

Skin Deep: How Do Psychotherapists Make Sense of Client Tattoos?

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which, to substantial extent, has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

Historically, within psychological fields including psychotherapy, tattoos have often been written about as an indicator of deviance, psychopathology, or personality disorder, and have been viewed as a form of self-harm or mutilation. With reactions and perceptions towards tattooing evolving, this research project explores the way that psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos within their clinical work and writing, through conducting a thematic analysis of 65 psychotherapy related articles published since the year 2000. This analysis identified four themes within the literature which focus on the *function of tattoos as an object*; being tattooed as *an act of mastery*; tattoos as *a way to relate and be related to*; and the *non-meanings, implied meanings, and indiscriminate meanings* of tattoos. In identifying and discussing these themes, this research aims to expand existing thought on the potential clinical significance of client tattoos and broaden the ways that therapists engage with and make sense of them in collaboration with those whose bodies they are on.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation explores the question: How do psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos? I was initially drawn to researching the way clinicians have written about and engaged with their clients' tattoos after working with tattooed clients both within a community-based clinic and a correctional facility during my time training as a psychotherapist. In my own work, clients with tattoos would sometimes reference their tattoos when trying to explain something to me and would seemingly use the illustrative nature of their tattoos to show me something less easy to verbally convey. I also found more than one client who conceptualised of their body as having a "good side" and a "bad side" and had representative tattoos on each half accordingly. I became curious as to how other psychotherapists may or may not be making sense of client tattoos as I did not recall ever having read any literature discussing the topic.

Where tattoos had arisen during my own time practising, I had found the symbols within clients' tattoos and the narratives which clients had attached to the images to be a richly informative part of developing my understanding of them as people and of our therapeutic work together. In order to further understand the way other psychotherapists may be working with client tattoos, in this dissertation I examine how psychotherapists have written about tattoos. In this first chapter I present an introduction to this research topic, lay out the scope and aim of this research, define terms used throughout, and give an overview of subsequent chapters.

Introduction to the Topic

At the outset of this project, I conducted a preliminary literature search. Here I give an overview of this search to serve as an introduction to the topic of client tattoos. This search looked not only at literature from psychotherapy but at select texts from adjacent areas of psychology and psychiatry to get a wider overview of the topic for orientation. A lot of the research I found in this first step considers tattooing within the context of western history where tattoos have been thought to act as an indicator of deviance, psychopathology, or personality disorder (Roggenkamp et al., 2017). Perrin (2017) notes that research into tattoos has been done primarily in forensic

settings or with psychiatric patients meaning it is not a representative sample of people with tattoos, although mentions more recent attempts to address this.

In beginning this search, the first paper I encountered on tattoos and psychotherapy was by Stirn and Hinz (2008). This was a psychotherapy research paper seeking to identify the links between “self-injury” and body modification, including tattooing. The focus of this research on aspects of the process of being tattooed was quite different to my own focus on the potential meaning of what is represented by the chosen imagery of the tattoo. These two differing angles were similarly noted by Aryan (2006) when reporting on a panel discussion at the 2005 Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association. Aryan writes how some panellists put forward the idea that tattoos represent aspects of the self and can be read or deciphered akin to a drawing or text, while others focused less on this and more on the act of being tattooed, including the pain caused by this and the parallels between tattooing and other forms of self-injury done to the skin.

Karacaoglan (2012), in a paper “On the Meaning of Tattoos in the Analytic Process,” offers case studies and an example of meaning making that thinks interpretively about the chosen imagery as well as the relevance of a tattoo being acquired during the course of therapy.

Karacaoglan also writes about the act of being tattooed, saying that tattoos are “an act of self-injury that resembles the magical ritual acts of indigenous peoples’ use of tattoos” (p. 5). While potentially ritualistic elements of tattoos seem worth consideration, as do culturally dependant understandings of tattooing, Karacaoglan seems to use indigenous people and their tattoos as a theoretical example placing them outside of the scope of practice, as if someone indigenous could not be encountered in the consulting room. As a therapist working within Aotearoa New Zealand, this seemed like an exclusionary oversight. Additionally, the implication that indigenous tattooing practices can be reduced to an act of self-injury seems highly questionable. To think more about context, while there is research on tattoos that has been conducted in Aotearoa, including some in the field of psychology, such as the thesis *Behind the Ink NZ: Tattoos in Aotearoa New Zealand and*

the Link to a Process of Self-Healing (Membery, 2015), I found no examples from within the field of psychotherapy, suggesting a way in which this project could contribute to the discipline.

A 2017 literature review of material published after 1990 within the field of psychiatry investigates the psychological and psychiatric elements of tattoos (Roggenkamp et al., 2017). This review has the aim of challenging outdated stigmas about tattooing with a view to aid clinicians in facilitating the consideration of tattoos with their patients. This review concludes by warning against overgeneralisation and stereotyping and encourages psychiatrists to include exploration into the personal meanings of tattoos as an augmentation of the physical exam, expressing the valuable information that this can reveal and the utility of this in enhancing clinical work. Further to this, Grumet (1983) suggests tattoos are an “often overlooked source of psychodynamic information” (p. 482). Decades later, I hypothesise that this may still be the case.

Formation of Question and Aim of Research

In carrying out my initial literature search, I was simultaneously surprised by the way I had neglected to think about the injurious aspects of tattoos and, conversely, by how some of the texts that *did* focus on the aspect of harm did so in a way that seemed to miss an opportunity for more nuanced, personal, and individualised meanings, often by conflating practices such as tattooing and piercing. Wanting to find information about how therapists were conceiving of client tattoos, I decided to ask the question: How do psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos? In asking this question, I aim to expand the ways in which tattoos are thought of and approached in clinical work. In answering this question, the scope of this research will be limited to an analysis of pre-existing articles with a clinical focus from within the field and published since 2000.

Usage of Terms

Here I will give some brief descriptions of how I will be using key terms throughout. *Tattoo* will be used to refer to both the act of tattooing and the resulting design or mark made by tattooing, where *tattooing* is defined as the practice of forming “permanent marks or designs upon the skin by puncturing it and inserting a pigment or pigments” (Oxford University Press, n.d.-d). In

this study, tattoo will not be used interchangeably with terms such as *body art* which carries an additional layer of meaning.

Throughout this dissertation, *clinician*, *psychotherapist*, *therapist*, and *practitioner* will be used in a similar way to indicate someone who practices psychotherapy, where psychotherapy is viewed as a talk-based psychological therapy. Likewise, the terms *clinical work*, *psychotherapy*, and *therapy* will all be used as equivalent. Similarly, for the purposes of this dissertation, the terms *client* and *patient* will be used interchangeably to refer to someone who is receiving or has received therapy.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation contains four chapters. Following on from this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 explains the way in which this research was carried out. I explain the methodology that underpins the way I have approached this project, my process of data collection, thematic analysis as a method of analysis, and how the process of coding and crafting themes for this dissertation was executed in practice. Chapter 3 lays out the four themes that were created in answering the question of how psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos. Each theme is explained and defined with the use of examples from the data. In Chapter 4 I expand on each theme and discuss and examine my findings. Before concluding, limitations and strengths of the project are considered along with its implications on clinical work and suggestions for further research.

Chapter Summary

In this introductory chapter, I have discussed how encountering client tattoos within my own clinical work led to curiosity about how other therapists may be working with or thinking about client tattoos. In a precursory look at some selected literature, I established the opening for further examination of this question before going on to use this to shape the aim of research to expand on ways that psychotherapists understand tattoos. Definitions of terms and an overview of this dissertation were also outlined.

The following chapter will explore the methodology of this research project, describe thematic analysis, and look at the process of how both method and methodology were applied.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method

This chapter explains the methodology behind this qualitative project and the methods used to execute my research into the question of how psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos. A basic outline of the design process begins this chapter. Following a subsequent consideration of methodology, I briefly examine axiology, epistemology, and ontology with the aim of describing influences on my approach to this research and denoting my research paradigm. Next, I then turn to detailing methods, where I outline the method of data collection used and explain reflexive thematic analysis as a method of data analysis. Finally, the practical application of these methods and their underpinnings are written about as I describe the process of carrying out each phase of this research.

Overview of Design Process

This research began with the supposition that I would be finding data from within pre-existing literature, and as such, a literature review focussing on psychotherapy related articles was selected as the basis of the process. After choosing my topic, I then conducted a limited search of literature to help me formulate my research question: How do psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos? This search also helped to establish the aim of this research, which is to expand existing thought on the potential clinical significance of client tattoos and broaden the ways that therapists engage with and make sense of them in collaboration with those whose bodies they are on. The choice in method followed, where a literature review employing thematic analysis, a modified systematic literature review, and a hermeneutic literature review were considered. Ultimately, reflexive thematic analysis was chosen as the method of analysis for the appeal of its structure, approachability, and that it fit well with my questions due to its utility as a method when attempting to gain insight into experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Additionally, Clarke and Braun (2018) have written about the recognition of thematic analysis as a useful analytic method for psychotherapy research. This method of analysis could also be made compatible with my aim, given that one commonly mentioned “key benefit” of reflexive thematic

analysis is its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 26). This comes in part due to the fact that thematic analysis is not bound to a pre-determined paradigm or epistemological and ontological frame. Given the flexibility, making assumed principles explicit demands active reflexivity on the part of the researcher when designing their project. The absence of a sufficient description of underlying assumptions is a common pitfall in those using thematic analysis to analyse data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In the following section, I attempt to evade this pitfall through a discussion of methodology.

Methodology

Methodology can be thought of as a process of describing, justifying, theorising, and analysing the assumptions, principles, and procedures of a study and of the methods involved (Carter & Little, 2007). Broadly speaking, this research fits within a qualitative as opposed to quantitative paradigm. The distinction between these two paradigms is sometimes reduced to the distinction between research that deals with experience versus numbers, but Willis (2007) points out that that major difference between these two approaches is not the type of data collected, but the underlying assumptions that are considered true while conducting the research.

Commonly, branches of philosophy such as axiology, epistemology, and ontology are drawn on to aid the exposition of methodological underpinnings. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) put forward that “all qualitative researchers are philosophers” (p. 19) in the sense of being guided by abstracted principles. While it is true that I am guided by abstracted principles, some known to me and others yet more obscure, given that axiology, epistemology, and ontology are each highly developed and sophisticated fields in their own right, and given the limited scope of this small-scale research project, I do not feel equipped to claim I am justifying my position and process from the standpoint of a philosopher. Taken in a broad sense, this exploration into values, knowledge, and reality as guided by my foundational understanding of axiology, epistemology, and ontology still aims to be useful in establishing the type of conceptual clarity and consistency in methodology that comes from

stating how underlying assumptions in these areas work together to create a framework for research (Ponterotto et al., 2017).

Axiology

As a therapist, consideration of values and what is important to me was perhaps easier to approach than ideas around reality and knowledge. Additionally, as epistemology itself is axiological, an examination of some pertinent values was a useful entry point into considering underlying premises (Carter & Little, 2007).

Firstly, in looking at the research question, which asks how therapists make sense of clients' tattoos, is the implied supposition that there is sense to be made and that therapists are, at least to some degree, doing this. In considering this assumption, I see this as being related to the value that is put on meaning making within the field of psychotherapy.

As a bias or value, I do also hold the supposition that it is potentially harmful to think pathologically about tattoos as has been predominant historically. This stance is visible in my explicit aim to broaden understandings of tattoos and has undoubtedly influenced my interpretations even where I have endeavoured to remain open to varied perspectives. In relation to my aim in this study, which is not simply to understand but to effect or change understandings, is the assumption of social progress as a valuable and viable pursuit of research and the underlying belief that change is possible.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology and epistemology relate to the nature of reality and the potential of knowledge respectively. Although they are two differing fields of enquiry, because holding a certain ontological stance will logically limit the possible epistemology, they will be discussed here together (Grant & Giddings, 2002). This study is ontologically influenced by critical realism and employs interpretivism as an epistemological underpinning. Relativism and social constructionism were also considered as options, though ultimately decided against due to the incompatibility with the more inductive

approach that was to be taken to coding and analysis, which will be discussed in the following section.

Critical realism can be thought of as sitting in the middle of a spectrum between a realist perspective where reality is verifiable, and a relativist frame where all stances on reality are only a perspective and therefore any interpretations are relative and entirely contextual (Willig, 2013). The critical realist perspective accepts that there *is* some kind of reality, but that access to this reality is always mediated by context and sociocultural understandings (Terry et al., 2017). In terms of this research, this position accepts that cultural norms will be an influence on the way therapists make sense of client tattoos.

Critical realism as an ontological perspective lends itself to an interpretivist epistemology owing to the fact that a critical realist approach starts from the idea that data is not a direct representation of phenomena and, as such, requires interpretation in order to be understood (Willig, 2013). Interpretivism takes for granted that humans are influenced by subjective experiences and perceptions of their environment and come to understandings through these perceptions (Willis, 2007). In this study, I take the stance of there being multiple versions of reality based on subjective interpretations rather than a single, discoverable, objective truth. It is assumed that any attempt at understanding reality is done through the process of interpretation. Given this, there are a range of possible interpretations, meanings, or “truths”. Within an interpretivist framing, the researcher’s subjectivity is recognised, suggesting a compatibility with reflexive thematic analysis as a method, where reflexivity on the part of the researcher is required.

Methodological Prompts from Reflexive Thematic Analysis

In addition to consideration of epistemology, Braun and Clarke (2006) state there are further decisions that need to be made prior to beginning analysis. These prompts suggest considering whether the analysis will attempt to be a rich description of the data set or a finer account of one specific aspect within it, inductive or theoretical, and semantic or latent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Terry et al. (2017) add that there are related possibilities for coding. Coding, as well as theme

development, is – primarily or exclusively – either deductive or inductive and semantic or latent. The decisions made in regard to this project will be outlined below.

In line with my research question and the aim to broaden the way therapists approach tattoos, this analysis has attempted to capture a wider description of that data, rather than looking into a particular aspect of the way therapist work with tattoos. To fit with this, my approach to identifying themes within the data was primarily inductive, where the themes that were constructed are strongly linked to the data itself and meaning is created from the “bottom up” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). While pre-existing knowledge and theoretical understandings will always be an influence, an inductive approach is in contrast to an overtly theoretical or deductive way of working where theories external to the data are expressly employed in understanding and forming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As well as an inductive approach to theme development, an inductive approach to coding was taken, where codes were created in a way that stays near to the text rather than codes being derived from theoretical interpretation (Terry, et al., 2017). An inductive orientation is more bound to semantic meaning than a deductive approach and, correspondingly, this project tends toward a semantic focus in regard to both coding and theme development although more latent interpretations of patterns are also drawn on in theme development in particular. This focus is sometimes described as descriptive, though this does not have to mean the analysis is superficial as this approach should still move beyond description to use the data interpretively (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Method of Data Collection

This study was based on the review of pre-existing literature in the form of psychotherapy related articles. In this section, I describe my methods of data collection and lay out my search strategy and the approach taken in the identification of literature for analysis.

Database Selection

Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) was used as the database which articles were sourced from. Additional databases were considered but were ultimately omitted due to returning

no relevant results in the case of Tuwhera, for example, or a significant number of duplicates with PsycINFO. The data set that I felt I would be able to compile from articles available on PEP appeared sufficient to meet the aim of giving me a wide enough view to answer the question of how therapists make sense of client tattoos in a rich way. Additionally, while there is debate over ideal sample size when using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), the decision to limit the search for articles to PEP was also based on this research being of a small scale and the usable results serving as a natural limitation to the amount of data to code and analyse.

Search Terms and Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

As most articles found on PEP already come from within a relevant field, a search term such as “psychotherap*” was not included, instead using only “tattoo*”. Results were additionally limited by type and language, filtering for articles and English language texts only. The date range was limited to articles published since 2000 as I was interested in exploring more recent thinking over the last 20 years. These search parameters returned 225 results.

From these initial 225 results, further exclusion criteria were applied after viewing the articles. Full texts were scanned or read to see the search term in context and assess the relevance. Texts where the tattoos being discussed were on someone known to the client but not the client themselves were excluded. Similarly, as this study is examining client tattoos, the tattoos of fictional characters and tattoos within art and dreams were likewise omitted. Again, with client tattoos being the intended focus, conceptual articles that were applying a psychoanalytic lens to areas outside of psychotherapy and clinical work, such as anthropology or psychoanalytic sociology, were not included.

As clients described as “adolescent” or “adolescents” featured heavily in the search results, a decision was made to include these as well as those centred on adults with the idea that given their prevalence, these articles might contain something elucidating. After all, given the permanence of tattoos, a tattooed adolescent becomes a tattooed adult. Articles in which involuntary tattoos

acquired during abuse or torture were written about have been excluded as for the purposes of this study enforced tattoos are being considered a separate phenomenon.

Extracts that contain the reported speech of clients have been included. It could be argued that these pieces of dialogue are the clients' words and therefore do not contribute to the research question which asks about the sense that therapists make. However, as the moments of reported speech are being used by and are necessarily selected by the clinician, the dialogue will be considered to be relevant. Similarly, authors' paraphrasing of other writers' ideas on tattoos will be likewise included.

As a result of these exclusion criteria, a total of 65 articles were eventually identified for inclusion in this review (see Appendix A for a full list of coded articles).

Method of Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) was chosen as the method of analysing data for this project. This process has six phases: familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; development of themes from within these codes; reviewing potential themes; naming, defining, and organising these themes; and finally, writing an analysis/narrative report on the work.

Despite having these six stages, doing thematic analysis is not procedural and does not follow a set of linear steps. Although the process is recursive and creative, in this section I will document how the thematic analysis was carried out for this project using the six stages as guides.

Familiarisation

Following data collection, the first step of thematic analysis is to begin the process of familiarisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As mentioned, thematic analysis as an approach is non-linear and accordingly the process of familiarisation began during the initial literature review used to establish the relevance of this research. From there, the process of deliberating over the above inclusion and exclusion criteria was a useful part of the familiarisation stage as it required engaging with all texts in a systematic way as these parameters were being created. While scanning and

reading during this initial phase, notes of things that seemed worth thinking about more were taken as well as ideas about pertinent patterns and points for later exploration.

Coding

The second phase of thematic analysis is coding, in which notable features of the data are systematically coded across the whole data set and extracts relevant to each code are collated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes are small bits of meaning that aim to succinctly capture significant or interesting aspects of text for later development into themes. As a process, this “involves attaching pithy, clear labels (codes) to ‘chunks’ of data, to help you organize the data around meaning-patterns (developed in later phases)” (Braun et al., 2018, p. 11). As these judgements are subjective, the interpretive elements of this method are apparent even from these early stages. While small, codes can also be rich, nuanced, and complex, and should evoke the data and make sense even when read independently from the original text. Although other varieties of thematic analysis have a different approach to coding, within reflexive thematic analysis, coding is “treated as an organic and flexible process, where good coding requires a detailed engagement with the data” (Terry et al., 2017, p. 20). Alongside this process, notes for potential later development continued to be taken.

For this project, the process of coding initially began by creating an Excel workbook (see Appendix B). As I would read through each article, all relevant extracts and page numbers were copied into this document along with the reference for the article. Relevant extracts were considered to be all sections of an article that were about tattoos and met the inclusion criteria of my search strategy. At this stage, I was also noting the cultural/geographic origin of the article, whether the author was a psychotherapist or a psychoanalyst or otherwise, whether the mention of the tattoo was in passing or if it was the focus for a wider point, whether the text was referring to a specific individual client or clients in general and whether it was referring to adult or adolescent clients, as well as checking each journal in regard to being peer-reviewed. Articles with single extracts were collated onto one sheet of the workbook and articles with multiple, longer, or more complex extracts were recorded individually on additional sheets within the workbook.

Once the extracts of text were added to the workbook, a code or codes were added. Two initial rounds of coding were undertaken. Terry et al. (2017) assert that coding improves and gains depth through repeated engagement with the data, and the process of a second coding served to deepen the familiarisation phase. In part, the second coding was conducted due to the first lacking nuanced detail. Interestingly, Radocchio writes that “tattoos and tattooing brings up a lot of feeling, and those feelings inspire the tendency to collapse the topic into easily held and metabolised forms” (2012, p. 51). With this in mind, I stayed closer to the extracts with the aim of capturing detail and specificity within the codes I was creating. For example, when a text used terms such as *self-injury*, *self-mutilation*, or *self-harm*, I did not unify them via a code in spite of their clear interrelation. Although similar, with the eventual potential to be gathered into one concept or gathered around one theme, I did not want to pre-determine them as the same thing in case additional data led me to see their differentiation as revealing or illuminating. This was in staying with a more inductive approach, where meaning is made from the *data up* and in contrast to the first round, which had been more deductive and less detailed.

During this second round of coding, as codes were added, they were placed into conceptual columns to begin to organise them around potential meaning-based patterns in the first tentative step toward theme generation. At this stage, my workbook was shared with my supervisor to be checked and commented on. As well as continuing to take notes during the coding process, I was highlighting pertinent examples of interesting phenomena with the aim that these extracts might be useful in the writing stage for illustrating my findings or for discussion.

Generating Themes

The next phase of thematic analysis involves generating potential themes. In this step, the analysis takes a step back from the detail of codes to the level of themes with the process being to find and create meaning-based patterns that can be used to tell a story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The most common approach to this is to collate related codes into groups that are somehow connected to each other and to the research question (Terry et al., 2017). As I had

organised codes into columns as I was creating them, to begin this stage I pulled the codes into one sheet. Codes were labelled (e.g., 4.h.1) so that if needed during reviewing phases they could be more readily linked back to the original extract and text. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Detail of Initial Collated Codes

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
1	meaning of act - creative	meaning of act - harm	act indistinct from or linked with	connotative descriptor "shorthand"	meaning of image	function of image (general)	function of image (specific)	other	meaning of being shown	more about the skin	image	placement
2	1.1.a "self-medicating wound"	1.2.b honoured and normative form of self-injury	1.2.c somatic illness or bodily self-harm (anorexia, bulimia, self-mutilation, compulsive body piercing)	1.4.a description associated with aggression	1.5.a memorial	1.6.a signal search for continuity with the object when anxious over losing traces of contact	1.7.a modification of desecrated parts	3.8.a contradiction "despite the"	2.9.a self-revelation as risk and trust	1.10.a ?	1.11.a viper	1.12.a arm
3	1.1.b way of (re)creating own body	1.2.d marks of pain	1.3.1 pierced nose	1.4.b description associated with toughness	1.5.b honour (alive memorial)	1.6.b personalised identity	1.7.b second skin	5.8.a contradiction	4.9.a ?	1.10.b canvas	1.11.b Maria	1.12.b back
4	1.1.c way to look better	1.2.e "second skin"	1.3.a piercings and exercise	1.4.c phallic narcissism	10.5.a representation of absence	1.6.c demarcating bodily limit	11.7.a to mark survival	7.8.a realm of potential space		1.10.c inscribing surface	1.11.d snake-dragon	1.12.c forearm
5	1.1.d way to create personalised identity	1.2.f expression of subcultural gender code	1.3.a talking drugs, drinking, shoplifting, binge eating, getting tattoos and body piercing	1.4.d striking	10.5.b living death	1.6.d a protective "second skin"	11.7.b a reclamation	7.8.b stroke or touch image in stress to soothe		1.10.d!	1.11.e snake	1.12.d back
6	1.1.e like cutting, it tells a tale	1.2.g a way to exert control and punish herself for misbehaviors	1.3.ab shaved head	1.4.e description - slothy/tense + strongly built	14.5.a memories into a badge of courage	1.6.e to counter invisibility	11.7.c to mark transition, change, or loss	8.8.a (missed) opportunity for rich material		12.10.a manage deficits in the skin ego	1.11.f stars	1.12.d wrists to neck
7	1.1.f many uses, so cannot know peremptorily	1.2.j impulsivity	1.3.ac shaved head	1.4.f tough outsider	14.5.b protection	1.6.f to appear less feminine for protection	2.7.a loyalty to mother	8.8.b can be used like dreams		12.10.b reinforce boundary or being held together	1.11.g name and birthdate	1.12.e arm
8	1.1.g marks of pain	2.2.a to spite mother	1.2.h piercing	1.4.g big attitude	14.5.c a symbol of danger	1.6.g to tell people to stay away	7.7.a memorial	8.8.c language of the psyche and access to unconscious material/contradictorily concrete and intangible		12.10.c way of managing anxiety	1.11.h "die" "no rules"	1.12.f forearm
9	1.1.h a way to appropriate the body, to be the body to the self (in psychotic subject)	3.2.a symbolic castration	1.2.i risk factor of potentially violent, homicidal and/or suicidal children or adolescents	1.4.h tension		2.5.a communication - a link between omnipotent and shared information	7.7.b honouring mentors	8.8.d multiple meanings/changing meanings			1.11.i necklace-like crosses	1.12.g neck
10	1.1.i a way of being her own self (by going against mother's wishes)	3.2.b way of managing castration encounters	1.3.b dieting, plastic surgery	1.4.i non-conformist beauty	6.5.a idiomatic and unique	1.6.i meant to distract and distance	9.7.a to pacify				1.11.j flames	1.12.h side of head

At this stage, one factor to be worked through was that the potential themes were functioning more as domain summaries, which is a common problem in reflexive thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) and an error which Clarke and Braun (2018) note is particularly common in psychotherapy research. A domain summary is a summary or an area of that data, without anything to unify and conceptually or *thematically* link the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). While this is an acceptable conception of a theme in some approaches to thematic analysis, in reflexive thematic analysis themes are “actively constructed patterns (or meanings) derived from a data set that answer a research question, as opposed to mere summaries or categorisations of codes” (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 1). Although each column (as depicted in part in Figure 1) was topically linked, relationships between these groups and the codes within needed to be further explored along with

the exploration of alternative groupings in order to get closer to creating true meaning-based themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that while working with potential themes, visual representations may be helpful. Following this suggestion, the codes were added one by one onto large sheets of paper to aid in theme development (see Appendix C). These were written out by hand as this manual process gave time to think and analyse the codes, with similar codes being written nearer to each other. In this way, writing out the codes was a way of beginning to create a thematic map. Through a combination of colour coding possible connections, drawing literal borders around various codes and groups of codes, and making numerous lists of potential themes and their interrelationships, various iterations of themes were tested out. These were developed and redeveloped as I sought to find the linking ideas or central organising concepts within each group of codes to shift them from domain summaries to the more multifaceted, conceptual, meaning-based patterns of themes. To give an example, through this process of engagement and analysis, the group of codes that were related to the act or process of being tattooed were eventually constructed into the theme *an act of mastery*. In total, I identified four themes to take to the review stage.

Reviewing Themes

In the fourth phase of thematic analysis, the themes that have been generated are checked against the extracts and then the entire data set. In reviewing the themes in this way, it should be checked that the boundaries of the concept are clear and that there is a central organising principle along with enough data to support each claim (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While there needs to be some evidence to substantiate each theme, prevalence alone is not indicative of relevance as less frequent ideas can still capture something pertinent to the research question and aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To begin this process, I created a new Excel workbook with four sheets. With one sheet per theme, these sheets were populated using the groupings of codes I had linked in the previous stage (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Detail of Thematically Ordered Codes

	A	B	C	D
13	breaking free of super-ego, expectations, authority		individuation	identity
14	way to create personalised identity		individuation	identity
15	creation of self		individuation	identity
16	means of self actualisation		individuation	identity
17	claiming of agency		individuation	identity
18	an act of initiative		individuation	identity
19	assertion of self definition		individuation	identity
20	body project to stabilise identity		individuation	identity
21	surrender towards growth			
22	creating a mirror for self-deliberation	mirror	individuation	identity
23	mirroring function creating wholeness from fragmentation	mirror	individuation	identity
24	a visible act of change			
25	inaction into action			
26				
27	Experience of and possibilities for mind-body connection		embodied	body
28	Creating an embodied world		embodied	body
29	Way to appropriate the body, to tie the body to the self		embodied	body
30	Somatic solution		embodied	body
31	Unique bodily experience		embodied	
32	Way of (re)creating own body		create	body
33	Control over the body		create	body
34	Way to sculpt the body		create	body
35	Reclaiming of body after illness or injury	reclamation	create	body
36	Transformative act, unlike cutting		create	
37	Give a sense of permanence and control over rapidly evolving body		permanence	body
38	Denial of death		permanence	body
39	Body project to stabilise identity		permanence	body
40	Way to look better		appearance	body
41	Fashion statement		appearance	body
42				
43	Way to exert control and punish self		pain	affect
44	Way of getting high		pain	affect
45	Makes affect tolerable			affect
46	Self-medicating wound		pain	affect

Once these codes were laid out in conceptual groupings, I revisited my earlier stages of coding to check that these new categories aligned with the extracts I had previously collated. Following this assessment, I returned for a final time to some of the original texts to check that the themes that had been constructed represented the data.

Defining Themes and Writing a Report

The final two phases of thematic analysis are defining and naming the themes, and then producing a report, which in this case takes the form of this dissertation. Defining themes is a process which seeks to capture the “essence” of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). This was achieved through a combination of a final tabling of themes and codes, arranging extracts to be used illustratively, and beginning to write up my findings. I will expand on these three aspects below.

Continuing from the previous step of generating themes, one final revision and a step in defining the themes of this study was arranging the codes into a table for inclusion in this dissertation. Codes were added to this table in what might be termed a conceptual order, with each code leading on from the next in regard to meaning, rather than alphabetically. In this way, the table

itself set up the pathway for a narrative description of the themes when writing the findings. See Figure 3 for an example and Appendix D for a full table of themes and respective codes.

During the defining and naming stage, it is suggested that any relevant subthemes, or themes-within-themes, be considered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Taking format from another dissertation from within the field that uses thematic analysis, written by Isaac (2020), I used several orders of theme to capture the layers of meaning within each theme and applied a numeric labelling system to add clarity. Figure 3 is an excerpt of this table and depicts one subtheme of theme one along with its secondary and tertiary themes.

Figure 3

Detail of Table of Themes and Codes

1.4 Autobiography	Related to the perception of self; Used for self-identification; A condensed story; Blueprint of inner life; A personal history; A private diary; Tells a tale; Selective biography; Marks of pain; Evidence of one's pains, hopes, perseverance, fears, and salvation; Way of externalising subjective experience
1.4.1 To alter	To alter sense of self; Way to shift an inner sense of self; Way of building an imaginary identity; Potential for self-transformation
1.4.1.1 Reclamation	A reclamation; Modification of desecrated parts; Bad memories into a mark of courage
1.4.2 To mark change	Communication of a new developmental achievement; To mark turning points; To mark transition, change, or loss; To mark survival

Note. This depicts one of Theme 1's primary subthemes, 1.4 Autobiography, with corresponding codes in the right most column.

In this stage, revisiting the original data extracts (rather than the codes or themes since generated) is recommended, and organising extracts for the reporting is a key part of this step which helps to further define the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Drafting introductory sections to each theme also aided in this process of definition. Throughout the entirety of the project, potential

themes had gone through many iterations of working titles. The final names were settled on in parallel to the process of defining the themes. Eventually, this process resulted in four themes which are described in the findings of Chapter 3.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained how some of my values as a researcher and practitioner, along with my assumptions about knowledge and reality, align with critical realism and interpretivism to create a research paradigm that underpins this project. Collection and selection of data from existing literature was explained and the recursive phases of reflexive thematic analysis as a method of analysis were outlined before a description of how these steps were carried out in order to write this dissertation and answer the question of how psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos.

In the following chapter, I report on my findings and define the themes that were generated after coding.

Chapter 3: Findings

In conducting this research, I constructed four themes from patterns within the literature in response to the question of how psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos. These four themes capture framings of tattoos identified in the data and focus on:

- the *function of the tattoo as an object*
- *tattooing as an act of mastery*
- *tattoos as a way to relate and be related to*
- the *non-meanings, implied meanings, and indiscriminate meanings* of tattoos

Codes within these themes have been further categorised into subthemes where tertiary subthemes represent aspects of a secondary theme, and secondary subthemes an aspect of a primary subtheme, and so on. The identified subthemes are used as headings throughout this chapter and serve to more finely explain the way therapists might understand tattoos. For an overview, Table 1 details the four themes and their primary subthemes.

Table 1
Table of Themes and Primary Subthemes

Theme 1: Function of the tattoo as an Object
Boundary marker
Sense of intersubjectivity
To preserve
Autobiography
Theme 2: An Act of Mastery
Mastery over identity
Mastery over the body
Mastery over affect
Theme 3: A Way to Relate and be Related to
To communicate
Group membership
To mark gender/sexuality
To attract and repel
Relationship with tattoo artist
Unintended Social Consequence
Theme 4: Non-meanings, Implied Meanings, and Indiscriminate Meanings
Non-meanings
Associated with or described as
Indiscriminate from

Using examples of extracts from coded texts, I will detail the above to define and substantiate each of the themes that resulted from this analysis. (See Appendix D for a full table of themes and codes.)

Theme 1: Function of the Tattoo as an Object

Analysis of the literature led to the identification of a theme where tattoos are made sense of through their function as an object. Function is taken to mean “the purpose or intended role of a thing” (Oxford University Press, n.d.-b), with the focus accordingly being on meanings centred around the role of having a tattoo or the purpose of the tattoo itself in contrast to the process of getting a tattoo. This theme considers tattoos as a thing, or an *object*. Here, object has two uses: “a material thing that can be seen and touched” (Oxford University Press, n.d.-c), and as derived from object relations theory where an object is something that the subject relates to, usually a significant other, part of that significant other, or a *representation* thereof that has been taken inside the self (Bott et al., 2011).

The functions that were communicated in the texts, categorised into four primary subthemes, include tattoos as: a way of marking the boundary of the self; a way to create a sense of intersubjectivity; a way to preserve aspects of the self and others; and the creation of an autobiography. Below, Table 2 lists the primary, secondary, and tertiary subthemes within this theme. The arc of these subthemes could be thought of as moving from using tattoos to delineate things that are *not-me*, through to the creation of an intersubjectivity and objects that preserve links between self and other, and finally to the defining of the self through the *me* of autobiography.

Table 2

Theme 1 and its Subthemes

Theme 1: Function of the Tattoo as an Object
Primary Subtheme 1.1 Boundary marker
Secondary Subtheme 1.1.1 Skin

Primary Subtheme 1.2 Sense of intersubjectivity
Secondary Subtheme 1.2.1 Mirroring
Secondary Subtheme 1.2.2 Transitional object

Primary Subtheme 1.3 To preserve
Secondary Subtheme 1.3.1 Others
Tertiary Subtheme 1.3.1.1 Memorial
Secondary Subtheme 1.3.2 Self

Primary Subtheme 1.4 Autobiography
Secondary Subtheme 1.4.1 To alter
Tertiary Subtheme 1.4.1.1 Reclamation
Secondary Subtheme 1.4.2 To mark change

1.1 Boundary Marker

In this subtheme, tattoos are made sense of as a way to demarcate the edges of the self. In some texts, this was framed as a way to define the border between self and other, or to help orient the self in space. This is mentioned by Suchet (2009), who says of a client that his tattoos “function as a visual form of time-stamping, a way of trying to locate himself in time and space” (p. 150).

Below is an extract from Bourgeaiseau (2002), which captures the essence of this theme:

Philippe used to tell me about the feeling of “losing himself”. He would refer to a sensation of losing his body limits and thought that he was losing his Ego. There was a time when he insisted on the necessity of being tattooed as a defensive measure and later he substituted this with the use of various rings. After that, he would force himself to wear a winter coat during the Rio summer, later exchanging the coat for a heavy backpack. Today, he tells me that his “bases” to “remain found” or centred, are his bedroom and my office. (p. 69)

In this extract, the function of Philippe’s tattoos was being thought about as a way of shoring up the edges of himself, a way of marking a boundary.

1.1.1 Skin. The secondary subtheme of this concept of a boundary marker is that of the skin, where tattoos are thought of as a protective layer in relation to the idea of a psychic skin or a protective “second skin,” such as described by Farber (2008), where a “layer of tattooed or pierced skin or layers of fat or the grotesque muscularity of body builders or scar tissue from self-inflicted wounds can all serve as a protective ‘second skin’” (p. 33). Werbart (2019) writes that “self

mutilation,” including tattooing, can paradoxically “reinforce a sense of the skin’s holding the person together” (p. 47).

1.2 Sense of Intersubjectivity

The second subtheme captures the function of tattoos as a means to establish a sense of intersubjectivity when faced with absence (Suchet, 2009). Although intersubjectivity, as defined by the American Psychological Association (n.d.-b), is thought of as the sharing of an experience by at least two subjects, in the literature, the tattoo appears to be represented as a stand in for an other in order to create this experience of intersubjectivity. For example, it is written that in some instances, body modification (including tattoos) “may be the only path open to creating a sense of interiority and intersubjectivity. In such a scenario, the intersubjective connection is composed of parts of the self, absent an Other” (Murphy, 2013, p. 35). In this subtheme tattoos are used through these means to defend against neglect, reassure, or to “search for continuity with the object when anxious over losing traces of contact” (Anzieu-Premmereur, 2015, p. 673). This subtheme has two further secondary subthemes which cover the ideas of tattoos as transitional objects and the mirroring function of tattoos.

1.2.1 Mirroring. Related to this concept of finding a means of creating a sense of intersubjectivity without an other, is the way tattooing can “function in a similar way for the individual as the mirror does for the infant: that it can move one from a state of internal or psychic fragmentation towards the experience of wholeness or integration” (Radocchio, 2012, p. 44). This is supported by Sonnenberg (2011) who discusses “tattooing as creating a mirror” which can be used to externalise elements of the self that can then be deliberated on (p. 653).

1.2.2 Transitional Object. In the literature, tattoos are compared to transitional objects or written about in a way that could be thought of as having a similar quality to transitional objects, such as being a constant companion and an object that soothes and pacifies. Winnicott (1953) described the idea of a transitional object as having a “not-me” like quality. Later writers generally interpret a transitional object as referring to an object that is treated by someone as halfway

between themselves and another person (Oxford University Press, 2015). This is captured by authors in extracts where the stroking of tattoos is mentioned, such as by Karacaoglan (2012), whose patient is “in the habit of brushing her finger across her tattoos at certain times, as though it settled her nerves” (p. 18).

1.3 To Preserve

Tattoos appeared in the literature as having the function of preserving aspects of others or parts of the self through the creation of a permanent image. Respectively, there are two secondary subthemes which break down into the preservation of others and the preservation of the self.

1.3.1 Others. The preservation of others through tattooing is written about as a form of remembrance, a way to show loyalty, and a way to honour significant relationships. The tertiary theme *1.3.1.1 Memorial* captures a prominent element of this which is a way to memorialise others as a response to loss and as an attempt to keep them alive. When a memorial is carried on the body like this, it can be thought that “as long as I am alive, you will be, too” (Murphy, 2013, p. 35). D’Amato (2015) describes a man with his dead sister’s name tattooed on his back: “To this day Maria’s grave is not marked with a headstone. Rico described himself as a walking cemetery. In a way, he was” (p. 53).

1.3.2 Self. Where tattoos function as a way to preserve parts of or a sense of the self, this is related to a sense of consistency and a need for stasis and immutability. In this way, tattoos are framed as a way to “bring consistency in mental life” (Vanheule, 2017, p. 396). The creativity of this is captured in one example where it is written that a client’s collection of tattoos is “not so much a manic defence against loss as a somatic solution, preserving a sense of self that could not find other expression. In this sense, body modification is less an outlaw than a remaining glimmer of possibility” (Murphy, 2013, p. 35).

1.4 Autobiography

The subtheme of tattoos functioning as a form of autobiography was identified in this review. In terms of autobiography, this is defined as an “account of a person’s life given by himself or

herself” (Oxford University Press, n.d.-a) and is related to the perception of the self. Radocchio (2012) states that to “fully understand the meaning and significance of a tattoo, it must be handled as a blueprint of one’s inner life into another mode of expression” (p. 44). This is described by others in various ways alluding to tattoos as a private diary, a personal history, and that a tattoo “tells a tale” (Brady, 2014, p. 229). There are two secondary subthemes related to tattoos as autobiography which look at the potential for altering a sense of self and the marking of change as of particular note.

1.4.1 To Alter. In some texts, the autobiographic element of tattoos was almost a way to rewrite the self, to alter a sense of the self. Suchet (2009) writes about this:

The tattoo was a carefully chosen symbol that she used to try and alter her sense of self. She felt she was rewriting her body’s meaning, in a literal manner reconciling her sense of self with her body. She believed she could choose who she wanted to be and change herself. Self-control through self-inscription (Pitts, 2003). The ability to perform a visible act of change, to create a permanent mark, was quite critical for this project. A body biography. Her personal history inscribed on her skin. (p. 14)

A particular alteration and rewriting is that of tertiary subtheme *1.4.1.1 Reclamation*. In this aspect of creating a narrative of the self, injured or damaged parts of the self (physical and internal) are taken back, bad memories are transformed into marks of courage (Tyminski, 2020).

1.4.2 To Mark Change. In recording a kind of autobiography on the skin, moments of change are frequently remarked on. Tattoos are written about as a way to mark turning points, mark transition, or even as a way to communicate new developmental achievements. For example, Rytovaara (2012) writes of a client that his tattoos were in part “to mark his ‘developmental milestones’” (p. 619).

Theme 2: An Act of Mastery

Another major theme identified in this review is that of viewing tattoos as an *act of mastery*, where mastery is defined as “control or superiority over someone or something” (Oxford University

Press, 2010). When thought of this way, being tattooed or acquiring a tattoo can be seen as an attempt or a way to gain control over, or change and influence, aspects of identity, the body, and affect. In contrast to sense made from tattoos as an object or image, the process or *act* of being tattooed underlies this theme. The three elements of identity, body, and affect inform the three primary subthemes of mastery. Table 3 illustrates the primary, secondary, and tertiary subthemes of this theme.

Table 3

Theme 2 and its Subthemes

Theme 2: An Act of Mastery
Primary Subtheme 2.1 Mastery over identity
Secondary Subtheme 2.1.1 Individuation
Tertiary Subtheme 2.1.1.1 Differentiation from mother
Tertiary Subtheme 2.1.1.2 Plus identification
Secondary Subtheme 2.1.2 Initiation
Secondary Subtheme 2.1.3 Self creation
Primary Subtheme 2.2 Mastery over the body
Secondary Subtheme 2.2.1 Embodiment
Secondary Subtheme 2.2.2 To create
Tertiary Subtheme 2.2.2.1 Reclamation
Secondary Subtheme 2.2.3 Permanence
Secondary Subtheme 2.2.4 Appearance
Primary Subtheme 2.3 Mastery over affect
Secondary Subtheme 2.3.1 Through pain
Tertiary Subtheme 2.3.1.1 Healing

2.1 Mastery Over Identity

The American Psychological Association (n.d.-a) defines *identity* as “an individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles.” This subtheme captures the way getting tattooed can play a part in shaping identity and has three secondary subthemes as illustrated below.

2.1.1 Individuation. Individuation as a secondary subtheme captures the idea that identity is partially to do with becoming an individual and having characteristics not *wholly* shared with any

other person. In the literature this is identified as a way to create personalised identity. An example from Stack (2016) illustrates this when describing a client's new tattoo:

It signifies doing something impulsive—as if she's not caring what other people might think. She's putting her hesitation and anxiety aside, "so that I can live my life as I want." She's breaking free, I think, of parental authority, of her superego, and of a society that tells her to toe the line. But she's also trying to break free of the confines of her own restrictive story, to fall into an embodied world where she can claim a separate subjectivity. (p. 21)

A specific element of the process of individuation is found within tertiary subtheme 2.1.1.1

Differentiation from Mother. Here the authors appear to view the individuation as being particular to differentiating from the mother and this is captured in extracts where writers describe getting a tattoo as a way of being an individual by going against mother's wishes. For example, Shapiro (2006) interprets the tattoo this way, saying that a client "discussed her wish not to take such responsibility for her mother's well-being and to be her own self. She then got a small tattoo, which she saw as important for its symbolism in going against her mother's wishes, especially where her body was concerned" (p. 103). This is similarly reflected in Murphy's reflection on a client named Jason who recently turned 18 and got a tattoo:

A few weeks passed before his mother noticed it — or, I should say, before Jason made it impossible for her to avoid seeing it. [...] His mother's outrage confirmed that his message was received. 'I gave him that body,' she protested. 'It belongs to me.' (2013, p. 34)

A further nuanced aspect of this process of individuation is tertiary theme 2.1.1.2 *Plus Identification.* Contrastingly, this is a way of differentiating, while remaining simultaneously identified or connected. This theme is identified where writers variously talk about a tension between agency and a wish to remain merged, or tattoos as expressing a desire for closeness and distance. This balancing is present in the description of a client who gets a tattoo written in her mother's language, that she herself cannot speak:

In one heartbreakingly expressive communication, my patient seeks to transform her body (and soul)—and so to strike a near death blow to mother’s omnipotence, for it marks a terrain beyond mother’s control and capacity for knowing—but she softens it, both muting and deepening the impact in the direction of protection and connection rather than separateness and aggression. (Gentile, 2010, p. 104)

2.1.2 Initiation. Related to the idea that identity has to do with affiliation and social roles is the idea of initiation. This subtheme covers tattoos when framed as a rite of passage, or examples where the entering into a new role or phase is marked via being tattooed is described as an initiatory experience. For example, Tyminski (2020) writes of how initiation sometimes requires an act that noticeably changes the body, stating that “tattoos are a way for a young man to emphasize a passage requiring something like sacrifice” (p. 33).

2.1.3 Self Creation. In this secondary subtheme, getting a tattoo is framed as a means of mastery over identity through the process of self creation. At various points, getting a tattoo is written about as a means of self-actualisation and a path to creation of the self, such as when tattoos are described as an assertion of self-determination or a claiming of agency. An extract from Gentile (2010) is one example where getting a tattoo is represented as relating to agency, where a client gets a new tattoo and describes “her desire and intent with such clarity that I, in turn, experienced this as a moment in which agency is claimed in decisive action” (p. 104).

2.2 Mastery Over the Body

In some texts, getting a tattoo is presented or interpreted as a means to mediate aspects of bodily experience. Getting a tattoo as a means to affect the body, the understanding of the body, or bodily experience has four secondary subthemes.

2.2.1 Embodiment. The process of being tattooed is sometimes written about as a way to appropriate the body (Schwartz, 2009) and create an embodied world. Relatedly, Miller (2020) states that tattoos “may offer experiences of and possibilities for psyche–soma connection and

integration. Within the clinical setting, this material occasions a voyage into one's past and future, interior and exterior: a voyage toward embodiment" (p. 143).

2.2.2 To Create. The physical alteration of the body is written about as a meaningful aspect of getting tattooed. This is presented as a way to control the body and to transform it. Within this, tertiary subtheme *2.2.2.1 Reclamation*, is a way of reclaiming the body following illness or injury. A client describes her first tattoo: "'A reclamation,' she declared. 'I am taking back my own body.' She could acknowledge that the original site of harm, her body, was now the site through which the transformation was to occur" (Suchet, 2009, p. 113).

2.2.3 Permanence. Mastery over the body to gain a sense of permanence is written about in various ways, such as by Stortelder and Ploegmakers-Burg (2010), who write that "bodily decorations like tattoos and piercings give a sense of permanence and control over the rapidly evolving body" (p. 512).

2.2.4 Appearance. In this subtheme, tattoos are simply a way to look better, or a fashion statement. This is represented in an extract of dialogue where a therapist asks, "And do you ever think about, I don't know, getting a tattoo, dieting, or having plastic surgery to look better?" (Ammaniti et al., 2015, p. 90).

2.3 Mastery Over Affect

The process of getting a tattoo as a way to modify and manage affect was identified within the data. Getting a tattoo is written about as a way of making affect tolerable in various ways and various situations. Within this primary subtheme is one major secondary subtheme, which is the idea of managing affect through pain.

2.3.1 Through Pain. Tattooing is described in a way that is akin to a self-medicating wound. "The act of tattooing transfers the unendurable affect to the painful manipulation of the body, thus rendering said affect tolerable" (Karacaoglan, 2012, p. 21). A unique aspect of this is tertiary subtheme *2.3.1.1 Healing*, where it is not just the pain or injury that is considered important, but that the recovery actively requires the skin to be carefully tended to in the process of aftercare.

Radocchio (2012) also writes that: “Something about the process of being tattooed — the pain, the blood, the healing — as well as having a marker representing the entire process — transforms you in fundamental ways” (p. 44).

Theme 3: A Way to Relate and be Related to

The third theme brought together in this study is of tattoos as *a way to relate and be related to*. In this theme, tattoos have a social and relational function where ideas of relationship and communication with others – both conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended – are considered central. In contrast to the more internal focus of theme one, this theme primarily concerns a “real,” rather than symbolic, other and does away with the distinction between the process of being tattooed and the state of having tattoos as both aspects have relational qualities. This idea contains six primary subthemes covering communication, group membership, the marking of gender and sexuality, tattoos as a way to attract and repel, the relationship with the tattoo artist, and the unintended social consequence of having a tattoo or tattoos. These primary subthemes, along with secondary and tertiary themes appear in Table 4.

Table 4

Theme 3 and its Subthemes

Theme 3: A way to Relate and be Related to
Primary Subtheme 3.1 To communicate
Secondary Subtheme 3.1.1 Shared and secret
Secondary Subtheme 3.1.2 Transference
Secondary Subtheme 3.1.3 Unconscious material
Secondary Subtheme 3.1.4 Through symbol
Tertiary Subtheme 3.1.4.1 Or not
Primary Subtheme 3.2 Group membership
Secondary Subtheme 3.2.1 Ancestry
Primary Subtheme 3.3 To mark gender/sexuality
Secondary Subtheme 3.3.1 Queer aesthetic
Secondary Subtheme 3.3.2 Gender
Tertiary Subtheme 3.3.2.1 Increase masculinity
Tertiary Subtheme 3.3.2.2 Hide femininity
Primary Subtheme 3.4 To attract and repel
Secondary Subtheme 3.4.1 To repel
Secondary Subtheme 3.4.2 To attract

3.1 To Communicate

This subtheme captures broad ideas around communication and the idea that tattoos express some kind of a message or have the possibility of transmitting meaning to an onlooker.

There are four secondary themes that fit within.

3.1.1 Shared and Secret. Some writers express that the meanings of tattoos bridge something between private and public, having a quality of communication that is both concrete yet intangible. In discussing a patient, Gentile (2010) captures this:

Over the years, as she has grown more comfortable creating visible signifiers of herself in the world, she has experimented with tattoos. Each bears personal meaning to her but appears obscure to others—unless she chooses to share their meaning. As such, they represent a link between omnipotent and shared communication. (p. 104)

3.1.2 Transference. Some writers consider tattoos that their clients get as being a depiction of the analytic relationship, or aspects thereof. Reflecting this, Junior (2015) describes an intervention: “I told him that he put the anxiety he felt due to my absence over the weekend on the tattoo, that he feared he would lose me” (p. 524). Similarly, Yassa’s description of a client’s behaviour expresses this idea: “She would often have text tattooed, sentences originating in the therapy, fragments of my interventions, and I understood that this happened under almost unbearable pain” (2014, p. 94).

3.1.3 Unconscious Material. As well as communicating in a deliberate or more conscious way, tattoos are written about in various ways as having the ability to convey unconscious material or as a manifestation of the “language of the psyche” (Radocchio, 2012, p. 40).

3.1.4 Through Symbol. An aspect within the literature that has been identified is that tattoos are sometimes thought of as a way to communicate through symbol where “one might conceive of tattoos as dream-images projected onto a screen – the skin” (Karacaoglan, 2012, p. 22). Further to

the idea of communication through symbol is the idea that tattoos are somehow easier than words or that getting a tattoo occurs when verbal language is inaccessible or insufficient. However, in other cases and other texts this is contradicted. The tertiary subtheme, *3.1.4.1 Or Not*, recognises this. Here, the images are represented as unimportant to the client or are captured as having no meaning. Additionally, tattoos are thought of as demonstrating an inability to symbolise and are “concrete, with no symbolic content” (Junior, 2015, p. 525).

3.2 Group Membership

Another way that tattoos are a means of relating and being related to is a way that they can be used to signify group membership. In this way, they can mark loyalties and convey allegiances. Denness (2005) points to some thinking that this is particular to “individuals whose self-identity is weak or diffused” (p. 24), but this detail does not recur throughout the literature when examining the varied reasons people choose to indicate belonging through getting or having a tattoo. Tattoos are represented as having a particular use when joining a group. Here, they might be used as part of an initiation or to mark a transition into any number of groups or communities, but this is often seen to be in relation to transgressive or “nonmainstream” groupings (Suchet, 2009). This subtheme has one additional pertinent aspect represented in a secondary subtheme, where tattoos are represented as being a way to show membership to family groups, as detailed below.

3.2.1 Ancestry. Another group that tattoos indicate links to is that of family and lineage, for example when Rytovaara (2012) writes of a client that he was “covered in tattoos to illustrate his ancestry” (p. 619). Although this was not a recurrent in the data, it was chosen as significant as I believe this concept captures something important that would have been more strongly represented if texts from Aotearoa had been available for inclusion.

3.3 To Mark Gender/Sexuality

Another way that tattoos are written about is as a means to express aspects of gender and sexuality. Although there is overlap, there are two secondary subthemes here: one that focusses on queer identity and the other that looks at various aspects of gender.

3.3.1 Queer Aesthetic. Tattoos can be used to create a “queer aesthetic” (Miller, 2020). Rose (2007), among others, illustrates this in discussing a client’s use of tattoos to signify aspects of sexuality:

James began to work out with a vengeance, spending two to three hours a night at the gym, beating his body up, as he put it. He also began to get tattoos, and then pierced his ear; the result was that increasingly he became what he realized during our discussions, was a thoroughly super-masculinized version of himself, yet a particularly gay-iconic version.(p. 77)

3.3.2 Gender. As demonstrated above, there is crossover between the use of tattoos to mark both gender and sexuality. When looking at the category of gender, tattoos are written about as the expression of a subcultural gender-code or as a way to modify perceived masculinity or femininity. In particular, this is seen in two tertiary themes: 3.3.2.1 *Increase Masculinity*, where tattoos are used to achieve a masculine identity, and 3.3.2.2 *Hide Femininity*, where tattoos are used to disguise the feminine body or to appear less feminine, particularly for the purposes of protection (Gassner, 2001; Motz, 2009).

3.4 To Attract and Repel

In the subtheme *To Attract and Repel*, tattoos are represented as being used in the hope of creating a response in others to either bring attention and to attract, or to repel. These two dynamics make up the two secondary subthemes of this category.

3.4.1 To Repel. Having tattoos seems in many cases to be read as a way to distract and distance or as a distortion or challenge. The interpretation that tattoos are meant to repel is illustrated in this excerpt from a case presentation: “So it is fairly clear that we are going to be dealing with somebody who will present something very distracting and distancing in the way of material, I would suspect. Like the tattoos” (Haft, 2006, p. 379). There is often an element of protection that is encapsulated in the extracts that inform this subtheme, such as when Goldklank (2009) describes a client, Jane:

With her rogue forearm tattoos and spiked wristlets, Jane looks, in Sally's words, as if she could "take all comers." Jane seems to be telling everyone to stay away. If anyone, however, makes it past the warning, even slightly, one sees why Jane protects herself from the encounter. (p. 14)

Similarly, Motz (2009) writes about the use of tattoos to repel or to hide in cases where the "sexual body has often been the site of abuse and violation, and so an attempt is made to cover it up, disguise, and transform it" (p. 38).

3.4.2 To Attract. The idea that tattoos are meant to attract others is captured in the conception that tattoos are a performative practice and a way to stand out or a way to counter invisibility. That tattoos might be intended to attract is also present in the idea that they can be viewed as secondary sexual characteristics (Karacaoglan, 2012). Murphy (2013) also demonstrates an aspect of creating attraction when writing, "as one person said about her tattoos, 'I have an unconscious desire for people to talk about my body and be drawn to it'" (p. 34).

3.5 Relationship with the Tattoo Artist

One overtly relational element of tattooing is that the experience requires contact with a tattoo artist. It is a collaborative process where communication, touch, gaze, close contact, and trust are required. This is described by one of Miller's clients when she talks about "the ways in which the careful touch of her tattoo artists, their gazes and the intonation and rhythms of their voices, stand in stark contrast to the impersonal touch of her early caregivers" (2020, p. 147).

Choice of tattoo artist is written about as an important intuitive act and the quality of voice and storytelling traditions within tattooing are of particular note (Murphy, 2013). The place where the tattooing takes place can be significant by extension: "The local tattoo parlour, run by an older man who shared a first name with Peter's father, became a second home as he engaged in his bodywork project" (Denness, 2005, p. 22).

3.6 Unintended Social Consequence

A further relational element of tattoos identified in the literature is the evocation of unintended and often stigmatised reactions in others. These responses can be in contrast to the planned purpose of the tattoo. Writing about the assumptions, reactions, and projections that tattoos give rise to, Radocchio (2012) states that:

The tattooed person is often brought into the limelight, and must negotiate their own personal space with the interest, curiosity, and reactions of others. It is ironic that an act that is essentially an attempt to work through, complicate, and expand my sense of self, can work so well to rigidly concretise my image, personality, and inner life in other people's minds. (p. 45)

Theme 4: Non-meanings, Implied Meanings, and Indiscriminate Meanings

Theme four brings together the ways in which tattoos are often written about with implied meaning and captures the way in which they are sometimes conflated and associated with various other practices or behaviours. In some ways, this theme captures the idea of tattoos *not* being made sense of, at least not explicitly or as something distinct. The three primary subthemes of this theme have largely been created from analysis of what tattoos are associated with and described as, and what they are treated as indiscriminate from. Table 5 shows the primary, secondary, and tertiary subthemes of this theme.

Table 5

Theme 4 and its Subthemes

Theme 4: Non-meanings, Implied Meanings, and Indiscriminate Meanings
Primary Subtheme 4.1 Non-meanings
Primary Subtheme 4.2 Associated with or described as
Secondary Subtheme 4.2.1 Diagnoses

Primary Subtheme 4.3 Indiscriminate from
Secondary Subtheme 4.3.1 Substance use
Secondary Subtheme 4.3.2 Self-harm
Secondary Subtheme 4.3.3 Body modification
Tertiary Subtheme 4.3.3.1 Surgery
Tertiary Subtheme 4.3.3.2 Scarring
Tertiary Subtheme 4.3.3.3 Piercing
Secondary Subtheme 4.3.4 Somatic presentations
Secondary Subtheme 4.3.5 Criminality and risk
Secondary Subtheme 4.3.6 Hair, clothing, and accessories

4.1 Non-Meanings

The first primary subtheme of theme four, is that of non-meanings. These are instances where, to varying degrees, tattoos are not made sense of or where it is stated that they should not, or cannot, be made sense of. Miller (2020) says that some have the clinical attitude that “body modifications may be noticed or commented on, even admired, but are not available as objects or experiences for analytic inquiry” (p. 144). Accordingly, they are not interpreted and are considered extra-analytic.

4.2 Associated With or Described As

This subtheme primarily comes from codes derived from extracts where tattoos are only mentioned tangentially or in passing, often to introduce a client at the beginning of a vignette or case study. Here, the tattoos are not made explicit sense of but are used to create an impression or paint a picture through some implied meaning. Examples are numerous, so I will present a limited selection: “Jim was an ostensibly aggressive, bisexual sadomasochistic skinhead, with a conspicuous tattoo of a viper on his arm. He was in repeated trouble with the police, mainly for vandalism” (Clark, 2006, p. 72); “It is early on in our therapy. Cathy slouches into my room, chewing gum. She sits in the chair opposite me, a strongly built, tattooed figure” (Ivey, 2011, p. 93); “Joe was in his early twenties, was over six feet tall, weighed two hundred pounds, and sported several tattoos. This all made him appear somewhat menacing” (Waska, 2007, p. 31); “C smoked marijuana everyday [sic] and experimented with other drugs. He had a shaved head with a tattoo on one side” (Waska, 2006,

p. 48). Although there is some variation in these presentations, overall, violence, criminality, and aggression feature heavily. There is one secondary subtheme examining the association of tattoos with diagnoses.

4.2.1 Diagnoses. This secondary theme compiles the various diagnoses that tattoos are associated with. They include borderline clients, women with severe personality disorders, those experiencing psychosis, and paranoid-schizoid patients.

4.3 Indiscriminate From

While there are texts and extracts that consider tattoos in isolation, there are many where tattoos are written about or mentioned among other practices. This final subtheme catalogues the behaviours and phenomena that tattoos are raised beside without particular distinction. Although often written about in combination, this theme has six secondary subthemes representing the categories of phenomena tattoos are discussed beside.

4.3.1 Substance Use. Tattoos are often written about in conjunction with various forms of substance use. For example, “We can see this in compulsive behaviour where symptoms involve something concrete, for example, food, alcohol, and drugs. Such patients spring into action without thinking” (Junior, 2015, p. 525).

4.3.2 Self-Harm. Similarly, tattoos are often mentioned alongside self-harm, self-injury, and self-mutilation.

4.3.3 Body Modification. Tattoos are also written about simultaneously with various forms of body modification. There are three specific varieties of this where tattoos are discussed in tandem with various surgeries, scarring practices, and piercings of multiple types. These are represented by the three tertiary subthemes of *4.3.3.1 Surgery*, *4.3.3.2 Scarring*, and *4.3.3.3 Piercing*. For example, “Tattoos, scarifications, and other skin inscriptions signal search for continuity with the object when anxious over losing traces of contact” (Anzieu-Premmereur, 2015, p. 673).

4.3.4 Somatic Presentations. Somatic presentations of a wide variety are written about in conjunction with tattoos. A passage by Anderson (2009) exemplifies this well:

What I became aware of was that with adolescents, I was constantly being confronted by their relationship to their bodies. Their preoccupation with their appearance, their tattooing, their body piercing, and, of course, in a psychiatric setting their illnesses with the frequent disturbance in their relationship to their bodies, which accompanies so much of adolescent disturbance: for example, eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, cutting and other suicidal behaviour. (p. 275)

Another extract that demonstrates this reads, “many have suffered severe trauma and have developed various kinds of somatic illness and/or bodily self-harm (anorexia, bulimia, self-mutilation, compulsive body piercing or tattooing)” (Farber, 2005, p. 261).

4.3.5 Criminality and Risk. Another combination of phenomena that tattoos are discussed amongst can be linked by the idea of criminality or risk. For example, this extract from Raphael-Leff (2012) mentions “drastic, often irreversible acts, involving tattoos, body piercings, self-harm, forbidden substances, risk-taking bravado, or gang cultures of crime or violence” (p. 301).

4.3.6 Hair, Clothing, and Accessories. Similarly, tattoos are often mentioned in combination with aspects of appearance – hair, clothing, and accessories – that are captured by this secondary subtheme. For example, “Katia talked at length about how she would get her parents’ consent on bizarre hair dyeing, piercing, tattooing” (Anagnostaki et al., 2017, p. 374). Or, “She also engaged in tattooing the most sensitive parts of her body, shaving her hair completely off and piercing her body” (Orlandini, 2009, p. 443).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the thematic analysis of the 65 texts selected for inclusion in this review, which resulted in the development of four themes with corresponding subthemes. I have defined and illustrated these themes of this study using extracts as examples throughout. These themes represent phenomena identified in the texts where authors make sense of client tattoos through interpretation of the *function of the tattoo as an object*, *tattooing as an act of mastery*, *tattoos as a way to relate and be related to* and presents the identified pattern of the

non-meanings, implied meanings, and indiscriminate meanings of tattoos presented by some writers.

In the following and final chapter, I will be commenting on and discussing these themes and this analysis. Before my concluding remarks, I will also comment on the strengths and limitations of this study, the implications on clinical practice for psychotherapists, and will suggest areas for further research.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

Through the application of thematic analysis to extracts from 65 articles, four main themes were identified in the literature relating to the way that therapists make sense of client tattoos. These themes position tattoos as having a function as an object, as an act of mastery, as a way to relate and be related to, and as having non-meanings, implied meanings, and indiscriminate meanings. In this final chapter, I discuss my findings. Following brief remarks on the identified themes, I will write about the implications of this research, its strengths and limitations, and give some ideas as to areas for further research before concluding.

Discussion of Findings

Here I will discuss some of the results of this study using some of my own reflections as a guide. As written before, this analysis identified four themes within the literature with additional primary, secondary, and tertiary subthemes. Using these subthemes to reflect back on encounters with tattoos within my own clinical work, I can readily recall instances where exploration of client tattoos matches with the subthemes of *1.4 Autobiography* where clients have marked significant life events such as gaining residency through tattoos, *1.3.1.1 Memorial* where they have preserved or honoured loved people or pets, *3.2 Group Membership* where allegiances are written on the body or face, and *3.4.1 To Repel* where I have seen motifs applied to the cheek for protection. In light of my findings, it is clear that consideration of the *process* of being tattooed has been largely absent from my clinical work and something that I have taken from this study. Interestingly, Murphy (2013) writes:

Various authors emphasize that it is the experience of acquiring a tattoo — not the content of the image — that is most significant. Without fully agreeing with that dichotomy, it is the experience — the touch, smell, voice, moist blood on the skin — that gives tattoos uniqueness. The experience is not simply a means to an end; the bodiliness of the process is essential. (p. 38)

I would similarly reject the dichotomy that Murphy (2013) mentions, adding that in addition to both the experience and the content that the image represents, there is sometimes a functionality to having a tattoo, which may be linked or independent to the content, as identified and written about in theme 1 (*Function of the Tattoo as an Object*). While some authors think of this “bodiliness” through the more limited framing of self-harm, this research shows that there is more that is possibly being sought or achieved through the act of getting a tattoo, as written about in theme 2 (*An Act of Mastery*) and aspects of theme 3 (*To Relate and be Related to*).

In some ways, theme 4 (*Non-meanings, Implied Meanings, and Indiscriminate Meanings*) exemplifies that the link between pathology and tattooing lingers for some in the way they frame tattoos, particularly in the way implied meanings are utilised when referring to tattoos. Within this, there is sometimes the idea of a tattoo as a red-herring, or something to be looked past, rather than explored. Additionally, subtheme 4.1 *Non-meanings* carries the suggestion that some consider tattoos to be extra-analytic. Given the premise of this dissertation relies on therapists making sense of tattoos, it would be easy to discount the idea that tattoos have no place in clinical work. However, there may be something to be said for this given how commonplace tattoos are becoming. It could be argued that there are ways in which tattoos are superficial and it is interesting to think about the clinical implications if considering them as a commodity, or a piece of art. For example, artist Amanda Wachob recently auctioned a tattoo for \$1,300 USD, which came with a copy of the tattoo on watercolour paper (LA Dance Project, 2021). And yet, even this seems as if it could prompt interesting clinical material. Murphy (2012) captures the tension here well, asking, “how can we engage with these patients without problematizing tattoos or trivializing them as a cultural moment?” (p. 35).

Overall, when considering the results of this study and the texts that I have read that engage more deeply with the idea of tattoos, I am struck, as I often am, by the creativity of humans in finding ways to adapt and grow. Suchet (2009) suggests that within our field it is possible that “we

have limited ourselves by focusing too exclusively on change from the inside out” (p. 115) and it does appear that, for some, tattoos offer the possibility of aiding change from the outside in.

Implications and Recommendations

The themes that were constructed from patterns within the literature have several implications for practitioners within the field. In this section, I make recommendations derived from this study and its results.

Firstly, drawing on the pattern that some authors appear to rely on implied meanings when referencing tattoos, is the recommendation that clinicians employ curiosity to interrogate their own pre-existing biases and responses to the idea of tattooing and tattoos. Following on from this, curiosity is likewise suggested in approaching client tattoos. Radocchio (2021) writes:

If there is an argument to be made, it is that further exploration into the subject of tattoos in our therapy rooms is necessary. “He had such intriguing images tattooed on his arms,” a teacher and colleague told me about his work with a tattooed client. “I never knew how to broach the subject; I always felt a bit strange talking to him about it, and I never actually did. I feel like I missed a big opportunity to get to some really rich material.” (p. 39)

This dissertation implies that the exploration of tattoos could indeed present a “big opportunity” to delve into meaningful material with clients. The above quotation begs the question: How does a practitioner broach the subject? This dissertation does not reveal answers to this, although one option may be to include questions about tattoos during the initial intake and assessment period for those clinicians who tend toward collecting a more thorough history.

Although how a therapist might go about raising the topic of tattoos remains open, this research offers some starting points or avenues for potential enquiry, as questions can be derived from the themes and subthemes. For example, when thinking about a client’s tattoo, it could be wondered: How might the tattoo be functioning or what might it be functioning as? What did getting the tattoo do to the patient’s sense of identity? How did it change their experience of their body, or alter affect? How did this occur? What role did pain have? What role did tending to a healing tattoo

have? What might the imagery be expressing? What is being communicated? What affiliations or markers are being expressed? What relational experience is being created in the presence of the tattoo? What did the tattoo artist mean to the client and what is their relationship like? How is the client experiencing the world relationally as someone with a tattooed body? How are people responding to them and how does that feel? What does a tattoo mean contextually, in this time and place, for this person?

These questions are in no way comprehensive. It should also be emphasised that, as this study demonstrates, tattoos are idiomatic and can have multiple meanings that shift over time, so some of these lines of enquiry will be irrelevant and anything gained from them subjective and subject to change. Some have argued that the rich information provided by tattoos can be used to conduct a kind of “dermal diagnosis” (Grumet, 1983, p. 482). Rightfully, this has been critiqued as it relies on the idea that the tattoo can be understood as having an objective meaning, often a pathological one (Roggenkamp, et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2009). Sullivan emphasises the relational aspect of meaning making when it comes to tattoos, writing:

[...]the tattoo will generate different meanings depending on a range of factors including the embodied history of the subject who interprets, the relationship between him or her and the tattooed person, the other ways in which the tattooed body is marked (e.g., in terms of gender, race, class, etc.), the context in which such an encounter takes place, and so on. (p. 132)

Considering this, although this study presents some ways that therapists have written about tattoos that may serve others as a starting point, I would caution against taking this study as any kind of a guide to “reading” tattoos. It is the hope of this study that rather than using a tattoo to concretise something, that clinicians are instead encouraged to engage with tattoos in a way that offers possibilities.

Strengths and Limitations

In considering the strengths and limitations of this research, it is worth revisiting the central question of this study: How do psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos? In an attempt to answer this question, it could be argued that the analysis in fact answers the questions of *what sense* therapists are making of tattoos rather than *how* therapists are making this sense. However, in discussing the findings the implications for how other therapists might go about approaching client tattoos becomes apparent. As discussed previously, what this study contributes through examining extracts from 65 texts is the collation of multiple aspects of tattoos for consideration.

With my aim of presenting information that might broaden the way therapists work with tattoos, it is interesting to consider what was left out. Although thematic analysis is systematic, and with this aims to be thorough, Braun and Clarke (2006) note that some loss of complexity and depth occurs, even in an analysis that attempts to work across a data set. In this way, omission is to part of the process, though what is omitted is worth noting. In acknowledging my biases, I wrote that I was not particularly open to interpretations where tattoos are framed as pathological or destructive, and my findings should be interpreted in light of this. For instance, the code “hostile act directed toward a hated self” is an example of a code that is not represented in the themes that resulted from this analysis.

This study has further limitations, some of which are related to the scope. Given the small scale of this project, limiting factors were chosen when selecting literature. One of these decisions was to use PEP as a database. Given PEP is a collection of psychoanalytic data, the texts are restricted in their focus and resultingly may not be representative of all psychotherapists. This study was also limited to articles, which excludes the depth that longer form texts such as books may have contributed to the findings. There were also no texts written in or by someone from Aotearoa New Zealand available for inclusion, which correspondingly limits this study. Membery (2015) states that along with Pākehā tattoo designs, moko from Māori tradition and tatau from Pasifika cultures make up the three dominant tattoo cultures within Aotearoa and writes about the significance and

sacredness of these practices. The implications of this on the way that tattoos might be made sense of is not captured within the findings of this project and given the bicultural context of Aotearoa and the deep importance of moko within te ao Māori, results may have differed significantly were this perspective able to be included. It is worth thinking about the particular harm that could result from a clinician viewing something sacred as an indicator of psychopathology. As an example, far from the “self-injury” of indigenous tattooing written about by Karacaoglan (2012, p. 5), there is suggestion from Māori psychiatrist Dr Diana Kopua and tā moko practitioner Mark Kopua that moko can function as a form of therapy (RNZ 2014, 2020). More broadly, one of the significant limitations of this study is that the data is sourced from existing literature. Given that a limited number of papers from which data was sourced specifically focus on tattoos, many extracts are unlikely to represent the full breadth of the way the author may actually be engaging with tattoos within a clinical setting. These factors have implications for further study, which will be discussed next.

Further Research

The findings and limitations of this study suggest the opportunity for further research. While this study relied on pre-existing literature for data, a study design and method that incorporate the direct collection of data specifically on the topic of tattoos would likely yield novel and relevant information. If remaining with a similar question, I suggest that interviewing or surveying therapists on the topic of how they work with tattoos would be one approach to this, as would interviewing or surveying patients as to their experience of their therapist’s engagement with their tattoos.

The relational experience between the tattoo artist and their client seems to have possible parallels with therapy in the way voice features and in the way something collaborative and intimate occurs. Research into the therapeutic aspects of the tattoo artist/client dyad as experienced by the client could potentially provide interesting insight for psychotherapists.

Miller (2020) suggests that the field of psychoanalysis has a limited understanding of body modification which impedes critical and creative thinking that results in an inability to aid patients in articulating the personal meanings of their body modifications. Leading on from this, Miller

recommends the incorporation of material from other disciplines, so multi- or interdisciplinary research might be of use.

Further psychotherapeutic research into tattoos as independent from other body modifications is also suggested by this dissertation. Additionally, research into the removal of tattoos, the modification or editing of tattoos, and the relevance of the placement of tattoos have appeared as gaps of inquiry within the literature I surveyed and would add further depth to this topic. Given the bicultural context, it is also strongly suggested that research specific to tattooing within Aotearoa from within the field of psychotherapy would contribute greatly to this body of knowledge.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the ways in which psychotherapists make sense of client tattoos. In doing so, four themes were identified within the literature that suggest therapists make sense of tattoos as having a function as an object, as an act of mastery, as a way to relate and be related to, and as having non-meanings, implied meanings, and indiscriminate meanings. This study recommends that therapists interrogate their stance on tattoos and the practice of tattooing and contributes to the field through uniting the way other authors have attempted to make sense of tattoos, suggesting possible avenues for engaging with tattoos within a clinical setting. While recognising the findings of this study are only starting points for the multitude of interpretations and ways of working with tattoos that might exist, if a way to approach tattoos is found, this research suggests that the exploration of tattoos within a clinical setting can provide valuable insight into the lives of clients and their internal worlds.

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Appendix B: Example Sheet of Extracts and Coding

	F	G	M	N	O	P	Q	S	T	U
1	reference	year	extract	page #	focus, or passing	client, or clients in general	client group	adult	1 meaning of act - creative (merge with "harm"? Some in both)	2 meaning of ac
2	Albright, M. (2002). The Stigmata. <i>Psychoanal. Contemp. Thought</i> , 25(3):329-358	2002	The release of endorphins from self-inflicted wounds also contributes to cutting's "medicating" effect (Leventron, 1998, p. 105). People who collect piercings and tattoos talk about the druglike high that comes from pain. After strenuous exercise	342	passing	general		n/a	1.1.a medicating wound	1.2.a medicating
3	Altman, N. (2007). The Children of the Children of the Sixties. <i>J. Infant Child Adolesc. Psychother.</i> , 6(1):5-23	2007	Tattoos and body-piercing he explains likewise as a manifestation of the effort to remake one's body according to one's liking.	10	passing	general		adolescent	1.1.b way of remaking own body	
4	Altestein, R. (2016). Finding Words: How the Process and Products of Psychoanalytic Writing Can Channel the Therapeutic Action of the Very Treatment It Sets Out to Describe. <i>Psychoanal. Persp.</i> , 13(1):51-70	2016	SEE SHEET 5		passing	client		adult		
5	Ammaniti, M., Fontana, A. and Nicolais, G. (2015). Borderline Personality Disorder in	2015	And do you ever think about, I don't know, getting a tattoo, dieting, or having plastic surgery to look better?	90	passing	client	borderline	adolescent	1.1.c way to look better	
6	Anagnostaki, L., Zaharia, A. and Matsouka, M. (2017). Discussing the therapeutic setting in child	2017	Katia talked at length about how she would get her parents' consent on bizarre hair dyeing, piercing, tattooing	374	passing	client		adolescent		
7	Anderson, R. (2009). Moving on From the Suburbs. <i>Psychoanal. Inq.</i> , 29(3):264-276	2009	What I became aware of was that with adolescents, I was constantly being confronted by their relationship to their bodies. Their preoccupation with their appearance, their tattooing, their body piercing, and, of course, in a psychiatric setting their illnesses with the frequent disturbance in their relationship to their bodies, which accompanies so much of adolescent disturbance: for example, eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, cutting and other suicidal behavior.	275	passing	general		adolescent		
	Anzieu-Premmeur, C. (2015). The Skin-Ego: Dyadic Sensuality, Trauma in Infancy and Adult									

Appendix C: Beginning of Thematic Mapping

borderline left
 queer trans
 women with severe personality disorders
 queer
 psychiatric subject
 potentially violent, homicidal and/or suicidal adolescents
 paranoid/schizoid patient

to erase whiteness and disability as oppressor
 to create queer aesthetic
 a way of expressing sexual identity
 to achieve a secure masculine identity
 to become super-masculine

transformation and disguise of the feminine body
 to appear less feminine for protection
 can incorporate feminine imagery without compromising masculinity

to tell people to go away
 a form of brag/gadecio

manage deficits in the skin-ego
 restore second skin
 protective second skin
 result: psychic skin
 archaization

modification of dissociated parts
 to mark survival

a way of constructing power
 taboo transgression
 magical significance and totemic function

holocephal vs. to accept in

reinforce boundary or being held together
 demarcating function to defend the boundary of the body
 a way to locate self in time and space
 a way to attract attention
 to stand out
 to counter invisibility
 to tell people to go away

communication - a link between omnipotent and shared information

announcing a menacing yet scarred person
 intentionally alienate from others because of assumptions, projections and reactions to the tattoo
 inadvertently, convey image, personality, and inner life in other people's minds

way of managing anxiety
 a way of calming to pacify

brushing image to settle nerves
 stroke or touch images to soothe
 construction of a transitional object

a way to repair structural deficits
 a defense against fragile internal objects
 a theme solution connected to realm of potential space

to reinforce a sense of group membership individuals whose self-identity is weak or diffuse
 to keep others alive a memorial
 a response to loss defense against neglect

way to make something real in inner space
 to signal search for continuity with the object unconsciously over long timescales
 reasoning of a personal bond or constant companionship
 a need for stasis and immutability
 to illustrate ancestry to link to ancestry

a blueprint of inner life
 a form of remembrance
 a way of extending to preserve part of the self
 subjective experience

a condensed story
 a way of building one's identity
 a way to locate self in time and space

a visible act of change
 to alter sense of self related to perception of the self
 used for self

personalised identity
 a way to shift an inner sense of self
 a way of constructing power

an invitation cipher
 communication between one shared information

easier than words
 a (missed) access to material realm of post extra-analytic

can express a thing's rebus
 the language unconsciously
 a (missed) access to material realm of post extra-analytic

my own work
 resistance
 marginalised
 He chose losing self
 stable/possible thing?

relationship
 tattoo partner as having
 intimate and collaborative relationship with tattoo artist
 tattoo artist as intrinsic partner
 refuge is sought in the tattoo artist
 calm personal and personalised experience

reclamation
 an act of reclaiming healing
 creative and empowered attempt to communicate possibility
 faith is an intuitive act
 occurs when symbolic language is insufficient
 inability to symbolise

transgressive act
 unlike cutting
 unique bodily experience

process of being tattooed
 way of managing incoherence encounters
 a symbolic construction
 a way to exert control and punish self for misbehavior
 expressing thoughts of internalised psychic conflict

self medicating wound
 a way of getting high
 alleviating anxiety through physical pain
 way of controlling precariously anxiety

a way of managing separation
 overcoming emptiness
 makes affect tolerable

a project
 an attempt to overcome the fear of abandonment and annihilation
 defense against regression to the paranoid position

fundamentally transformative
 anti-psychotic function

relationship
 tattoo partner as having
 intimate and collaborative relationship with tattoo artist
 tattoo artist as intrinsic partner
 refuge is sought in the tattoo artist
 calm personal and personalised experience

reclamation
 an act of reclaiming healing
 creative and empowered attempt to communicate possibility
 faith is an intuitive act
 occurs when symbolic language is insufficient
 inability to symbolise

transgressive act
 unlike cutting
 unique bodily experience

process of being tattooed
 way of managing incoherence encounters
 a symbolic construction
 a way to exert control and punish self for misbehavior
 expressing thoughts of internalised psychic conflict

self medicating wound
 a way of getting high
 alleviating anxiety through physical pain
 way of controlling precariously anxiety

a way of managing separation
 overcoming emptiness
 makes affect tolerable

a project
 an attempt to overcome the fear of abandonment and annihilation
 defense against regression to the paranoid position

fundamentally transformative
 anti-psychotic function

a line between trivialising and problematising
 a symbolic construction
 impulsivity
 a way to exert control and punish self for misbehavior
 honoured and normative form of self-injury
 alleviating anxiety through physical pain
 a way of getting high
 sophisticated self-harm
 a hostile act directed towards a hunk of self or body/inner object

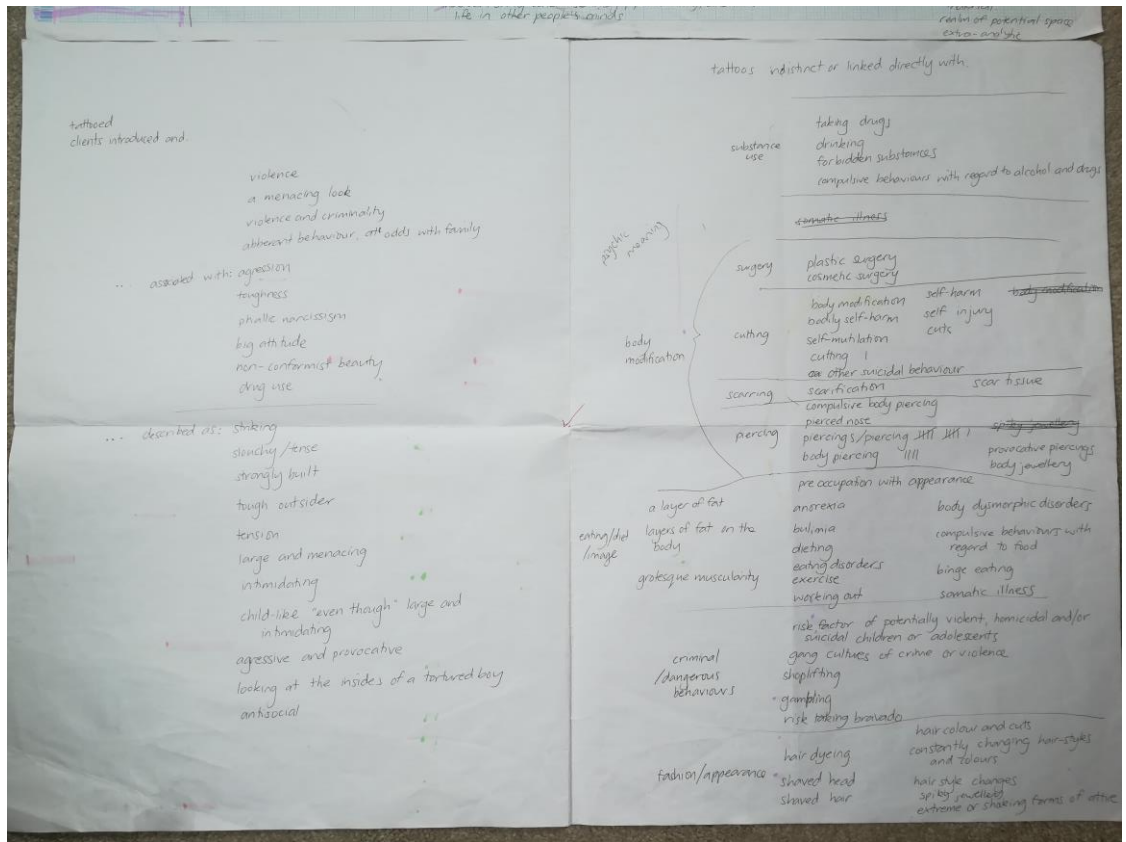
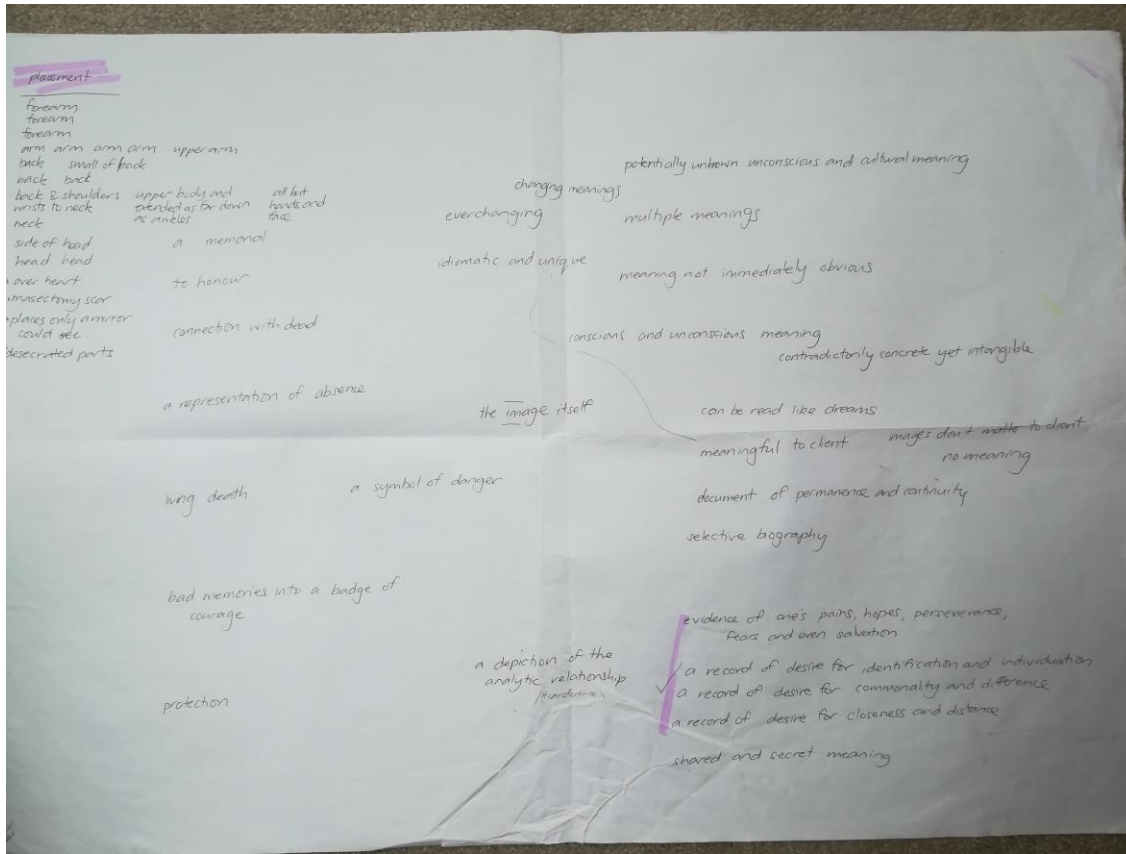
self medicating wound
 like cutting, it kills at the marks of pain
 different to cutting

tearing of age
 rite of passage
 progression towards masculinity
 rite of passage
 part of crossing into a non-memorial continuity
 initiation or way to emphasise a passage
 initiatory experience
 expression of individuality
 tension between individuality and conformity
 a way to create personalised identity

a way of being own self
 against pathos's wishes
 an attempt at separation or differentiation
 creating a mirror for self for deliberation
 breaking free of super-ego, expect
 creation of self
 means of self-actualisation
 claiming of agency
 assertion of self-definition
 mirroring function
 creating uniqueness from fragmentation
 an act of initiative
 overcoming emptiness

multiple motivations for why the tattoo
 idiosyncratic & unique
 contradictory, complex
 many uses, so cannot know

language of the psychical
 access to unconscious
 material
 realm of potential space
 extra-analytic



Appendix D: Table of Themes and Codes

Theme 1: Function of the tattoo as an object

<i>Primary Subtheme</i>	<i>Secondary Subtheme</i>	<i>Tertiary Subtheme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
1.1 Boundary marker			Way to repair structural deficits; Reinforce boundary or being held together; Demarcating function to defend the boundary of the body; Way to locate the self in space
	1.1.1 Skin		Manage deficits in the skin-ego; Second skin; Protective second skin; Psychic skin
1.2 Sense of intersubjectivity			Defence against neglect; Reassurance of a personal bond; To signal search for continuity with the object when anxious over losing traces of contact
	1.2.1 Mirroring		Creating a mirror for self-deliberation; Mirroring function creating wholeness from fragmentation
	1.2.2 Transitional object		Construction of a transitional object; Stroking or touching tattoo to soothe; Brushing tattoo to settle nerves; To pacify; Way of managing anxiety; Way of calming; A constant companion
1.3 To preserve	1.3.1 Others		Honouring mentors; Loyalty; Form of remembrance; To honour
		1.3.1.1 Memorial	To keep others alive; Response to loss; Memorial; Skin-memorialisation
	1.3.2 Self		To preserve part of the self; To bring consistency in mental life; Need for stasis and immutability; Form of remembrance; To locate self in time

1.4 Autobiography	Related to the perception of self; Used for self-identification; A condensed story; Blueprint of inner life; A personal history; A private diary; Tells a tale; Selective biography; Marks of pain; Evidence of one's pains, hopes, perseverance, fears, and salvation; Way of externalising subjective experience
1.4.1 To alter	To alter sense of self; Way to shift an inner sense of self; Way of building an imaginary identity; Potential for self-transformation
1.4.1.1 Reclamation	A reclamation; Modification of desecrated parts; Bad memories into a mark of courage
1.4.2 To mark change	Communication of a new developmental achievement; To mark turning points; To mark transition, change, or loss; To mark survival

Theme 2: An Act of Mastery

<i>Primary Subtheme</i>	<i>Secondary Subtheme</i>	<i>Tertiary Subtheme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
2.1 Mastery over identity	2.1.1 Individuation		Psychic separation; Breaking free of super-ego, expectations, authority; Way to create personalised identity
		2.1.1.1 Differentiation from mother	Attempt at separation or differentiation from the mother; Way of being own self by going against mother's wishes; To spite mother
		2.1.1.2 Plus identification	Tension between agency and wish to remain merged; Expression of individuality <i>and</i> identification; Desire for closeness and distance; Record of commonality and difference

	2.1.2 Initiation	Initiatory experience; Initiation or way to emphasise a passage; Coming of age rite; Rite of passage; Part of crossing into a non-mainstream community; Progression towards masculinity
	2.1.3 Self creation	Creation of self; Means of self-actualisation; Body project to stabilise identity; Claiming of agency; Act of initiative; Assertion of self-determination; Surrender towards growth; Inaction into action; Visible act of change; Mirroring function creating wholeness from fragmentation; Restoring self-structures
2.2 Mastery over the body	2.2.1 Embodiment	Experience of and possibilities for mind-body connection; Creating an embodied world; Way to appropriate the body, to tie the body to the self; Somatic solution; Unique bodily experience; A wish to retrieve sensory experiences; To make something real in an alienated world
	2.2.2 To create	Way of remaking own body; Control over the body; Way to sculpt the body; Transformative act, unlike cutting
	2.2.2.1 Reclamation	Reclaiming of body after illness or injury
	2.2.3 Permanence	Give a sense of permanence and control over rapidly evolving body; Denial of death; Body project to stabilise identity; To preserve part of the self
	2.2.4 Appearance	Way to look better; Fashion statement

2.3 Mastery over affect		Makes affect tolerable; Way of controlling persecutory anxiety; Way of managing separation; Attempt to overcome the fear of abandonment and annihilation; Overcoming emptiness
	2.3.1 Through pain	To alleviate anxiety through physical pain; Self-medicating wound; Sophisticated self-harm; Honoured and normative form of self-injury; Way to exert control and punish self; Way of getting high
		2.3.1.1 Healing
		An act requiring healing; Attempt to heal;

Theme 3: A Way to Relate and be Related to

<i>Primary Subtheme</i>	<i>Secondary Subtheme</i>	<i>Tertiary Subtheme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
3.1 To communicate			An invitation; Creative and empowered attempt to communicate; Easier than words
	3.1.1 Shared and secret		A link between omnipotent and shared information; Shared and secret meaning; Contradictorily concrete yet intangible; A cipher; A rebus; Idiomatic and unique; Meaning not immediately obvious; Changing meanings; Everchanging
	3.1.2 Transference		A depiction of the analytic relationship
	3.1.3 Unconscious material		Language of the psyche and access to unconscious material; Language of the unconscious; Potentially unknown unconscious and cultural meaning; Conscious and unconscious meaning

	3.1.4 Through symbol	Can be read like dreams; Meaningful to client; Occurs when symbolic language is insufficient; Easier than words
	3.1.4.1 Or not	Images don't matter to client; No meaning; Inability to symbolise
3.2 Group membership		To reinforce a sense of group membership in individuals whose self-identity is weak or diffused; To mark loyalty; Initiation; Initiatory experience; Part of crossing into a non-mainstream community; To erase whiteness and disidentify as oppressor
	3.2.2 Ancestry	To illustrate ancestry; To link to ancestry
3.3 To mark gender/sexuality	3.3.1 Queer aesthetic	To create queer aesthetic; Gay-iconic; Queer identity
	3.3.2 Gender	Expression of subcultural gender-code; Can incorporate feminine imagery without compromising masculinity; Non-binary identity
	3.3.2.1 increase masculinity	Progression towards masculinity; To achieve a secure masculine identity; To become super-masculine
	3.3.2.2 hide femininity	Transformation and disguise of the feminine body; To appear less feminine for protection
3.4 To attract and repel	3.4.1 To repel	Meant to distract and distance; To tell people to go away; To appear less feminine for protection; A distortion
	3.4.2 To attract	An invitation; To stand out; To counter invisibility; A secondary sexual characteristic; Performative practice

3.5 Relationship with tattoo artist	Relational experience; Tattoo parlour as home; Refuge sought in tattoo artist; Intimate and collaborative relationship with tattoo artist; Tattoo artist as intimate partner; Voice of artist important; Calm
3.6 Unintended Social Consequence	Unintentionally alienate from others because of assumptions, projections and reactions to the tattoo; Inadvertently concretise image, personality and inner life in other people's minds

Theme 4: Non-meanings, Implied Meanings, and Indiscriminate Meanings

<i>Primary Subtheme</i>	<i>Secondary Subtheme</i>	<i>Tertiary Subtheme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
4.1 Non-meanings			A missed opportunity for rich material; Extra analytic; Many uses, so cannot know
4.2 Associated with or described as			A menacing look; Big attitude; Provocative; Antisocial; Aggression; Violence; Violence and criminality; Aberrant behaviour; Drug use; Toughness; Tough outsider; Large and menacing; Intimidating; Child-like even though intimidating; Tension; Slouchy; Phallic narcissism; Non-conformist beauty
	4.2.1 Diagnoses		Borderline; Women with severe personality disorders; Psychosis; Paranoid-schizoid patients
4.3 Indiscriminate from	4.3.1 Substance use		Taking drugs; Drinking; Forbidden substances; Compulsive behaviours with regard to alcohol and drugs
	4.3.2 Self-harm		Bodily self-harm; Self-mutilation; Cutting; Self-harm; Self-injury; Cuts; Other suicidal behaviour
	4.3.3 Body modification	4.3.3.1 Surgery	Plastic surgery; Cosmetic surgery
		4.3.3.2 Scarring	Scarification; Scar tissue

4.3.3.3 Piercing	Compulsive body piercing; Pierced nose; Piercing/s; Body piercing; Provocative piercings; Body jewellery
4.3.4 Somatic presentations	Body dysmorphic disorders; Preoccupation with appearance; Compulsive behaviours with regard to food; Anorexia; Bulimia; Binge eating; Eating disorders; Dieting; Exercise; Working out; Grotesque muscularity; Layers of fat on the body; A layer of fat; Somatic illness
4.3.5 Criminality and risk	Gambling, Shoplifting, Risk-taking bravado; Gang cultures of crime or violence; Risk factors of potentially violent, homicidal, and/or suicidal children or adolescents
4.3.6 Hair, clothing, and accessories	Hair colours and cuts; Constantly changing hair-styles and colours; Hair style changes; Hair dyeing; Bizarre hair dyeing; Shaved head; Shaved hair; Spiky jewellery; Extreme or shocking forms of attire