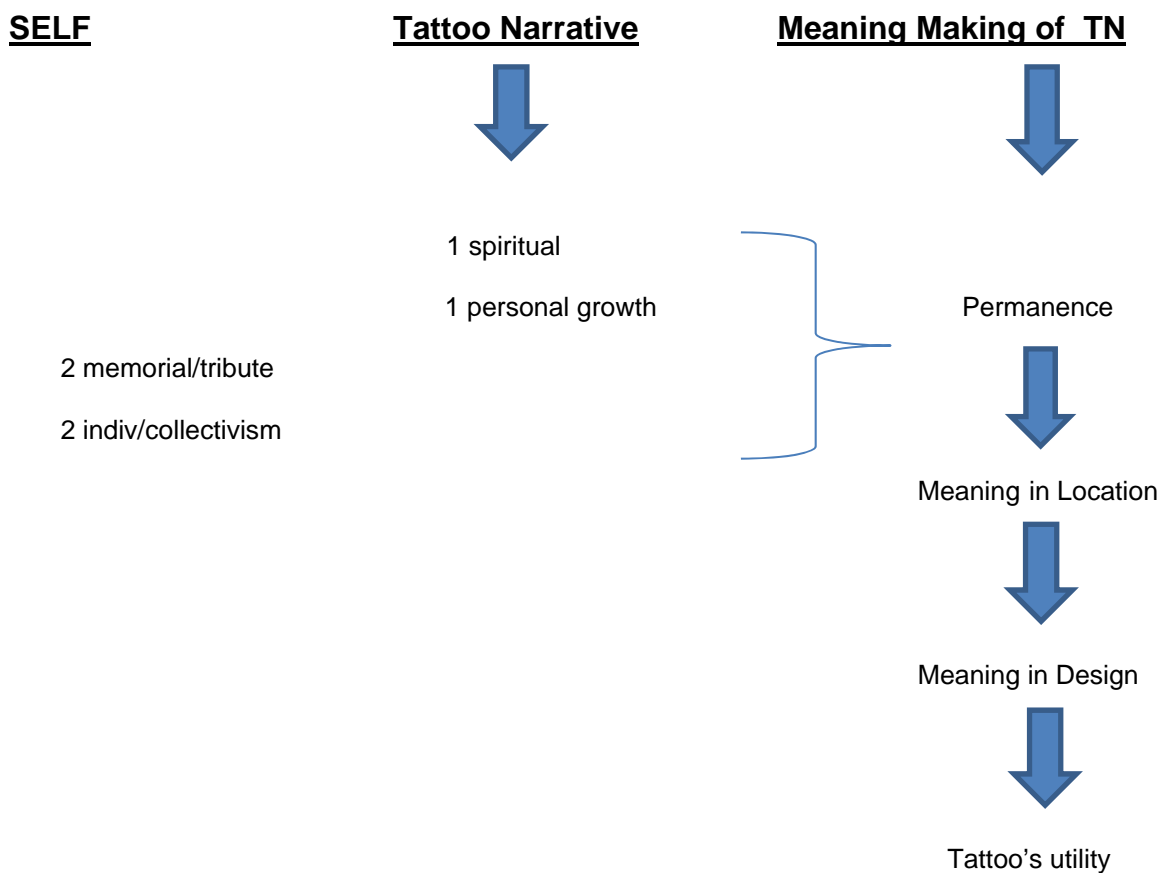


Table 2 – Results of Data Analysis (Master and sub-themes)

#### 4.1 Master theme 1: SELF

The master theme, Self, produced no sub-themes. All four participants however reflected on their Sense of Self throughout the interviews in a variety of ways, all resulting in a type of “I am the type of person who...” statements. Participants reflected on who they used to be, their changing identities and who they are at this point in their lives. This master theme captured all those ‘I’ statements that related to the person they are, rather than their tattoo. Participant in vivo quotes has been italicised for ease of reading.

**ST** explains the Self she was when she received this particular tattoo.

*I was married for 15 years, single for 9 years, and when I had this tattoo, I was probably single for 4 years.....and I was mental. Absolutely mental! (8:298-300)*

*But I think, back then there was massively two sides to me... (8:320)*

*I have absolutely no issue about anybody knowing anything. I'm really really ridiculously open (13:512-513)*

**BF** explored the Self she was, the breaking of that mould of conditions of worth and the Self she since became.

*I never put a foot out...I was a pleaser....I was always trying to earn my mother's love, and I still haven't got it. (1:26-28)*

*...there is something about that word “offensive”...no one's gonna like me, because it's offensive (4:134-136)*

*I was then starting to probably have a voice (3:81)*

*I've done it once, it didn't particularly hurt, I got through it..... Uhm..... I can do it again. No-one rejected me for it. I'm not a bad person for it ... (5:163-165)*

**FC** explored her spiritual Self and how her years of meditation, Reiki practice and Personal Development (PD) have created the energy flow that she feels in her every day.

*I have looked in very great depth into who I am, who am I... I am still getting to know myself .....not myself as a Frances but my spiritual self, my real, my true self, not the ego, or the mannerisms or the personality, but the spirit of me (10:358-362)*

*in the letting go that I found I'm opening up more, ...but the more I let go, the more I'm able to open up to the spirituality all around me and within me, and the whole and the one and the 'Om' and other people as the spirit in them (10:366-369)*

*I still find it difficult to communicate my ideas and my thoughts to others. I feel that everything else seems to be in place, but I do need to do some work on my throat chakra. (7:255-258)*

**JB** Spoke passionately of the powerful feeling a tattoo gave him in claiming his changing identity.

*"Yeah, Im tattooed", I felt cool, I didn't feel blank. I was gaining a part of my identity, or I realized that I was, (5:148-149)*

*... but to make a statement on my body about who I really was..... wow! That really was powerful, because it was me and this is a mirror now and I can look at my tattoo and I know who I am. (5:170-172)*

*... uhm... I'm making a statement about when I changed as a person, or when I achieved something or when I overcame a challenge, (5:174-176)*

This concludes the theme of Self. Findings suggest the significant role reflexivity, personal history and individual memory play in understanding participants' sense of Self.

#### 4.2 Master theme 2: TATTOO NARRATIVE

This master theme of Tattoo Narratives produced four sub-themes and reflects most of the type of narratives discussed in tattoo narrative literature. As each participant reported only one or two Tattoo Narratives, I cannot provide quotes from all four participants for each sub-theme.

##### 4.2.1. Sub-theme: Spiritual

**FC's** Tattoo Narrative demonstrates the level of personal and spiritual meaning her tattoo carries.

*when you go into meditation and then you get the silence.....it's like beneath the silence....., it's like a part of the silence. A part of the silence is..... it is the silence. I couldn't even voice it, because it seems like it's a.....it's like.... the earth, it's like the sound of the earth, the sound of the universe. And to me... I wanna be part of that and to be part of that (4:125-130)*

*...like it has given me a feeling of being a part of the whole, the one, the om, the universe, God, Spirit, whatever. I feel like this tattoo has imprinted itself in on me (3:93-95)*

*... it's part of me, so I feel part of the one now... (3:101)*

#### 4.2.2 Sub-theme: Personal Growth

**ST** discussed three different tattoos. One of the three tattoos she discussed reflects her Personal Growth Tattoo Narrative. It's a tattoo she received to mark the end of a long developmental journey.

*..... so I wanted the word "Sex" in Greek and this was just at the end of my post-graduate.. and I was about to graduate and I was so proud of myself, because I've been through hell and high water to get where I wanted to be, and I was so pleased with meself. (11:425-429)*

#### 4.2.3 Sub-theme: Memorial/Tribute

This sub-theme represents tattoos that are a memorial to a deceased loved one, but also tributes of love to people that are still alive. Two of the four participants reflected this Tattoo Narrative.

**JB** talks about how his tattoo and future tattoos will mark the chapters of his life – acting as if a tribute to his life. His tattoo is a tribute to the relationship he has with his son.

*"I remember what it meant to me then" and wow it was cool what happened from this tattoo to this tattoo, these things have happened in my life, and these things are the headings, the chapters of how I have experienced life. (6,7: 219-223)*

*...and it meant a lot to get a tattoo for me, because it was about that relationship with my son. (1:11-12)*

**BF's** Tattoo Narrative for one of her tattoos pays homage to her departed father.

*My father was - he loved his gardening – and there was this buddleia tree and it was always butterflies. So for that, it's me and him. (9:322-323)*



*it's from the father through having my children to where I am now with my partner,.....yeah... to where I am today. Yeah... that I love dearly. (14:487-489)*

#### 4.2.4 Sub-theme: Individual/Collectivism

**ST** expressed her fundamental narrative as being an expression of how similar and also how different she is to her fellow man.

*.... and that's why I wanted this tattoo, because I'm saying to everybody out there that I am actually fundamentally just like you, but them two little strands at the bottom say.. "but I'm made differently, ultimately as I grow up in what I learn and what I do." (3:82-85)*

*So from being 14, I've been six foot, so I was Big Bird, and then it got shortened to Bird and everybody calls me Bird. (11:415-416)*

**JB** highlighted a feeling of connection with fellow tattooed individuals.

*From a comment or question about something on your body, all of a sudden you're building a relationship with people who you never would speak to. And then you could find common values, like being a good parent. (5:151-154)*

*...to get people who I wouldn't normally talk to, to open myself up conversationally and I can talk about theirs, you know? Lots of new beginnings...(4,5:143-145)*

*What should we talk about? All of a sudden you're – bang (click of the fingers) – you're straight into who they really are, and who you really are. (5:180-182)*

It is evident from these findings that all participants connected to a specific tattoo narrative. The following master theme explains the meaning participants connect to their tattoos.

### 4.3 Master theme 3: MEANING MAKING OF TATTOO NARRATIVES

This master theme captured four elements of meaning making for the participants.

#### 4.3.1 Sub-theme: Permanence

Each participant spoke about the meaning of *permanence* of their tattoos. What was interesting is how each statement related to their TN.

**JB's** tattoo narrative of memorial/tribute suggests replacing the loss of the family unit, with a reminder that his son will permanently be his.

*I'm thinking maybe there was a part of me that had to keep something alive from that relationship, but that's just a small part...this tattoo on my arm has only made up in a small part of the relationship with her, it's more about him. (4:110-113)*

**BF's** tattoo narrative highlights the replacement of a loss with permanence. The loss of her father.

*That's it..... they're mine. No-one can take them away from me. Yeah.... they're permanent. As I'm just sitting here, Im now thinking my dad dying,..... something's been taken away from me, uhmm..... my mother not loving me (5:169-173)*

**ST** introduced a conflict to the permanence element of tattoos. When talking about the individual/collectivism element of her DNA strand tattoo, she stated,

*... But the tattoo was just something I wanted permanently symbolizing it...(9:315-352)*

When discussing regret of a specific tattoo's location, she stated,

*...you can do anything like that nowadays, it's not a problem. ..you wanna move something, move. You wanna... you know like.... "awww you have a tattoo you got it for life That's not the case anymore. (14:536-538)*

**FC** reflected on the permanence of her spirituality and how her chosen tattoo reflected that point.

*that is (the tattoo) like a sign for me to say "This is permanent, this is who I am. I'm a spiritual person, take it or leave it. This, this, this is me (6:208-209)*

*...because it's permanent and I believe in it so much that I will put it on my body, for ever. I love my tattoo, I absolutely love it. (5:185-186)*

Following a discussion with another person about her choice of "being "marked for life",

*I'm not covered in scars, I'm not marked for life with scars – I like it!"..... I chose this one. The others were accidents (4:150-154)*

#### 4.3.2 Sub-theme: Meaning in Location

All four participants connected meaning with the location of their tattoos.

#### **JB**

*I play orthodox grip, so my forearm is facing me and I'm playing for my son cos it faces me when I'm playing (2:52-53)*

#### **BF**

*the butterfly is, for me, particularly larger, the largest one. And...it is hidden from me, but I think I'm the most uncomfortable about it, because of its size (12:424-426)*

**ST** spoke of how important *Location choice* can be in the case of regret of getting her hand tattooed. The last in vivo quote is about a different tattoo where the location was important to her. At this stage of her life, she strongly identified with a character from a television series and had the same tattoo of the character tattooed on her shoulder.

*And me dad said to me “You shouldn’t ve had it on your hand”.. and that bothers me, because me dad... it’s only me and me dad... but I just thought ... because I had doubts and when he said that, I thought “Oh he’s right”. (14:529-530)*

*I was so excited... and I was like “oh no no no, I wanna be proud when people ask what it is”, and, you know, this and that and the other. So I’m having it removed to have it done behind my ear now, cos I listen to sex all the time. So it’s about listening to sex.. (12:449-452)*

*... And I just thought “Oh God, and I just thought I’ve made a mistake.” (12:479)*

*..one of the reasons why I had this on my shoulder at the time, ..., that was the meaning behind it. But one of the characters in the show has the tattoo on her shoulder in exactly the same place (8:284-287)*

**FC** Even though the location for FC was very important to the meaning of her tattoo, she did find herself questioning whether this was the real reason behind her location choice.

*My intention is to get a tattoo on every chakra point....(3:83)*

*I’ve often question myself, why didn’t you get it done on your arm, or ... Why have you got it hidden – for something that is so important .... I could be in denial!! ...*

*I'm in denial of wanting to hide it because I'm not confident enough to.... maybe to show it, but it doesn't feel like that. It feels like I don't want to just put it out there.*  
(10:380-386)

#### 4.3.3 Sub-theme: Meaning in Design

Each participant connected great personal meaning to each tattoo.

**BF** spoke how her mother never even knew what her favourite colour was as a child. This was something she consciously chose to mark in all her tattoos.

*...it would always be the blue option...but I didn't like blue! I actually liked green*  
(4:118-119)

**JB** commemorated the personal meaning and history Thailand had for him, by choosing to have his son's name tattooed in Thai lettering.

*... this idea of writing (I did English Lit at Uni) and words, names... for me that's where the meaning is. I could have had an illustration or something symbolic, but I just wanted his name* (4:126-128)

*... I thought this place has meaning for me. It's where I go to get away from the world for a bit. To sit on a desert island and just stare into space. So that connection with a part of myself ... uhm... to get it done in Thai...* (3:84-87)

**ST** is fascinated by the Nature/Nurture debate and the influence of genetics on our DNA. At the same time as her research into the topic, she started watching a television programme that incorporated this debate with “the uniqueness of us”. Her tattoo is from this particular television programme.

*the people who knew the programme and knew what it meant ... they'd come up and they's go .. "Oh my god, a helix...you've got a helix!" ... "How cool is she she's got a helix of Heroes on her shoulder." 9:346-350)*

**FC's** tattoo is the symbol of universal sound and having this powerful symbol imprinted on her body, feels like she can draw from its energy.

*I feel like this tattoo has imprinted itself in on me, so that symbol has the power of.....it has its own power being with me. It has - because the symbol itself is a powerful symbol – I believe that that powerful symbol is part of me now. (3:94-97)*

#### 4.3.4 Sub-theme: Tattoo's utility

It is my understanding from listening to my participants, that tattoos with significant meaning also has a purpose.

**ST** used her DNA helix tattoo to illustrate this point.

*it just reminds me, I own it, that I'm no better than anybody else. (10:370-371)*

**FC's** tattoo has made her question its message to her:

*It's a part of me, but it does not seem to make sense that the particular tattoo I've got at the moment is the universal sound. Perhaps to me that is the sound that I need, this is the universal sound that perhaps I need to be heard, perhaps I need to show myself that... (8:301-304)*

*I do need a reminder now and again. Perhaps I do, when I'm getting angry or stroppy with the family, or not being as nice as I could be. (11:399-401)*

**BF**'s tattoo journey reflects how she has developed and changed over her lifespan and reflects the freedom she now feels.

*Freedom to choose, freedom to have an opinion... and it doesn't matter what other people think of them (5:177)*

*Yeah.... it's a reminder ... (13:447)*

*It's my life really. So, it's from the father through having my children to where I am now with my partner,.....yeah... to where I am today. Yeah... that I love dearly. (14:487-489)*

**JB** explored how his tattoo serves as a statement to himself and his son.

*... it was about me making a statement, that's what it is, a visual statement.....uhm... of my intentions about being a good dad... (1:19-20)*

*..... I'm looking at it every day ....I'm reminded every day and it .. it did what it was supposed to do. (2:63-65)*

*I came to realize that it is also a reminder to me to support my dreams, because in order to be the kind of dad that I want to be. There's something that I have to fulfil within me....that he can look back on. So it's just as much a reminder to me, about my goals and my dreams and my values, as it is about him. (3:71-74)*

The significant findings from this master theme show that meaning can be found in all elements of tattoos – from design, to location. Meaning is connected to the permanence of the image and serves a meaningful purpose. This concludes the Findings chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Three master themes emerged, detailed by eight interlinking super-ordinate themes. These findings will be discussed in relation to previous work in this field. I also aim to highlight and connect unexpected findings to preceding research.

### 5.1 Self

I use the term Phenomenological Sense of Self as to situate this research in relation to Self-theory. I find it important to highlight the delicate process of discussing Self-theory without reference to a theoretical understanding of the Self. This is because Phenomenology is the suspended view of how I experienced the participant's sense of self and it is NOT about my understanding of a particular behaviouristic theory per se. Saying that, I am not a blank sheet and it is inevitable that I bring with me, my own beliefs, values and assumptions. Finlay calls this, "something of a dance – the researcher slides between striving for reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight" (Finlay, 2008, p.1).

Keeping the dance going, I was also conscious of how no two individual's lived experiences are the same. With this in mind, I found it important to treat each participant's sense of self as the individuals they are and didn't think sub themes would be appropriate to the master theme, Self.

Participants have however discussed a range of topics related to their sense of self. My sense making of this, related to counselling theory in the form of *Configurations of*



*Self, a changing Self and Personal Development of Self.* As my participants and I are all counsellors, it felt acceptable for me to grab onto counselling theory as an anchor, until I came to a point of understanding the engagement of bracketing and exploiting theory as a source of insight.

The majority of participants discussed their Sense of Self through sharing their Configurations of Self, their true/authentic self and how some have shed conditions of worth. A key point I've found is that all participants reflected a sense of on-going change and development. This finding concurs with Giddens's view that discovering our authentic Self is a process of shedding false self or former beliefs. The identity of the Self is an on-going routine, sustained by reflexive and conscious awareness (Giddens, 1991). This was the case for all participants. However, as each person's lived experience is so subjective, I didn't want to generalise on every aspect of my findings and lose the essence of each participant. With this in mind, the following few paragraphs will reflect my interpretative discussion on individual transcript findings.

ST described her self-concept as being ridiculously open, not caring what others knew or thought of her. To her, she had very distinguishable sides – *an angel side* and a *devil side*, she had a *medical head* and a *psychological head*, she used to be married, and then single for four years, she was *mental*. Some of these configurations explain the person she is, but also versions of former selves. As Mearns and Thorne contends, "configurations of the self are available to the individual that emerge at different times to take into account the differing circumstances than an individual confronts in life" (Mearns, and Thorne, 2000, p. 107). These versions of self (and at different times in ST' life) has been reflected through her tattoos and identity narrative.

As mentioned previously, my findings suggest that the Self is not a fixed structure, but can shed the 'conditioned self' to become her true self (Merry, 2002). Through BF's personal development towards becoming a counsellor, it became evident how tied she used to be in her conditions of worth. She *was a pleaser, she never put a foot wrong, she was always trying to earn her mother's love*. She used the idiom, "*breaking the mould*" to articulate just how ingrained her conditioned self was and the process by which she started on the road to self-discovery.

When we shed our conditions of worth, we start to trust our internal locus of evaluation, our trustworthy organism (Rogers, 1961). BF started with body modification in the form of piercings and discovered that *no one rejected her for it*. Others' approval or disapproval didn't matter anymore. To BF, she *was starting to find her voice*. In Rogerian terms, she was striving to become a fully functioning person, shedding external locus of evaluation and focused inwards towards her need to actualise her conditioned Self (Rogers, 1961).

Part of being a counsellor involves a high level of commitment to PD. Some participants spoke of finding or recovering their true self. According to Rogers, this is the authentic self that gets distorted by culturally defined constructions we live with in modern day. FC described a beautiful moment of this journey to self-discovery.

She has discovered that *the more I let go, the more I'm able to open up to the spirituality all around me and within me, and the whole and the one and the 'Om' and other people as the spirit in them* In existential terms, she meets others at relational depth (Mearns and Thorne, 2000). FC recognises her spiritual self and trusts her

organismic self to open up (as opposed to staying closed –off) and surrender to the spiritual experience of meditation and connecting with others.

There is another element to FC's view of what her Self is capable and not capable of at present. As personal development and self-awareness is so intrinsic with her present personal journey, that she has become aware of her difficulty to communicate her own needs and thoughts. She is open to co-experience the journey of others (as a counsellor) and to experience a connection with those around her, but needs to do work on why she is finding it so hard to express her own needs. This just reflects the fluid and on-going nature of the Self and the innate striving to self-actualise. Rogers calls this the experience of comfortably discovering the real self (Rogers, 1961). This discovering was also evident in the discourse of JB. My interpretation of the text related to Self, illuminated a young man that suffered the trauma of a severed attachment with his own father. JB mentioned what got him through that particular event, was the thoughts of how he would be a different dad to what his father was. This painful memory played such a pivotal part in JB's development of Self and his tattoo (his *mirror*) reminds him NOT to be like his own father. Furthermore, reflexive thoughts around what it meant to gain and incorporate this new part of his identity and how powerful this statement was to him and his confidence. He has shed some of his father's values and used the resilience he gained from the experience, as a life lesson.

This concludes the discussion section of Master theme 1. The key point highlighted here is to see the Self as a social construction, ever-changing and ever striving to self-actualise, to rid of false versions and to find our true selves. It also answers one of the original research questions this study set out to explore: Talking about one's tattoo is a form of understanding and sharing the Sense of Self.

## 5.2 Tattoo Narratives

*Tattoo stories centralize one experience – the tattoo- and relate what changes have occurred in that tattoo wearer's life since that central defining point. Tattoo narratives, however, are different from other types of life-story narratives in that they do not rely so heavily on memory and are much more self-reflexive*  
DeMello, 2000, p.152

As mentioned earlier, identity narratives flow out of our sense of who we are and how we experience ourselves in everyday life. Heidegger viewed the Self as a human construction, a way of Being In the World (*Dasein*). Without an interpretive stance or a context in which we exist, there is no consciousness (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to our experience of who we are and in turn *cuts off* our Identity Narrative, Sense of Self and Tattoo Narrative. My findings show that all participants related to a particular Tattoo Narrative, but again, each narrative was different from the other. I therefore cannot generalise across my findings.

### 5.2.1 TN – Spiritual

FC's entire interview was based in discourse of Spirituality. Previous studies on how language has been used to illustrate the phenomenological connection with Spirituality are in abundance (Gockel, 2009, Bruner, 1990). Schwab (2013) and Riessman (2000) highlighted a variety of meaning making strategies people use to make sense of their spiritually based story narratives. With this current research I am highlighting Spirituality narrative in a slightly different way – by means of a tattoo narrative. FC's tattoo makes her feel connected to '*part of the whole, the one, the om, the universe, God, Spirit*'. Being deeply connected to the earth and spirit and feeling as if she is part of that energy flow, is what her tattoo represents for her.

Tattoo-based research found the experience of being tattooed as spiritualistic or ritualistic (Goode and Vail, 2008). Not used as an excerpt in my Findings, but quite relevant to this section, was FC's lived experience of receiving her tattoo. She described the experience as '*not making sense, but I liked the feeling of getting it done*'. She reflected on the connection she felt to the music that was playing in the background and how the heavy metal song represented '*the idea of how a tattoo feels through sound*'. My interpretation of her account also felt spiritual, like a deeper connection through penetration of the tattoo needle, reflecting similar experiences mentioned by the Modern Primitive tattoo community (Klesse, 2000).

#### 5.2.2 TN – Personal Growth

The most dominant tattoo narrative in research has been the narrative of personal growth through self-help and empowerment (DeMello, 2000; Fischer, 2002). Scarneki offered the view that tattooing could be a mark of the 'ability to control or master stressful events' when a person could feel out of control (Scarneki, 2001, p.21). Often, people in stressful life situations would reach 'turning points' that fundamentally change the person's current life course, leading to personal growth, overcoming a trauma and a changing identity (Riessman, 2000).

In this research, the majority of participants mentioned their own growth, change and development, but only ST chose to commemorate this aspect of her challenging journey with a tattoo. She described the experience of training as a sex therapist, as going '*through hell and high water*'. She held onto an image of the work Sex in Greek for 10 years before she qualified and finally had it tattooed on her body. She needed to complete this journey of going to hell and back first. The tattoo was her

mark of completion. She was now a sex therapist and could allow herself to have it marked on her skin.

### 5.2.3 TN – Memorial/Tribute

The connection between memorial tattoos and mourning has been highly researched over the last 10 years (Aguirre, 2008; Alcina, 2009; Samuel, 2011; Anastasia, 2009; Littell, 2003). I believe this has been as a result of a cultural shift and an embracing of tattoos through popular culture and media. It was through the volume of tattoo-based television programmes that I became interested in the area. There is something so moving in re-creating a continuing bond with a deceased loved one through a memorial tattoo (Aguirre, 2008). BF recalled playing with her father in the garden as a child. There were always butterflies around the buddleia tree. It was just her and her dad. The attachment to him was secure, unlike her mother. She lost her dad when she was aged six. In order to protect herself, she had the tattoo placed on her back where she cannot see it every day, but she knows it is there. As mentioned previously, this statement suggests that not all memorial tattoo wearers wish to see their tattoo on a daily basis, as previous research might have found (Aguirre, 2008).

I chose to use the word, Tribute as a narrative to describe a tattoo that represents a loved one that is still alive. JB explained how one day, he wants to look back at his tattoos, reading it like chapters to the significant events in his life. The birth of his son, marked the first chapter. This is a tattoo that JB is proud of. *'yes, I am tattooed. I am not blank anymore'* and *'I can look at my tattoo and I know who I am'* are very powerful statements of his tattooed identity.

#### 5.2.4 TN – Individual/Collectivism

Literature on tattoo narratives suggests that one way to express Individuality is through a custom tattoo rather than taken from flash (DeMello, 2000). So if we were just to engage with ST's DNA helix that she copied from the television show, it wouldn't appear to be individual at all. To me, this is where reflexivity, connection and personal meaning steps in. ST didn't choose this image because she wanted a tattoo that made a statement about her individuality in *tattoo choice*. ST chose this tattoo to highlight her sameness, but also her differences as a human being. For her, she belongs to a community of biological human beings. This suggests that perhaps she sees it as a source of identification to the human race, and not just as a source to identify to a tattoo community as Moerier and colleagues (2011) would argue.

For one participant however, this identification to a tattoo community was a revelation. Since receiving his tattoo on his forearm, JB experienced a feeling of connection with fellow tattooed people. He was astonished how new relationships seemed to form in his life. Through sharing his tattoo narrative, an instant connection with the core value of another human being was created. My interpretation, while reflexively restraining my pre-understandings of this phenomenon, conjures up the idea of being part of a community. As Anderson (1983) re-defined community as no longer 'village-based' (Anderson, 1983, cited in DeMello, 2000) or concrete. Today's communities are more imagined and "must be understood with respect to the style in which they are imagined, i.e., via shared ties of kinship, citizenship.....Communities like the tattoo community provide a model for just such an understanding, in that they do not even possess the quality of spatial boundedness that nations, cities, or neighbourhoods have" (DeMello, 2000, p.40). Because of this imagined and non-concreted form of new community, members need to seek out other members in

order to form connections and a shared identity. What makes the tattoo community different from more traditional communities, like occupation or religion, is its emphasis on individual choice in the expression of self-identity (DeMello, 2000).

Muggleton (1995) noted a movement towards 'neo-tribalism' with a strong emphasis on personal nature of modification rather than subculture affiliation of more traditional and class-fixed tattoos like gangs affiliates. Patterson and Schroeder explored embodied identity within consumer research and generated a series of insights into intercorporeality, embodiment, and body projects. They challenged the idea that we are relatively self-contained and solely responsible for our own identity construction. Their findings suggest that our identities are socially constructed and understood through 'the works, looks and discourses of others' (Patterson and Schroeder, 2010, p. 263).

### 5.3 Meaning Making of the Tattoo Narrative

*"Engaging this attitude involves a preparedness to be open to whatever may emerge rather than prejudging or prestructuring one's findings. The aim is to connect directly and immediately with the world as we (and, through empathy, as our research participants) experience it"* Finlay, 2008, p. 4

#### 5.3.1 Meaning Making of TN- Permanence

An element that has emerged from this research that I wasn't anticipating was the meaning the participants attached to the Permanence of a tattoo. As I highlighted in the Results Table of Data Analysis (Table 2, Chapter 4) there has been a clear link between each tattoo narrative and Permanence, regardless of type of Tattoo Narrative.

Previous research has highlighted the importance some individuals place on replacing a loss with something that cannot be lost (Aguirre, 2008, Follett, 2009).



The permanence of tattoos has given some participants this opportunity as can be seen in the account of BF and the memorial butterfly tattoo she had done in the name of her deceased father. There is a drive or a need for something to continue beyond the loss (Follett, 2009). A tattoo can create this continuing bond. It is the one thing no one can take away and the meaning of this, has proven to be immensely powerful in all the participants' narratives. ST wanted her belief system of individuality in a collectivist world permanently symbolized. FC wanted the permanence of her spirituality forever reflected on her embodied self.

During the interview with FC, she mentioned her husband's disapproval of her tattoo, stating that she is "marked for life now". Her reply to this was that she chose this mark and that all her other marks were scars from accidents. This carried great importance to her. Her permanent reflection of her true self, not a disfigurement that life threw at her in a form of an accidental scar.

### 5.3.2 Meaning Making of Location

The chosen location of the tattoo in itself can hold meaning for the tattooed. It was interesting that each participant brought the topic of location, but in completely different ways.

Fisher wrote, *"Having this decorative function, tattoos are often associated with exhibitionism. Although there is indeed an element of desire to reveal tattoos, there is often an equally profound desire to conceal tattoos. Revealing the tattoo has several functions, including showing the individual's stylishness, identifying a group to which they belong, and demonstrating their rebelliousness. The desire to conceal can stem from the deeply personal meaning of the tattoo for the individual or from the deeply embedded social stigma. While the tattooed person enjoys the positive*

*attention from his/her peers generated by the tattoo, most of these same people feel embarrassed about the negative reactions they get from others, especially when this reaction is coming from friends and family. People with tattoos try to avoid and resent questions such as 'Why would you do that to yourself?' Fischer, 2002, p. 12.*

To JB, it was important to have his son's name on his forearm, visible when he plays the drums, reminding him to follow his own dreams, but also as a reminder to encourage his son to one day follow his dreams.

FC reflected an element of Fischer's findings. Although her initial thought behind her tattoo location was so strongly connected to her chakra points, she did question whether her concealed tattoo location didn't perhaps also reflect her lack of confidence to have it more on show. This was a very reflexive moment for her during the interview and she came to the conclusion that she *'doesn't want to put it just out there'*.

BF admitted to feeling uncomfortable with the size of her memorial tattoo and explored the idea why she chose this particular tattoo to go on her back so that she doesn't see it every day. To my knowledge, this is a unique finding in tattoo research and differs from a previous study (Aguirre, 2008) that suggests people like to be able to see their memorial tattoos in order to interact with them.

ST discussed tattoo location of two different tattoos. The first location was purely due to identification with a television character that had the same tattoo on her shoulder. The second tattoo brought a new element to permanence. ST regretted a specific tattoo location. This brought a new dimension to tattoo research, as all available research discussed the regret of a tattoo and NOT just tattoo location (Follett, 2009; Sanders 2008; Armstrong 1994, Atkinson 2004, cited in Strohecker,

2011). This participant is in the process of having the tattoo removed and then re-done in a different and more significant location – behind her ear, as she is a sex therapist and she listens to ‘*sex all the time*’. From having the tattoo on her hand, she was bombarded with people wanting to know the meaning of it. ST would describe herself as a ‘*ridiculously open person*’, but she still found it an intrusion when she just wanted to get on with her shopping.

This ‘moving’ of the tattoo has also brought up the debate of how permanent a tattoo really has to be in the modern days of laser removal. Follett (2009) highlights the scarification and that in itself will stay permanent, but immersing myself in ST’s discourse, I didn’t get a sense that this was an issue to her.

### 5.3.3 Meaning Making of Design

It feels a bit obvious to discuss the importance of design to a permanent image, but what is interesting is the level of detail *meaning making of design* can affect what a person has tattooed or even just the colour. All BF’s tattoos are a shade of green. This has been a very deliberate statement for her. She reflected on how she always loved green, but that her mother never even knew this. Her mother discarded her preference and always dressed her in blue. By having her tattoos in green, she claims her favourite colour. The meaning that she has taken from this, reflects her assessment of that lived experience, of being a child and not being able to express herself (Johnson, 2007).

For JB, it was clear that he wanted his son’s name represented with lettering and not an image. Words are where this participant attaches meaning. As a child, he received the value from his father, that names are more important than images. He

grew up to study English Literature because to him, a word is what carries meaning. He chose to have his son's name written in Thai lettering, as this reflected the emotional and meaningful connection he wanted to hold on to with Thailand. This is the place he can escape to, where he can '*connect with a part of himself*'. This is where he came after his marriage dissolved, where he came to take stock and to have his son's name immortalised on his arm. It would imply that the meaning this participant takes from his tattoo design is that it keeps him connected to the history and time he spent with his ex-wife in Thailand, and the boy that was created through that significant time frame. Also, that the use of language might have been a condition of worth or value passed on from his own father (Merry, 2002).

#### 5.3.4 Tattoo's utility

What has been illuminated during this research has been the understanding that tattoos with significant meaning, also serves a purpose. These tattoos serve as a poignant reminder to each person's personal life message (Pitts, 2003). Alcina calls these, "note-to-self tattoos" (Alcina, 2009, p. 64). She categorized reminders under three headings: 'important people, important places and tattoos as symbolic of a life philosophy by which they are trying to live or character traits to which they aspire' (Alcina, 2009, p. 65). My interpretation matches that of Alcina.

For ST, it is a reminder that she is '*no better than anybody else*'. To FC, it is a reminder to not get so angry and to stay in the calm and peaceful space that she enters when she meditates. It is also a reminder to her to '*show herself more*' and that she too has to '*be heard*'. During BF's journey of self-discovery and change, her tattoos remind her of the freedom she discovered she had, once she shed the

shackles of her conditions of worth. It is also a reminder of the things in life that she loves dearly. To JB, it is a reminder to not just follow his own dreams, but to guide his son to do the same.

To conclude, I believe these findings and discussion to be my interpretation of the participants tattoo stories. To highlight the key points uncovered in this study was the importance permanence and tattoo design can play in such individual tattoo narratives. Also, to my participants, their tattoos served a purpose. To add to the phenomenological angle of this research, Tattoo utility was utterly subjective and could not be generalised any deeper. These findings answered the other original research question this study set out to explore: why people choose to immortalize specific life events and the personal meaning they connect to it.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Implication of this research

Conducting this research has given me a front row seat into the delicate process of individual meaning making and understanding the Self in its lived world. Through the immortalisation of words or an image on a person's body, I gained an understanding of phenomenological accounts of personal growth and identification. Also of integrating versions of Self, previous and present. As a researcher, I witnessed their "embodied visual communication" – permanent messages or reminders of THAT particular Self they were when they received this tattoo (Kosut, 2000, p. 98). The research highlighted the importance of the utility of the tattoo.

I have always considered tattoo narrative as such a poignant form of sharing phenomenological Selfhood. Listening to people's accounts from all walks of life always made me think of a missed opportunity in the counselling room. This study produced knowledge that can be beneficial to counsellors. I often found myself wondering whether non-tattooed counsellors ever considered asking a tattooed client about their tattoos. In my experience, it can be such an illuminating aid.

The choice to follow the hermeneutic route on analysis had great implication on the findings of this research. My aim was to evoke lived experience through the explicit involvement of interpretation (Finlay, 2011) of tattoos and identity. In my opinion, a more scientific quantifiable method could not have captured the essence of *living intersubjectively in the world*. This research was not about understanding the type of person that gets tattooed. It was not to understand the behavioural or cognitive

forces behind choosing to body modify (Wohlrab, et al. 2007; Thomas, 2012; Goode and Vail, 2008; Caplan, et al. 1996; Lemma, 2010).

I'm aware that a hermeneutically informed method of analysis is complex. This study relied heavily on the balance between the core understanding of the participant's narrative, with setting up a dialogue with the text (Rudestam and Newton, 2007) and then integrating its meaning through my understanding of it.

## 6.2 Limitations of this research

IPA is a painstaking form of analysis that can feel never-ending. With every re-read, more questions and avenues came to light. As a researcher working against the clock, there came a time where I had to step away from the text. I found this quite difficult. As I was trying to explore every angle of the text, I did find the element of *Linguistics comments* in the participant's narrative quite fascinating, but as there was no time or space to explore this avenue, I have decided to add these comments from the transcripts as an appendix. (Please see appendix 14).

In order to analyse the participants' lived experience, I had to rely on the use of language. Willig (2001) would argue that language constructs rather than describe the experiences, making direct access to the lived experience, impossible.

IPA is limited to small scale or time-limited studies. The methods are not appropriate for larger number of 'faceless' participants. It is in the nature of IPA to explore and seek out individual phenomenology.

As participation was self-selected, it did not represent a cross-section of the population. Although I had both male and female counsellor participants, all four were from the same ethnicity.

Finally, the interviews produced such rich data and although this is the aim of IPA, findings of this paper are based on my interpretation of the text. Another researcher would ultimately interpret the findings differently.

### 6.3 Suggestions for further research

Future research in the area might consider interviewing individuals from a variety of career backgrounds. I did experience the participants as counsellors, and their level of personal development was evident. It might be interesting to hear the same interview questions answered by individuals who don't work in this area.

Future research that I would personally like to be involved with, would be a development of the question: Is there a use of *tattoo narrative* as a tool for making psychological contact in the counselling room?

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Literature Search – Terms used that relates to area of research

COUNSELING and	MEANING and	SELF and	TATTOO
OR “counsel*in g research” OR “phenomen o*” OR “IPA” OR “counsel*or	OR “personal meaning” OR “meaning making” OR “memorial” OR “loss” OR “regret” OR “premanen*”	OR “sense of self” OR “identi*” OR “group identi*” OR “intergroup” OR “experienc*”	OR “tattoo*” OR “body mark*” OR “body modif*” OR “body art”

## APPENDIX 2

### Copy of email correspondence:

Hi Leana,  
Thanks for your email. I've just uploaded your entry to our May online issue at TherapyToday.net.

Here follows the usual confirmation regarding inclusion in the online TherapyToday.net Noticeboard, which will be updated next around **15 June...**

- Please note that entries may be edited according to house style and so that entries appear consistent
- If your entry does not feature when you had hoped, please let me know and I will ensure it is included as soon as possible
- If you wish to repeat your entry, please email me with the wording (of approximately 30 words, not including contact details) and your BACP membership number, before **15 June** for the **July** online issue
- Please note that since February 2013, the noticeboard is now only available online. If you also wish to have your wording printed in the hard-copy *Therapy Today* journal, you may want to consider placing a classified advertisement from £1.19 per word + VAT. To book a classified advert, please contact NAME REMOVED (Advertising Manager) on NUMBER REMOVED, email ADDRESS REMOVED or visit [www.bacp.co.uk/advertising](http://www.bacp.co.uk/advertising)

You may also be interested in the **BACP Research Notice Board**, offered by the BACP Research department: [http://www.bacp.co.uk/research/Research\\_Noteice\\_Board/index.php](http://www.bacp.co.uk/research/Research_Noteice_Board/index.php) BACP members can submit notices about their own research by forwarding up to 500 words to [ADDRESS REMOVED](#) (please supply your BACP membership number when submitting your wording).

Best wishes,  
NAME REMOVED

### **Seeking Counsellors of any training background who have a tattoo with significant personal meaning**

**(qualified or in training, excl. 1st years) I am a Post-graduate student at the University of Chester and I'm carrying out research into personal representations and significant meaning of your own tattoos. Interviews will be semi-structured and audio-recorded and will last approx 1 hour. Interviews will take place in a reserved room at your place of study or work or University of Chester.**

**Contact: Leana Hughes NUMBER REMOVED  
email: ADDRESS REMOVED**

## APPENDIX 3



### Help Wanted .... Participate in a students research project !

Posted on [May 22, 2013](#) by [Rory](#) Posted in [General Interest](#), [Research](#)

3



I have been contacted by Leana Hughes, a student currently studying an MA in Clinical Counselling at the University of Chester.

**Which will finish on the 31st of August 2013**

Leana has agreed to post a summary of her findings on the blog when completed.

She is looking for 4 Volunteers to take part in a research project described below.

---

**Seeking Counsellors of any training background  
who have a tattoo with significant personal meaning  
(qualified or in training, excl. 1st years)**

I am a Post-graduate student at the University of Chester and I'm carrying out research into personal representations and significant meaning of your own tattoos.

Interviews will be semi-structured and audio-recorded and will last approx 1 hour. Interviews will take place in a reserved room at your place of study or work or University of Chester.

## APPENDIX 4

Counselling Dept  
ADDRESS REMOVED  
15/07/13

ADDRESS REMOVED

Dear Ms

I am a Post-graduate student at the University of Chester studying MA in Clinical Counselling. I am carrying out research into personal representations and significant meaning of your own tattoos and I am seeking to interview counsellors (qualified or incl. training, excl. 1<sup>st</sup> years) who carry tattoos with significant personal meaning.

If you have a space, would you please advertise on your premises? I am also happy to send you this request in email form if you could perhaps email this request to staff members or students with tattoos.

I have already started interviewing, so I am good to go and will happily do the audio recorded, semi structured interview at your premises or at (ADDRESS REMOVED), as this is where my placement is based.

I would be so grateful if anyone could be of help.

Kind regards

Leana Hughes

CONTACT DETAILS REMOVED

Placement phone number (avail on Tuesdays) : NUMBER REMOVED

## APPENDIX 5



**Seeking Counsellors of any training background who have a tattoo with significant personal meaning (qualified or in training, excl. 1st years)**

I am a Post-graduate student at the University of Chester and I'm carrying out research into personal representations and significant meaning of your own tattoos.

Interviews will be semi-structured and audio-recorded and will last approx 1 hour.  
Interviews will take place in a reserved room at your place of study or work or University of Chester.

Thank You  
Contact: Leana Hughes  
**DETAILS REMOVED**

## APPENDIX 6

### Research Information Sheet

Title of dissertation: **The tattooed client – a phenomenological exploration of symbolic representations in Self-concept**

About me: I am a third year post-graduate student on the MA Clinical Counselling course at the University of Chester. I am a mom, a wife and I have an interest in tattoos. I am in placement at a GP surgery.

My research: People use different ways of expressing themselves, of sharing who they are, in life and in the counselling room. The paramount part of our training and personal development as counsellors is to explore our own attitudinal perceptions, any pre-conceived ideas or potential limitations to working with individuals that may or may not identify themselves differently to ourselves. The aim of this study is to bring a new conversation to counselling research. It may inform counsellors how Body Art or Body Modification can create dialogue, capable of producing the richest discourse and phenomenological exploration of a person's concept of personal and social self and how they choose to express that Self. Clients in everyday life explore a variety of topics in the counselling room – grief and mourning; transition; examining Self and identity. Through this study, I hope to open the discussion around the implication of choosing to carry tattoos.

Selection of participants Once I receive inclusion criteria checklists back from respective counsellors, I will select 4 or 5 participants that would give me the most diverse selection of participants. Ideally I will have participants of different age, training and gender.

What does participating in this research mean? If you choose to be involved in this study and you meet the inclusion criteria, you will be required to part take in a 1 hour long audio-recorded interview. This interview will take place in a suitable and private room at the University of Chester or agreed alternative suitable venue meeting confidentiality criteria. This can include your consulting room if you are a practising qualified counsellor. After the interview, I will transcribe the audio recording and can securely send it to you for your approval. You will have the opportunity to remove any parts of the interview that you feel uncomfortable with, if you choose to do so. Your transcript will become the data that I will analyse to look for themes across all my participant interviews.

What are the potential risks? During the interview, sensitive topics and tender feelings might arise for you. It is of the utmost importance that you have a personal

counsellor or supervisor that you can explore these feelings with. I can provide you with access to a list of counsellors in your area if you should need it.

Benefits of the Research: I feel there is a real need in the UK to get an alternative slant on identity narrative – one where social lines and cultural differences are blurred. Tattoos transcends normal social borders and can deliver an unique phenomenological narrative for every tattooed person – from the surgeon with tattoos, to the football mom with tattoos, to the tattooed church organist. My hope for this research study is to remind counsellors of the window of opportunity a tattoo can create in making psychological contact with a tattooed client.

Confidentiality Your anonymity will be protected throughout the entire dissertation process, by allocating you a code name from the start. This code will be used in paper and pc form. All pc data will be password protected. Any verbatim extracts used in the dissertation, would be done with your consent. Any names you might mention during the interview will be given a pseudonym. You are welcome to bring an image of your tattoo for clarification purposes during my interview if you feel this is important to you. To clarify, the image will not be part of the dissertation and is not a requirement.

What will happen to the results: The results of this study will become my dissertation for MA in Clinical Counselling at the University of Chester. The university will keep a copy and the dissertation may also be available electronically.

Data Protection: I am custodian of all the data. Forms of data include audio recordings, pc and paper files. All audio recording will be deleted from the dictaphone once copied onto my home laptop to which only I have access to. All recordings will be transcribed. All mentioned names will be given a pseudonym and participant names will be replaced with an identity code. All recordings and transcripts will be copied onto a memory stick as back up. All files will be password protected. All paper hard copies will be kept for 5 years in line with University regulations. Personal notes and audio recordings on the memory stick will be stored in my lockable filing cabinet at home and deleted after the M.A. has been awarded.

Ethics: I have submitted my research proposal to the University of Chester Ethics Committee and have gained their approval to proceed with this study. I confirm that my research will adhere to the BACP's Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy and will also be carried out in accordance with the University of Chester's guidelines. Participants will be given the right to withdraw at any point before the dissertation goes to print.

Complaints Procedure: In the event of a complaint, I would hope we could resolve matters between you, me and my supervisor. If you wish to make a formal complaint, please write to the my supervisor at Social Sciences and Counselling Department of the University of Chester (see details below) – DETAILS REMOVED

## APPENDIX 7

### Inclusion Criteria Checklist

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Assigned Anon code: (office use only) \_\_\_\_\_

Mobile number or email: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred time to call you: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: 20-29 \_\_\_\_\_

30-39 \_\_\_\_\_

40-49 \_\_\_\_\_

50-59 \_\_\_\_\_

60-69 \_\_\_\_\_

70-79 \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have access to personal therapy? \_\_\_\_\_



Do you have a tattoo that carry significant meaning to you? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Interview location options**

Would you be able to travel to University of Chester library for the interview?

\_\_\_\_\_

If you are a **qualified and working counsellor**, do you use an office/

counselling room, suitable for confidential audio recording? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

If you are a **student counsellor**, are you aware of rooms at your place of

study where confidential recordings can take place? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please return via email to DETAILS REMOVED

Or to:

Leana Hughes Counselling Dept

ADDRESS REMOVED

PARTICIPANT	JB	ST	BF	FC
GENDER	Male	Female	Female	Female
AGE RANGE	30-39	40-49	50-59	50-59
TRAINING	Integrative	Sex therapist	Integrative	Psychodynamic
TRANSCRIPT COLOUR	Blue	Green	Yellow	Orange

Table 1: Participant Profile Table

## APPENDIX 9

# UNIVERSITY OF CHESTER

## DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

### MA IN CLINICAL COUNSELLING

#### CONSENT FORM

#### AUDIO RECORDING OF DISSERTATION INTERVIEW

I, ....., hereby give consent to be audiotape recorded and for the details of the interview involving me and **LEANA HUGHES** , to be submitted as part of a dissertation for the MA in Clinical Counselling at University of Chester.

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and that all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the research data. I further understand that the transcript may be seen by Leana's MA supervisor and the External Examiner for the purpose of assessment and moderation. I also understand that all these people are bound by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

I understand I will have access to the transcribed material should I wish to and would be able to amend or delete any part of it. I am aware that I can stop the interview at any point, or ultimately withdraw the interview before the publication of the dissertation. Excerpts from the transcript might be included in the dissertation.

A copy of the dissertation will be held in the University of Chester and may be made available electronically. In line with the University of Chester regulations, the data obtained from the interviews will be held by me, the researcher, for a period of five years and then destroyed.

Without further consent, some of the material may be used for publication and/or presentations at conferences and seminars. Every effort will be made to ensure complete anonymity.

Finally, I believe I have been given sufficient information about the nature of this research, including any possible risks, to give my informed consent to participate.

Signed [Participant].....

Date .....

Signed [Researcher].....

Date .....

## APPENDIX 10

### Interview Schedule and Guide

(Please note that this is not a script, it is purely a schedule for my guidance)

#### Introduction

Thank you for coming – I would like us to spend the next hour exploring the motivations and choices behind your tattoo or tattoos. I am interested in YOUR experiences, so please talk freely and know that there are no right or wrong answers.

(Ensure consent form is signed)

Do you have any questions about the process before we start?

#### Questions

Brief explanation of the image

Did it represent anything specific in your life at the time you got it? (When did you get it)

Has that meaning changed at all?

Why did you choose that specific design? (this might be answer automatically)

Why did you choose a tattoo specifically over anything else?

What do the people around you think of it?

Do you or would you have anymore?

APPENDIX 11

Emerging themes	Original transcript	Exploratory Comments
<p>LINGUISTIC COMMENT</p> <p>Location of tattoo</p> <p>Description of tattoo</p>	<p>L As this is only audio, Im gonna ask if you can start by telling me what your tattoo looks like.... if you could just explain the image for me.</p> <p>JB OK so, its uh three words, uh written in uh Thai writing. Its the name of my son...uh and it actually says in English, it says Ruben Lee Blakeley. And so its characters on my forearm, my left forearm, its on the underside of my left forearm and its in blue lettering.</p> <p>L In Thai.....!</p>	<p>He states its 3 words, rather than just its my son's name <i>Words are important to him</i></p> <p>He gives a very clear description</p> <p>Alot of uhms and stutters before saying Thai – highlighting the importance he connects with the word/place</p>

<p><b>LINGUISTIC : LAUGHTER</b></p>	<p>JB Yeah, I had it done in uhm in uhm in Phuket one night at about two in the morning (laughter)</p> <p>L Wow!</p> <p>JB Yeah... after ...uhm... after a couple of drinks.... but yeah, I've been thinking about getting a tattoo leading up to that particular holiday. Uhm My son has been born six months earlier and it meant a lot to get a tattoo for me, because it was about that relationship with my son.</p> <p>L So you were six months, already.. you started to get to know this little guy!</p> <p>JB Yeah, uhm... there were some...basically uhm, the circumstances at the time were ..uhm... my wife and I separated shortly after he was born</p>	<p><i>Pronunciation of Phuket is very deliberate. Almost highlighting its importance.</i></p> <p><i>Laughed when he said 2 am as if he almost couldn't believe the time. I found it odd for a 'well thought through' tattoo to be done this time of night. Normally its drunken tattoos done at that time, unless he needed Dutch courage</i></p> <p><i>It meant a lot because it represents the relationship with his son. It represents the attachment</i></p> <p><i>Circumstances around the marriage break up. The use of Uhms and pauses .....</i></p> <p><i>Talking about 3 big changes here – his</i></p>
<p><b>Needed courage</b></p> <p><b>MM – it meant a lot because its about the relship with my son</b></p>		
<p><b>TN - A Visual statment</b></p> <p><b>Of loss</b></p> <p><b>Being left/leaving</b></p> <p><b>Of NOT hurting his son</b></p>		

<p>LINGUISTIC: laughed when questioning how we was going to be as a dad. Like his own&gt; or different? Such ?tender, fear, sensitive thoughts intrinsic</p> <p><b>Contrast of really good childhood and then parents split up and Dad became absent</b></p> <p><b>Personal Meaning of what being a good dad means to me</b></p>	<p>and..... (pause).. uhm..and I'd, I had a pretty chaotic childhood relationship with my... with my dad and.... I think I went through a bit of trauma during separation, but ... what kind of got me through it was my feelings about how I was going to be as a dad... and so (laughter), the tattoo carried a lot of meaning... it was about me making a statement, that's what it is, a visual statement.....uhm... of my intentions to be a good dad... (laughter)</p> <p>L So a visual statement... I'm going to be a good dad, I'm going to be different to what my dad was..</p> <p>JB Yeah, yeah.... I mean, I knew my dad up to, until I was seven, and I think...I had a really good childhood, but when my mom and my dad separated, I didn't really see much of him. So he was an absent figure, and I always knew I wasn't gonna be for my son....so...yeah, it was a statement about what being a dad means to me.</p>	<p>marriage break up, his parents' traumatic break up when he was a young boy, becoming a dad himself. Tattoo is something to hold on to – can't lose it like he lost his dad, wife and family unit</p> <p>Also, his PD on chaotic attachment to Dad</p> <p>What got me through...he was already thinking of how we has going to be a different father I wonder at what age he started thinking about being a dad? I doubt a 7 year old will think about fatherhood?</p> <p>The use of laughter and uhm Uhms feel like a highlight to his next word. Laughter feels more like masking sadness?</p> <p>He needed a visual reminder of his intent to be a different father than his own. I AM NOT MY FATHER</p> <p>Dad left at such a young age (LOOK AT ERIKSONS STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT)</p> <p>THEORY – ATTACHEMENT AND SEPARATION</p>
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<p><b>MM</b> this is me making a statement that I'm going to be a different dad to what MY dad was to me.</p> <p><b>Linked with his sense of Self (SoS)</b></p>	<p>L And at this point, you and your partner had already split up?</p> <p>JB Yes, we'd split up.</p> <p>L So it was like, "my parents also split up and this is what my dad chose, and this is what I'm choosing".</p> <p>JB Yes, yes... to be different.</p> <p>L Ok. You made a clear statement, on your fore-arm.....open for everyone to see.. "This is me saying I'm going to be a different dad".</p> <p>JB And.. yeah, yeah... and.. and that, that meaning, I only kind of gave to it after I had it done, but the <u>feeling</u>, the <u>motivation</u> was there. <u>It was, it was just a</u></p>	<p><i>At this point I remembered that his own marriage broke up, hence my next statement A statement of how NOT to lose my son the way I lost my dad</i></p> <p><i>I'm gonna be different (DIFFERENT FROM WHAT? WHAT CAN A 7 YEAR OLD KNOW ABOUT BEING A DAD? Feels simple, literal, black and white. Its crucial to be different to him</i></p> <p><i>Its only after he got the tattoo, did he start to think why I did that and what it means. The meaning became apparent after he</i></p>
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feeling, I wasn't consciously making a statement... but I had a feeling that was strong and I wanted to put that feeling on my body.

L So the feeling was strong...

JB Yeah..yeah..

L You didn't know, by the time you're gonna get a tattoo, that this is going to be the emotion and the meaning that you are going to put on this tattoo?

JB Yeah.... there was a part of me who just thought it would be really good, it would look great and that is cool...(laughter)... and then... I started to think about why I did that, what it meant, and that is when I went deeper with it.

L It's almost as if having it visually there has given you the focus of "Ok.. why did I do this really, and what does is really mean?"

had the tattoo done. Its almost like tattoo is the driving force to get a subconscious awakening/realisation . AGAIN, HOLDING ONTO, KEEPING IT, NOT LOSING that message that he has been carrying since his loss as a boy

Part of me: Parts of him: to be cool, abandoned son, ex husband, hopeful dad, single man, counsellor, musician are other parts of him

TN and SoS

<p>Linguistic: he knew the impact that his statement would have?</p> <p>Tattoo is a reminder that he can see every time he plays drums</p> <p>Linguistic – laughter in the amazement?</p>	<p>JB Yeah.... well.... I...I used to play in a jazz band... I used to play in quite a few jazz bands and I played drums and there is two grips in drumming... I don't want to bore you with this (L No.. go for it) there is two grips.... there is orthodox grip where you basically, its like.. you know you see drummers in a marching band (L ..my dad's one!) There you go! So orthodox grip and then there's the match grip which basically is like you see rock drummers. I play orthodox grip, so my forearm is facing me and I'm playing for my son. (L Oh wow...!) (laughter) cos it faces me when I'm playing.</p> <p>L So you see it...! So what is it about the playing.. that feeling and that connection with that visual .....</p> <p>JB It's a reminder to me to be supportive to my son when it comes to him pursuing his dreams!</p> <p>L Oh Wow....that is so powerful!</p>	<p>This was so moving to hear. Understanding what it meant to see his tattoo while playing drums. Meaning of Tattoo location: a reminder for me to be supportive to my son and his dreams. And to not abandon him</p> <p>The message is CONSTANT, IMMEDIATE</p> <p>Use of laughter again. Mostly at big, meaning-carrying statements.</p>
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<p>Meaning uncovered post-tattoo exploration – reminder NOT to abandon like he was abandoned</p>	<p>SG Yeah..yeah.. (laughter)</p> <p>L And you couldn't have known this when he was six months old that day you got that tattoo..</p> <p>JB Yeah, yeah... but ... it was there in the back of my mind, but I only really explored it after I had it done, because when I had it done, it was then that I really started to think... I'm looking at it every day ....I'm reminded every day and it .. it did what it was supposed to do.</p> <p>L It did what it's supposed to do. (JB Yeah...yeah!) ...that's brilliant! So my next question is... has the meaning at all changed of the tattoo for you... it</p>	<p>Looking at it every day makes him truly connect to the thoughts of the meaning and message to himself with this tattoo. It is his REMINDER. As if he could have forgotten that message without the tattoo? Is he worried the 'Dad abandones Son' message might seep through if he doesn't keep his eye on it? This tattoo had a PURPOSE – A JOB, A CLEAR MESSAGE</p>
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## APPENDIX 12



Image 1: Splitting each transcript into emerging themes



Image 2: Working towards Super-ordinate themes



Image 3: Super-ordinate themes into Master themes

## APPENDIX 13

Image reflecting complete audit trails, including reflexive journal, dissertation request correspondence, advertising communication correspondence and local counselling facilities searches of a 20 mile radius.



## APPENDIX 14

### Linguistic Comments

#### JB

1. OK so, its uh three words, uh written in uh Thai writing. Its the name of my son...uh and it actually says in English, it says Ruben Lee Blakeley. And so its characters on my forearm, my left forearm, its on the underside of my left fore-arm and its in blue lettering.

He states its 3 words, rather than just “it’s my son’s name”. Words are important to him. He gives a very clear description. A lot of uhms and stutters before saying Thai – highlighting the importance he connects with the word/place

2. Yeah, I had it done in uhm in uhm in Phuket one night at about two in the morning (laughter)

Pronunciation of Phuket is very deliberate. Almost highlighting its importance. Laughed when he said 2 am as if he almost couldn’t believe the time. I found it odd for a ‘well thought through’ tattoo to be done this time of night. Normally its drunken tattoos done at that time, unless he needed Dutch courage.

3. ... what kind of got me through it was my feelings about how I was going to be as a dad... and so (laughter), the tattoo carried a lot of meaning... it was about me making a statement, that’s what it is, a visual statement.....uhm... of my intentions to be a good dad... (laughter)

The use of laughter and uhm Uhms feel like a highlight to his next word. Laughter feels more like masking sadness? LINGUISTIC: laughed when questioning how we was going to be as a dad. Like his own dad or different? Such tender, fear, sensitive intrinsic thoughts?



1. . I play orthodox grip, so my forearm is facing me and I'm playing for my son. (L Oh wow...!) (laughter) cos it faces me when I'm playing.

Linguistic: he knew the impact that his statement would have?

2. JB It's a reminder to me to be supportive to my son when it comes to him pursuing his dreams! (L Oh Wow....that is so powerful! ) SG Yeah..yeah.. (laughter)

Use of laughter again. Mostly at big, meaning-carrying statements. Linguistic – laughter in the amazement?

3. JB Yep, yeah, yeah, and he is with me half the week, he is with her half the week, everything is shared 50/50 and its all balanced...yeah it's good! .. (laugh)

The laughter feels more like disguising the sadness

4. they're judging you as a person and they quickly show themselves to be somebody that you wouldn't necessarily, or I wouldn't necessarily want to justify my tattoo to. (laugther)

Anger at being judged?

5. look back on this and say "I remember what it meant to me then" and wow it was cool what happened from this tattoo to this tattoo, these things have happened in my life, and these things are the headings, the chapters of how I have experienced life.... (laughter)

Another moving, important statement that's greeted with laughter. This time it sounded like amazement

## FC

1. ....the whole experience included the music..... included the music too.... really, really, really good!

Her face lit up as she was remembering the experience

2. she said: “Oh, whatever floats your boat!” (*laughter*)

Daughter’s misunderstanding, not seeing her value – this is something so meaningful to the participant

3. So I peeled it off and let him peek and he said: “Oooh what do you like?” (*laughter*) and uhm.... he’s accepted it, but I don’t think he really likes it. He said: “You’re marked for life now”, so I said: “ So what? I’m not covered in scars, I’m not marked for life with scars – I like it!”

CONCEPTUAL: Laughter when feeling VULNERABLE?, not approved of, rejected, judged

4. smoking I put on a lot of weight and the tattoo rose up my body, it went further up, which really annoyed me... (*laughter*)... because it wasn’t sitting on me sacral chakra any more.

CONCEPTUAL – laughter when talking about being annoyed

5. The right time would be tomorrow, if I had the money! (*laughter*)

Vulnerability?, realistic

6. whereas if I came up with my own symbols for each individual chakra of my own, it will be my idea, and it will be more personal to me, and I would prefer that. *(laughter)*

Linguistic comments: laughter about the fact that SHE has to do the choosing – her OWN statement of what the chakra means to her. The laughter almost felt like it was a bit of pressure on her to ‘do it right’, even if it’s just for her (personal meaning)

7. They do, yeah..... they do. They have totally different pathways and totally different energies and they are the root, if you like....uhm.... the part, the chamber – I see them like a chamber of energy – that can get blocked, and if that part of your chakra gets blocked, it means that that part that it’s related to, is also blocked. Uhm.... like.... for example if your throat chakra is blocked, it will prevent you from being able to clearly, but if you are able to clear your chakra apparently you can .....well, you can clear it by infusing it with meditation of the colour blue, by putting a blue crystal on your throat...

Linguistic comment – such a calm voice in explaining chakras and energy flow to me. Taking her time, respectful of what she is discussing

8. Perhaps to me that is the sound that I need, this is the universal sound that perhaps I need to be heard, perhaps I need to show myself that.....I don’t know .... *(laughter)*

I don’t know!

laughter when expressing/questioning her need to be heard, to step up and show herself

9. So if all.....to me I suppose opening your chakras is like opening the hatch for it to flow freely, almost as if emotions are trapping it, if you could imagine that the emotion, the negative emotion may be the trap door stopping your emotion from flowing.

Linguistic comment: as if she cannot believe this strong analogy is coming from HER mind as she is currently struggling with communicating (blocked throat chakra)

10. .... I could be in denial!! (*laughter*) I don't know, but...

### ST

1. Says uhm a lot and interrupts herself a lot
2. She explains herself through backstories

### BF

1. so it was 3 one side (L ... yeah) 3 another (L .. yeah)... even, perfect.... (*laughter, clap hands*)!

She was excited like a naughty, rebelling girl

2. yeah! (*sharp intake of breath..*) Never thought of that one before!! (*Laughter, clapping of hands*) Oh wow.....

excitement, a strong realisation

3. they're small, neat and tidy, there's symmetry ....(*laughter*) yeah,

laughing at her understood need for symmetry, neatness

4. ...I'm gonna say... controlling. And I.... I'm a control freak (*laughter.*)

A clear understanding about her, she knows she is controlling (I hold my hands up)

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