Marking motherhood: tattooing and willfulness as a response to and a way to survive child removal

Lisa Morriss, Lancaster University, UK and Siobhan Beckwith, University of Huddersfield, UK

Abstract

Our project, *Marking Motherhood*, explores the significance of tattooing for mothers following state intervention and child removal. Taking a material methods approach to 'object interviews', we found that the women curate their own tattoo collections, creating an archive inscribed on their skin.

We analysed the interviews using Sara Ahmed's (2014) theoretical work on 'willing'; specifically, we apply her concepts of willfulness, a willfulness archive, and a will sphere. Later, Ahmed's work on hope and the will as project are brought into dialogue with Tia DeNora's (2021) notion of carrying a dream. By bringing together Ahmed's and DeNora's theoretical and conceptual work with extracts from our empirical interviews, we develop the theory through the data.

We argue that through their tattooing practices, the women are carrying their children on their bodies, enabling a maternal connection to persist, despite the enforced separation. Tattooing allows the mothers to simultaneously survive the trauma of separation, bear living with unspeakable pain in the everyday, and to will a different kind of future into being, creating possibilities and hope.

The article makes an original sociological contribution as it is the first to show the significance of tattooing practices for mothers following state intervention and child removal. Many high-income countries with institutionalised systems of child protection remove children from their mothers in the ways discussed in this article. Hence this distinctive form of loss and the associated maternal strategies to grieve, survive and sustain a connection with their child are a global concern.

Keywords

Child removal, Tattooing, Archives, Willing, Hope, Futures

Introduction

'…bodies out of place have much to teach us' (Ahmed, 2014, p.19)

Our project, *Marking Motherhood*, funded by the Sociological Review Foundation Kick Start Fund, explores the significance of tattooing for mothers living apart from their children. We became aware of the significance of tattoos for these mothers as researchers (Lisa) and through developing specialist services for over fifteen years (Siobhan), both with a keen eye to the non-verbal ways mothers storied their experiences. We were surprised to find that this would be the first such study of the tattooing practices of mothers following state intervention and child removal. In her book, *What's the Use* (2019, p. 6), Sara Ahmed tells us that 'to follow something, it first needs to capture your attention'. The mothers' tattoos captured our attention; we are haunted by their stories (Morriss, 2018), reflecting how the 'fragments scholars retrieve can embed themselves in their bodies, relating with their own archive of feelings and body memory' (Puwar, 2021, p. 8).

We begin with a literature review of key sociological work on tattooing, loss, and trauma, then discuss our methodological approach. Taking a narrative approach to 'object interviews' (Riessman, 2008; Woodward, 2020), we explore how eight mothers who live apart from their children curate their own tattoo collections, creating an archive inscribed on their skin. We applied Ahmed's (2014) theoretical work on 'willing' to understand how the women used tattooing to survive living with unbearable loss in their everyday lives. Specifically, we apply Ahmed's concepts of willfulness, a willfulness archive, and a will sphere. We also draw upon Amy Chandler and Sarah Wright's (2024) key article making the case for a 'haunted sociology of suicide'. Later in the article, Ahmed's work on hope and the will as project are brought into dialogue with Tia DeNora's (2021) notion of 'carrying a dream'. By bringing together Ahmed's and DeNora's conceptual work with extracts from our empirical interviews, we develop the theory through the data.

We found that the mothers use tattooing to express their creativity and their love for their child. We argue that through their tattooing practices, the mothers are intentionally curating their own archives, inked on their skin. It is a means of regaining control of their maternal identity which has been jeopardised through the power of the state to remove their child from their care. By carrying their children on their bodies, the mothers enable their maternal connection to persist, despite the enforced separation. Tattooing allows the mothers to embody a response to and means to survive the trauma of separation; most of the women we interviewed had their tattoos marked on their bodies immediately after separation. It is a way in which they can survive living with unspeakable pain in the everyday. Finally, tattooing enables the mothers to will a different kind of future into being, creating possibilities and hope of reunification with their child.

The article makes an original sociological contribution as it is the first to show the significance of tattooing practices for these mothers and underlines the vital role of sociology in understanding the impact of child removal. Many high-income countries with institutionalised systems of child protection remove children from their mothers in the ways discussed in this article. Hence this distinctive form of loss and the associated maternal strategies to grieve, survive and sustain a connection with their child are a global concern.

Sociological work on tattooing

There has been some important sociological work on tattooing, trauma, and loss. In his influential 2007 book, *The Art of Listening*, Les Back describes tattoos as 'inscriptions of love', which very much resonates with the tattoos of the women we interviewed. He emphasises that examining tattooing practices allows us 'to pay attention to the realm of embodied social life that operates outside of talk' (p. 95). In his book, Back writes about Donna who is pictured on the book's front cover. Donna has the musical notes of Stevie Wonder's *Isn't She Lovely* tattooed on the inside of her arms to commemorate her goddaughter, Lyric, who died of brain cancer. Donna used to sing this song to Lyric and the tattoo is placed where she hugged Lyric before she died. Donna's story shows how tattoos can be used as a form of permanent memorialisation: 'the price of these indelible lines was a physical pain that is fitting, given the grief and loss that inspired them' (p. 108). In *Virtual afterlives*, Candi K. Cann (2014, p. 54) also links tattooing with mourning, with the loved one 'forever embedded not only in their memories, but also on their skin'. Cann describes the tattoos of Donna G. who has had three miscarriages and two living children. Donna G. has the names of her two living children tattooed on her arm, protected by three angels which represent the babies she carried. In words which resonate with our participants, Donna G. told Cann that the tattoos meant: 'They are always with me. I won't ever forget them' (p. 57). Thus, both Back and Cann write about tattooing in relation to the loss of a child, inscribing 'profoundly painful and intimate memories directly onto the flesh' (Caplan, 2010, p. 138). Their findings link with recent work by Cadell et al. (2022, p. 137) on the theory of 'continuing bonds', where tattoos are 'embodied expressions of the ongoing relationships with the person who died'.

Alice Bloch (2022; 2024) also writes about tattooing as memorial practice; her focus is the decision amongst the children and grandchildren of Auschwitz survivors to replicate the concentration camp number of their survivor family member on their own body. Here the attention is on parents and grandparents, rather than children, but the focus is still on tattooing as marking intergenerational family ties. In her study, Bloch interviewed 13 descendants of Holocaust survivors about their decision. She identified key themes of honouring the heroism and the legacy of the survivor, love,

cherishing the person, and keeping family stories and histories alive. These themes are aligned with our findings. Bloch's (2024, p. 1331) sociological analysis 'shows how personal lives are shaped by memories, as well as secrets and silences, and how they connect with history, relationships and identity'. Interestingly, even though Bloch discusses memorial tattoos, 8 of her 13 participants had their tattoo inked when their parent or grandparent was still alive and were able to talk to their loved one about their tattoo. For example, Sara [pseudonym] explained that she had talked to her father about wanting to tattoo his number on her body when he was in hospital, just before he died. Sara told Bloch, ''he was so angry at me' and said, 'never do it, don't do it'' (p. 1323). However, Sara went ahead and had the tattoo on the day he died. Later in the article, we will see how timing is significant for the women in our study too.

The work by sociologists Back, Cann, and Bloch on memorial tattooing practices echoes some of our findings. However, there is one critical difference. The mothers in our study are living with a distinctive form of loss and grief: their children are still alive but absent, with many mothers not allowed to know where their children are living. Their children are a 'ghostly presence'; there and not there at the same time (Gordon, 2008). Unlike some participants in Bloch's study, at the time of interview, none of the mothers in our study had had the opportunity to share their tattoos with their now-adult children. Thus, this article makes an original sociological contribution as it is the first study to examine the tattooing practices of mothers following child removal. We discuss our methodological approach in the next section.

Methodology

We considered the nature of tattoos and how we might relate to them in the research process. What is their relationship to the stories women tell about them? We knew the materiality of tattooing was central and so turned to Sophie Woodward's work on material methods to explore these questions, including questions of whether the tattoos in our study might be usefully considered as 'objects'. In her 2020 book, *Material Methods*, Woodward outlines a 'material-oriented ontology, which works from the premise that things are not passive but are active, and entangled components of everyday worlds' (p. 12). This aligned with our work as the tattoos are inextricably entangled with the everyday lives of the mothers, inked on their skin.

Once ethical approval was granted by Lancaster University, we circulated information about the research to services working with mothers living apart from their children. Women considering participating in the study were given our contact information so they could ask us questions via mobile, text, or WhatsApp. Eight mothers engaged with the project, with twenty-three children

between them. At that point, the women had a total of 114 tattoos on their bodies. Their tattoo collections ranged from four to thirty-eight tattoos per mother. Women ranged from their mid-twenties to their early fifties in age, and their children ranged from babies to mid-twenties. One mother also had grandchildren she was not in contact with. All eight tattoo collectors had had social care involvement with their families at some point, with seven of the mothers having at least one of their children removed and permanently placed elsewhere by the state. One mother was forced to leave the family home due to severe domestic violence. Domestic violence and mental distress featured heavily in the women's stories and were contributory factors for the removal of their children (Beckwith, 2024).

We were keen the research process would not be extractive. To embed an ethics of care (Doucet and Mauthner, 2012), we carefully built relationships via mobile, WhatsApp, and email with all the mothers we connected with over the duration of the project. We invited the mothers to meet with us at least twice in person. The first was to discuss the project and to then have a private sitting with an experienced female photographer so that photographs of tattoos could be taken. Women were encouraged to take a lead in the shaping of the images, recognising the tattoos as part of their living bodies. In addition, the women were invited to sit for portrait photographs. These were not for research purposes, but to allow for an opportunity to access professional portraiture, something that would typically be beyond their financial means. These were not occasions to have images of clinical 'specimens' taken. In the same vein, referring to the tattoos as 'objects' felt both helpful whilst also slightly jarring due to their embodied and intimate nature. We originally wanted the women to have the choice whether to consent to having Photoshopped images of their tattoos, with any identifying dates or names removed, included in outputs from the research. However, this was not permitted by the Ethics Committee. This was distressing to some of the women as they felt yet another institution was controlling their bodies. As a result, we re-applied to the Committee, and we were granted ethical approval for an artist to draw the tattoos for any publications or presentations, but in a way that rendered the images as not identifiable.

The next time the mothers met with us was for an individual audio-recorded semi-structured interview with Siobhan. All but one of the women chose to be interviewed, thus, there are the words of seven women in this article. We adopted a narrative approach to the object interview (Riessman, 2008; Woodward, 2020), asking 'do you want to tell me a little bit about your tattoos?' The tattoos were original commissions by the women and consequently the stories about them were vivid and required little drawing out. The stories felt like they were just beneath the surface ready to be told, barely under the skin itself - like their tattoos. The women's powerful evocations demonstrated how

their tattoos are what Ian Woodward (2001, p. 116) describes as 'epiphanic' or 'pivotal' objects. Indeed, these tattoos have been telling stories even before they were committed to the skin. We reflected that the research encounter was not only a 'space for connection' (Woodward, 2020, p. 38) but also an opportunity for reconnection, reflection, and affirmation.

The photographs were placed on the table between us, and we had felt tip pens to number the images so we could make the connection between the tattoos and the specific photograph being discussed in the interview. In her book, Sophie Woodward (2020) makes a distinction between undertaking object interviews 'in-context' (i.e., where the object is usually situated, such as a wardrobe) and in an 'interview-context' (i.e., where the object or a photograph of the object is brought to an interview setting). We merged the two as we had both the tattoos and the photographs of the tattoos present. Why did we choose to add the additional layer of the photographs? Many of the tattoos were inked in places - such as on their back - which were not visible to the woman, or in more intimate places, such as the top of the thigh. The photographs enabled the mothers to discuss the tattoos without having to take off clothing in the interview setting. Where the tattoo was more visible, the mothers could point to the tattoo itself, alongside the photograph. The mothers were involved in choosing their own pseudonyms, and these are used throughout the article.

Tattoos are on bodies; they are part of bodies. Sometimes women spoke of individual tattoos and sometimes they spoke of their whole bodies, their collection, their canvas. We followed the carefully curated tattoos on the mothers' bodies, allowing us 'a really nuanced and in-depth understanding of everyday life in relationship to the material dimensions of practices' (Woodward, 2020, p. 103). Woodward argues that 'opening up collections – as a method – is underexplored and can offer new perspectives' (p. 74). She shows how this approach can provide insights into the spatial, material, relational, and temporal.

Following the interviews, the women were offered high quality copies of all their photographs and a framed copy of their chosen image; a new set of objects created as part of the research process. In these ways, the encounter with tattoos in our project for women took place over time and space, both in and beyond the interview interaction, allowing for care to be taken. The encounter lasted from initial discussion around the research, phone calls, initial meeting with us both, the photography session, interview, and post interview interactions. Finally, we used the theoretical work of Sara Ahmed and Tia DeNora to analyse the interview material. By bringing Ahmed's and

DeNora's conceptual work and extracts from the empirical interviews together, we develop the theory through the data.

Being willful

The most common issues which trigger child protection involvement include maternal mental health, intimate partner violence, learning disabilities, and the mother herself being in the care of the state (Morriss, 2018). These issues are used to judge these women as being not mothers, arguably one of the most stigmatising judgements for any mother. In her book, Willful Subjects (2014, p. 15), Ahmed shows how willfulness 'might be what we do when we are judged as being *not*, as not meeting the criteria for being human'. She argues that when you are 'judged as being *not*', willfulness 'might be required to recover from the very attempt at its elimination' (p. 140). Hence, the mothers in our study can be seen as becoming willful to retain the motherhood that has been jeopardised through not having their child in their care. Ahmed (2015, p. 38) explains that willfulness is not only assigned to certain bodies, but then shapes those bodies: 'The scars on your skin both attach you to a past of loss and a future of survival. This is not a healing'. This is strikingly so for these mothers; having a child forcibly removed from your care causes unspeakable pain. It has material 'collateral consequences' (Broadhurst and Mason, 2020) such as becoming homeless, remaining with a violent partner or (re)turning to drugs or alcohol to cope with the traumatic loss (Morriss, 2018). Thus, to counter this, 'perhaps willfulness is an optimistic relation, a way of holding on, of not giving up' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 175). We contend the act of hope symbolises willfulness to survive. The women in this study accomplished this through their tattooing practices and the stories they told about the visible ink on and under the surface of their skin.

The mothers we interviewed use tattooing to express their creativity. For example, in relation to her tattoos, Lucy explained that: 'It's me. Every art, every bit of skin, everything means something to me in a way that it is related to my kids'. For Maya, tattooing is 'about art and expressing yourself'. Being willful is to be creative, to 'create spaces of relief, spaces that might be breathing spaces, spaces in which we can be inventive' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 169). Through tattooing, these mothers can be inventive, creating breathing spaces where they can express their love for their absent children through artwork. Furthermore, Ahmed shows how 'will as well as willfulness become assignments that pertain not only to persons but also to *things*' (p. 14 italics ours). We argue that the tattoos are saturated with will and the carrying of them on their bodies offers these women a material connection to the motherhood which has been threatened by enforced removal.

A Willfulness Archive and the Will Sphere

Lilly: I'm just adding more tattoos to my collection. It is a little collection.

The mothers in our study assembled 'archives' through tattooing, indelibly inscribed on their skin. Their tattoos include children's handprints and footprints, a handwritten note from a child, and a photograph of a child: bodies on bodies. The mothers actively curate their collections through decisions about placement, visibility, and meanings of each tattoo. Through the tattoos, they have gathered images and words that might 'otherwise remain dispersed or scattered' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 17). As Naomi explained about her tattoos: 'They're not random, they've all got either a story or a meaning behind each and every single one'. She continued: 'My tattoos are either to do with family or depression'. Naomi told Siobhan that she didn't have depression before child removal, instead: 'My depression came from them taking away my children and not listening, that's where it fully went spiralling out of control'. Naomi has a tattoo of a black and white rose on which three colourful butterflies have settled. She is the rose, and the butterflies are her children:

> **Naomi**: The butterflies are my children. The fact that the colour's dripping through it's like a watercolour, it's my depression because sometimes it's there and sometimes it'll just drip and then drip, and it'll just expand and get worse and then turn my whole life upside down.

Through the design of her tattoo, Naomi has entwined herself, her three children, and the depression she lives with following the removal of her children from her care. In the tattoo, the children are with her, but the depression is constantly dripping through, until it becomes unbearable, and turns Naomi's life 'upside down'.

Ahmed (2014, p. 19) argues that 'when willfulness is deposited in our bodies, our bodies become part of a willfulness archive'. By adopting Ahmed's use of the word 'archive' we intentionally recognise the active gathering and carrying of tattoos as curation. Indeed, as researchers, we deliberately created our own willfulness archive in this study as a response to our fears the tattoos might be overlooked. Ahmed suggests 'you emphasize something because you perceive it has been overlooked. Perhaps you are trying to stop something from being passed over' (p. 17). We recognise it is all too easy for the mothers to be passed over as they often remain silent through shame or are forcibly silenced through being made subject to court-ordered reporting restrictions (Morriss, 2018). In *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed (2014) assembles a willfulness archive of her own. If what you hope for 'becomes what is behind you, then it can place objects in front of you, as things that can be taken up again' (p. 40). The mothers are actively willing in the everyday by assembling their archives, marking

their bodies with tattoos relating to their children. The children are no longer in the care of the mothers, yet motherhood persists because the tattoos are present, ineradicably marked on their bodies.

Living with unbearable loss and pain in the everyday, through willing

Lilly: I was grieving for someone who was still alive.

Looking at the photos of herself during the interview, Lilly reflected that 'it looks like I haven't got a care in the world' and in relation to accepting that her children have been adopted, 'certain days I think oh, I've conquered it'. However, 'other days you slip back down like the birthdays were a bit difficult'. She went on to explain how she had recently struggled to decide how to mark her child's birthday:

> **Lilly**: I didn't feel comfortable like not doing anything [for the birthday] because it just felt unnatural for me to not celebrate it because I would celebrate if they were here and they're not dead, but I was grieving for someone who was still alive. Normally, I just think we're one year closer for them to come home, but it seems like a lifetime.

This quote captures the distinctive form of traumatic grief and loss that these mothers bear in their everyday lives. The mothers are unable to follow the customary grief rituals of bereavement as their child has not died but is alive, living somewhere that is often unknown. This is 'haunted motherhood' (Morriss, 2018): they remain suspended in the shadowlands where the living and the invisible coexist (Gordon, 2008). Lilly 'normally' thinks that a birthday marks another year closer to her children coming home, but, at times, it 'seems like a lifetime'. This links with Ahmed's (2014, p. 38) depiction of the 'anxiety that what is willed might not happen… when hopeful and confident, the gap seems to be shrinking; when worried or anxious, the gap seems to become larger'. Thus, Lilly – and the other mothers in our study - live with an almost unbearable uncertainty and fear that they will never see their children again.

At times of overwhelming dread, feeling that she couldn't continue without her children in her care, Lilly made several suicide attempts. She explained: 'I was reliving the kids being taken away every night and it was just waking me up every night screaming'. In response to Siobhan's question about how she feels after having a tattoo, Lilly told us that she began self-harming after her children were removed:

> **Siobhan**: So, do you walk out of the tattoo parlour tattoo artist shop feeling better?
> **Lilly**: To a certain extent yeah because it is my release. It's how if I get so worked up it's the only thing I can do to make me feel better, so it is like another form of self-harming for me.
> **Siobhan**: When did you start self-harming?
> **Lilly**: Just after the kids got taken away because I just couldn't cope… it was like what's the point anymore, so I didn't want to be here. It sort of saved my life by having the tattoos done if that makes sense because it was a way of putting it more of a positive than a negative. They are a bit of a saviour for me.

In her stories of tattoos as saviours, Lilly is actively employing tattooing to survive the trauma of the separation from her children and having to live with this unbearable loss. Indeed, Lilly has a long-standing connection with her tattooist as she explained: 'It's my therapy if you like so it's how I deal with stuff. He [tattooist] is a bit like my therapist'. Telling the tattooist the story behind each of her tattoos as he pierces her skin helps Lilly cope with her feeling of loss. Lilly had her children's handprints meticulously – smudges included - inked on her body immediately after they were removed and adopted. She described:

> **Lilly:** It was a pretty traumatic time, but my tattoos kept me going. It's like people say well don't you think your tattoos are a negative? And it's like no because they were the only things I could control. For me, I couldn't control anything. I couldn't control the situation that I found myself in but getting the handprints I could control it. They're permanently there now. It's a set point in time no one can take from me. They can't remove my tattoos.

Again, Lilly makes the connection between the tattoos, enabling her to keep going in the everyday, following the traumatic separation from her children. Although her children have been adopted through state-ordered removal through the Family Court system, Lilly has recovered her will and taken back control of her body through tattooing: 'getting the handprints I could control it'. Ahmed (2014, p. 10) notes that the 'will is understood here as the capacity or potential to enact a 'no,' the potential not to be determined from without, by an external force'. The permanency of the tattoos mark Lilly's refusal for her body to be wholly controlled by the state. Her tattoos are 'permanently there now' and can't be removed. To 'mark the body becomes a willed and willful act' (p. 161).
Like Lilly, Claudia explained how tattooing is one way that helps her survive child removal in the everyday. Towards the end of the interview, after Claudia has talked about all her tattoos, Siobhan asked:

Siobhan: It feels like some of them [the tattoos] are a part of your journey.

Claudia: Yeah… they are. It's part of recovery, memories.

Siobhan: And do you think there is a link in terms of mental health and tattooing generally?

Claudia: Yeah… And I don't know if it's the same form of like a self-harm but in a good way or you know you want something on your body to be able to look at and help you get by struggling times.

Siobhan: And so when you said that's it's something about self-harm almost in like a positive way. What is it you're doing that's different to or how would you describe that difference having a tattoo rather than versus cutting yourself or

Claudia: I think because you have the idea of a tattoo in your head and you know what you want and when you're struggling and it's the rage moment and it's like oh you know just walking into the tattoo shop and getting it done is brings you back like. I don't know, it's like grounds you in a way.

Siobhan: Yeah, and if say you couldn't get into a tattoo parlour… would the fact that you were planning something be.

Claudia: Yeah, because your mind is focused on what can I have and what can I add on to it, you're researching into the meanings or you're drawing it out. It just takes your mind off where you were.

Claudia, like Lilly, told Siobhan about the connection between tattooing and self-harm, both framing it as a way of coping with child removal by the state. Claudia uses the word 'struggling' twice in the extract. Ahmed (2014, p. 169) writes that willfulness 'can be a daily grind'. When Claudia is ground down, 'struggling and it's the rage moment', having the tattoo grounds her and brings her back to herself. It gives her 'something on your body to be able to look at', something related to 'recovery, memories', these tattoos relating to her children. Even planning and researching the design of the tattoo 'just takes your mind off where you were'. Thus, tattooing can be seen as 'part of people's everyday rituals, and planned, future ritual scenarios, linked to hope' (DeNora, 2021, p. 26). Through the tattoos relating to her children marked on her body, Claudia can keep her children present: she has found a way to live.

Like many of the women we interviewed, Angel described how her mental health deteriorated due to the violence and coercive control from her partner over a long period of time. The violence became 'too much'. Angel told us: 'I realised that I wanted to live, I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be a victim anymore'. She fled the family home and entered a refuge. Angel had reached breaking

point. This was heart breaking as she was forced to leave her children behind with their father. A 'willfulness archive does include broken threads; it is full of scenes of breakage' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 154). Whilst in the refuge, Angel had the names of her children tattooed on her wrists. In the interview, Angel had just described the meaning of her first tattoo, a tattoo unrelated to her children; following this, Siobhan asked:

> **Siobhan**: So that [tattoo] was [inked] as your marriage was breaking down. Do you want to tell me about any of the others?
> **Angel**: I think the next tattoos I would've got would've been on my wrist which one says [name of eldest child] I think I had that one done first, and one says [name of youngest child]. By this time, I've left and I'm living in the refuge and unfortunately, I had quite a lot of suicidal thoughts at the time of 'how can I go on without my children?' and that's the reason I had the tattoos done on my wrist, so I'd never be tempted to cut my wrist.

Angel chose to discuss her tattoos in chronological order. Here she is describing her second and third tattoos: the names of her two children on her wrists. Like Lilly and Claudia, Angel told us how she felt suicidal and the way in which tattooing served to keep her alive after her highly traumatic and forced separation from her children due to violence. Specifically, the tattoos of her children's names on her wrists reminded Angel that she is a mother 'so I'd never be tempted to cut my wrist'.
In contrast, the next tattoo Angel had inscribed is a large, colourful butterfly. She explained: 'I chose it to let anybody know that tries again to own me, I'm a beautiful butterfly and that's who I am, and I'll carry on growing'. Through the butterfly tattoo, Angel is refusing to be controlled again. After being subject to coercive control in her marriage, she is reclaiming her identity as 'a beautiful butterfly' and someone who will keep on 'growing' as a woman. This resonates with Ahmed's (2014, p. 169) argument that there can 'be joy in creating worlds out of the broken pieces of our dwelling spaces'. Angel was broken and living in a refuge but was determined to create a new world of joy which is epitomised in the butterfly tattoo. Angel concluded: 'Despite and in spite of everything that others have done to me, that hasn't defined who I am, I've kept a sense of me throughout'. Thus, as Ahmed makes clear, 'to discover a will of one's own is to recover a will that has not been fully eliminated' (p. 140). We can see how tattooing makes it possible for Lilly, Claudia, and Angel to survive the traumatic separation from their children, whilst, at the same time, their tattoos enable them to reclaim control and allow for motherhood to continue.

A note on suicide and self-harm

We have seen that Lilly and Angel's stories are haunted by suicide and that tattooing is one of the strategies they employ to survive in the everyday. We didn't set out to ask questions about suicide or self-harm in our interviews, although we knew that mothers who have a child taken into care have significantly higher rates of suicide attempts and completions (Van Zyl et al., 2022; Wall-Wieler et al., 2017). It was the mothers who made us aware of the connection between tattooing and self-harm and suicide during the interview interactions. We knew that the mothers were haunted, as were we (Morriss, 2018), thus, we were drawn to Amy Chandler and Sarah Wright's (2024) key article making the case for a 'haunted sociology of suicide'. Drawing on the work of Avery Gordon and Lauren Berlant, Chandler and Wright demonstrate how arts-based discussion groups on the topic of suicide provided valuable connections between qualitative accounts and the social and cultural contexts in which they were told. Chandler and Wright's concept of a haunted sociology of suicide 'allows us to consider some of the complex and unseen ways in which power operates on lives and deaths' (p. 1052). Consistent with this, we have seen how power operates in the mothers' lives - and how tattooing enables them to take back some control. For example, Lilly explained: 'I couldn't control anything. I couldn't control the situation that I found myself in but getting the handprints [as tattoos] I could control it'.

In their article, Chandler and Wright contend that sociological work on suicide is relatively limited and has tended to use quantitative approaches. They call for the application of interpretive sociological approaches and arts-based methodologies to understanding suicide. The authors argue that such approaches enable people to communicate their intangible, complex, and unspoken experiences of suicide as a 'living present' (p. 1043). What is notable in connecting our study with Chandler and Wright's work is that tattooing is arts-based. For example, Claudia described tattooing as 'an expression. It's art to me', as did Coco: 'It's a form of expression; the love that I have for my children'. Without any interventions by researchers or practitioners, the women in our study have individually devised their own creative method of survival through tattooing. It is through tattooing that they can communicate their unspeakable pain. Moreover, their tattoos symbolise their stories of survival in their everyday lives. Thus, our article develops the work of Chandler and Wright on the vital significance of art in communicating pain.

In the next section, we examine how the mothers sustain a maternal connection with their child and introduce the concept of 'carrying a dream'.

Sustaining a maternal connection and carrying a dream

The mothers sustain a connection with their child through the materiality and intimacy of the tattoos they carry. Lucy wears her children's names on her wrist and just above her ankle and described how important tattoos can be for mothers: 'They'll get a tattoo of something not to forget them because it's on their body [and] it's in your heart as well'. Tia DeNora's (2021, p. 31) book, *Hope: The dream we carry*, introduces the concept of 'carrying a dream'. For DeNora, to carry is 'to bring something with us, so as to keep it close as we move through time and place' (p. 22). This concept of carrying resonates with mothers' stories of how tattooing allows the maternal connection to persist, despite the children living elsewhere. Claudia explained:

> **Claudia**: I just think it's quite soothing having that tattoo that means something about your children on your body. It's something you'll see every day and something that will remind you of your children… It's comforting and it's like you've still got them there with you in a sense that you know they might not be in sight but there in mind and in your heart.

Carrying her children on her body means Claudia has a permanent and material bond with her children. As Ahmed (2014, p. 10) argues, persistence 'can be a deviation from a trajectory'. In the case of child removal, the 'official' trajectory is separation and not motherhood, but the women resist this designation through their tattooing practices. DeNora suggests carrying can be of '*material objects* that we keep physically close to us when we are on the move, things that, when we are 'in transition' can offer *symbols*, *emblems* and *reminders* of our hopes' (DeNora, 2021, p. 24 italics ours).

It is interesting to note the connection here with DeNora's allusion to material objects and our use of Sophie Woodward's material methods approach. Also aligning with this conceptualisation by DeNora, Maya's tattoos were all used as reminders. She explained that her tattoo of her child's face on her lower back 'reminds me that I'm a mum. And I'm so proud to be her mum'. Maya continued: 'I take her everywhere I go really. She's not physically here but she'll always be with me a part of me… She's the important person of my life'. Maya physically carries her child through the tattoos inked on her body. Here, tattooing enables Maya's maternal connection with her child to persist. Her child is 'within reach' as the tattoos 'have already been gathered' (Ahmed, 2014, p.40).

Dreams of motherhood are carried, through tattooed symbols and emblems relating to their child. Coco explained the meanings of her tattoos relating to her youngest child: 'The heart represents my love for him, and the footprints are from when he was 8 weeks old. His name, stars, and his date of birth'. Siobhan asked:

Siobhan: And so, you were saying that you were saying that if you haven't experienced it [child removal], you know you wouldn't understand.

Coco: No, they don't understand… to have people telling me I'll get over losing my children, I'm never going to get over it. It's always going to be with me, no matter how old they get, they're always going to be with me.

Siobhan: You're going to have the tattoos with you?

Coco: Yes.

Here Coco is refuting that it is possible to 'get over' losing her children. To do so would place motherhood in the past. Instead, she actively ensures her children are 'always' with her in the everyday through carrying her tattoos on her body. Later in the interview, Coco reiterated this maternal connection: 'They are always with me, no matter what they'll always be with me'. Thus, we can see how the tattoos simultaneously marked the pain of separation, and the deep love Coco has for her children. This tension is encapsulated in the words of Maya's tattoo which asserts that '*Love Hurts*'. Maya explained: 'It's another reminder… how painful love is… because love can be a beautiful thing but at the same time it can hurt and leave scars'. The children are absent, yet present through the tattoos. Materiality 'is not bound by temporal and spatial limits, since they are the material with which people build stories of absent presences' (Hurdley, 2006, p. 720). In this way, the tattoos encapsulate both the past and the present. Next, we argue that the tattoos are also future facing, imbued with hope.

Hope, Carrying and Futures

In this section, we focus on the connections between hope, carrying, and futures, again employing the conceptual work of Ahmed and DeNora to analyse our empirical material. We began the article by showing how the mothers view their tattoos as art which allows them to express their deep love for their children through creativity. As Naomi explained to us, 'It's my way of expressing things because my body is a blank canvas… Some people write in a journal. I write on my skin'. Both Ahmed and DeNora contend that hope is creative. For Ahmed (2014), assembling a willfulness archive 'is premised on hope' (p. 21) as the 'objects that surround her are objects of hope' (p. 40). DeNora (2021, p. 4) states that 'hopefulness – being hopeful – is a highly creative way of being'. Likewise, DeNora describes carrying a dream in relation to the 'material objects that we keep physically close to us' (p. 24). The tattoos the mothers create and curate on their bodies are objects of hope. This curation is active. DeNora explains: 'To gather up what we need in order to hope… is never passive.

It is… a form of work' (p. 78). For Ahmed, the intentionally gathered objects in the archive form a dynamic will sphere. This will sphere is dynamic as the objects are permeated with vitality. The tattoos are vital and vibrant. Again, it is notable that throughout her book, Woodward (2020) emphasises the vibrancies of things and materials; this is certainly the case here.

The tattoos curated on the mothers' bodies are saturated with hope. Hope 'keeps something open' (Ahmed, 2015, p. 185). Talking about writing her annual letter to her child through the Letter Exchange scheme (see Beckwith and Morriss, 2022), Lucy told us how difficult it is to write letters to the adoptive parents of her child who was removed from her at birth in the maternity ward. She had never had the opportunity to meet the adopters and expressed how it feels like writing to 'a complete stranger'. Despite this, Lucy is determined to write:

> **Lucy:** I'm like, well, I don't know who I'm writing to but I'm still writing my letters every year. I'm doing it for her sake, not anyone else's …one of these days she'll end up coming back and praising me for writing the letters.

Here Lucy persists in writing her letters, despite the difficulties of knowing what to write to the child she last saw as a baby. Through her determination to write to her child, Lucy is willing a future into being where her child will return and praise her for writing the letters. DeNora writes that hope gives 'space for possibility' (p. 4) in which the present 'becomes a time of possibility as opposed to a time of waiting' (p. 79). Actively curating their collection of tattoos allows the mothers to hope that their children will return to their lives in the future. The word hope appeared in all the interviews. For example, Maya told us: 'One day I hope my daughter will be proud of me that I've made changes'. Coco explained: 'I'm hoping I'll get to be able to show them [the tattoos] at one point and even that they'll want to know me at some point'. Angel remains hopeful even though she does not have contact with her now adult children: 'I'm hopeful. I just know [eldest grandchild] he's going to ask questions'. For the mothers in our study, hope is future facing.

For Claudia, the tattoos themselves epitomise hope. She thinks deeply about the imagery of her tattoos; they are suffused with symbolism. Describing her tattoo of a dreamcatcher, Claudia told us: 'I used to have quite bad flashbacks and nightmares and so I had that [tattoo] done'. She explained the meaning behind her choice:

> **Claudia**: Dreamcatchers are known for catching your bad dreams or your nightmares and discarding of them in the morning… for you to be able to have your happy dreams or your hopes… My dream of getting back to the children.

It is notable that Claudia's tattoo of a dreamcatcher closely aligns with DeNora's concept of 'carrying a dream'. Through the tattoo, the traumatic memories of the enforced separation from her children are captured by the dreamcatcher, affording Claudia the space for her hopes and dream of having her children returned to her care.

Likewise, Claudia described the meaning of her rose tattoo in the following way: 'The rose represents hope and new beginnings so obviously new beginnings starting again, trying to get back with the children'. Again, the tattoo is highly meaningful, signifying new beginnings, and once more, her hope of being reunited with her children. Claudia also has a tattoo of two lilies, each signifying one of her children. She told us: 'Now lilies represent motherhood and rebirth.' Thus, Claudia chooses her tattoos for their symbolic meanings of motherhood, new beginnings, rebirth, hopes and dreams. The tattoos 'are talismans and charms for the future' (DeNora, 2021, p. 26), imbued with hope for a future of reunification.

The mothers actively ink their bodies in the present to keep open the possibility of their child returning. We saw earlier how important it is to Lilly to have her children's handprints on her body. Here she describes the importance of her tattoos:

> **Lilly:** It's important that they [the tattoos] stay because it's my last link to them. People say, well, it will only remember the bad times because it was done at the last contact, that's just going to relive it, but to me it's not symbolising last time I've seen them, it's when they come back. Their hands will be triple length, but I've always got them [the tattoos] to turn round and say well, you know that was the last time I saw you; this is how big your hands were and how times change but my tattoos stay.

Lilly had the handprints tattooed immediately after the last time she saw her children who have been adopted. However, rather than the tattoos representing this traumatic separation, they symbolise Lilly's continuing maternal connection with her children, her 'last link to them'. Furthermore, these tattoos are future facing, carrying a dream of reunification. Lilly plans to show her children the tattoos when they 'come back' and they will be able to compare their 'triple length' hands with these tiny handprints. Thus, willing 'not only points toward a future, but is the feeling of the future coming closer' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 39). The tattoos enable Lilly to imagine a future where her children are physically present. Indeed, she imagines that her now-grown children will place their fleshy hands against the tiny handprints tattooed on her body. This imagined future 'creates a

liminal space between present and future for the person or people who hope' (DeNora, 2021, p. 113). Lilly's tattoos simultaneously embody past, present, and future.

Conclusion

We make an original sociological contribution for several reasons. Most significantly, this is the first study to demonstrate that tattooing is a response to and a way of surviving child removal. Our attentiveness to the mothers' tattoos as objects worthy of research allowed us to resist the ease with which these mothers, their tattoos and their stories might be passed over or ignored. By creating space in which the carrying of their hopes and futures might be seen and heard we aim to disrupt the silencing through shame or forcible silencing through being subject to court-ordered reporting restrictions (Morriss, 2018).

Furthermore, our focus differs from previous sociological work on memorial tattooing practices. The mothers in our study are living with a distinct incomparable form of loss, with their children still alive but absent, living in places unknown to the mothers. Moreover, taking a narrative material methods approach to touring these tattoo collections is an underexplored method. Finally, the innovative use of Ahmed's (2014) work on willfulness and DeNora's (2021) notion of carrying a dream to analyse our empirical material led to new findings about the women's tattooing practices.

Through the artwork on their skin, these mothers creatively express their love for their absent children and retain the motherhood that has been jeopardised through not having their child in their care. By adopting Ahmed's concept of the 'willfulness archive', we highlighted how the mothers' tattoo collections are actively curated to contain carefully chosen images and meanings. Willfulness can be seen as a way of holding on to motherhood and a refusal to give up their maternal identity. Indeed, we argued that the tattoos themselves are saturated with will. In addition, our project illustrates how mothers utilised tattooing as one strategy for coping with highly complex loss and trauma after experiencing separation from their children. Several of the women we interviewed had their child removed in the maternity ward just after giving birth. Their pain is almost unimaginable. We saw how tattooing is one way that makes it possible to endure this traumatic separation. Building on the work of Chandler and Wright (2024) on the importance of art in communicating pain, we showed how the women in our study have each instinctively and individually devised their own creative method of survival through tattooing. The women had tattoos inked in the wake of separation, enabling them to reclaim control their own bodies and motherhood. For mothers in our study, tattooing is both therapeutic and a saviour.

We concluded that tattooing is a notable means in which mothers communicate their unspeakable pain, cope with suicidal thoughts, and live with unbearable loss. Their traumatic separation from their child which happened in their past is to be lived with in the everyday present. We also learned that despite the enforced separation, the women continue to physically carry their child on their bodies in the form of photographs, handprints, footprints, and handwritten notes. Thus, in line with the work of DeNora (2021), tattooing sustains maternal connection through carrying a dream. The tattoos are a vehicle for the women to keep their child close to them as they move through time and space. In this way, the tattoos encapsulate both the past and the present. The innovative use of combining Ahmed and DeNora's theoretical and conceptual work to analyse our empirical material, led to our final finding that the women's tattooing practices are also related to the future. More active than simply marking loss, the use of tattooing allows the women to remain hopeful, opening up possibilities and dreams. Indeed, the tattoos the mothers create, curate and carry on their bodies are imbued with hope about the future. The creation of a willfulness archive keeps hope alive, creating joy from the broken spaces. Intentionally gathered objects in the archive form a dynamic will sphere in which the tattoos are permeated with vitality. They are vibrant, and active. To conclude, for the women in our study, tattooing simultaneously marked the pain of separation, was one strategy that enabled the women to survive in the everyday and are imbued with the hope of future reunification with their child again. Tattooing enables the women to carry their dream of a future where they will show their child their tattoos - physical and visual evidence that they were always present.

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