

**TATTOOED NARRATIVES: A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE**

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# TATTOOED NARRATIVES

## Certificate of Approval

I certify that I have read TATTOOED NARRATIVES: A PSYCHOANALYTIC  
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**Declaration**

**Unless specifically indicated to the contrary, this research report is the result of my own work**

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### Abstract

Literature suggests that people do not only acquire tattoos for explicit motivations such as fashion accessories or rebellion, but also because they express implicit meanings, needs and motives. The aim of this study was to: a) use a psychoanalytically-informed framework to understand the symbolic and representational process of the tattooed narrative, b) explore what core psychodynamic factors appear salient in the subjects' experiences and history. A case study design was adopted, focussing on the narratives of the subjects in relation to their tattoo(s). Narratives were elicited using psychoanalytic research interviewing techniques (PRI). Six subjects were interviewed (4 females, 2 males aged between 23-42) who had existing permanent tattoos. Results of this study indicated that tattoos served an adaptive function and act as transitional objects to facilitate transformative relationships. This was particularly evident in the process of mourning and spirituality. Further, the concreteness and permanency of the tattoos assisted the subjects in reducing anxiety during the period of transition. Results suggested that tattoos may also serve a defensive function when associated with themes of destruction. A general motivation for 'asserting' an insecure part of the self by making it permanent was also identified.

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Jonelle du Plessis

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## **1. Introduction**

Many studies focusing on the phenomena of tattoos, body art and body modifications have compiled ample literature around the explicit motivation for such acts. The literature found on permanent markings and indelible ink dates back to historical, culturally-informed perspectives. This is an area that has been explored and understood by a wide variety of disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, Feminism (Braunberger, 2000; Mifflin, 1997; Butler, 1993), Nursing (Millner, &Eichold, 2001), Criminology (Lozano, Morgan, Murray, & Varghese, 2010; Himelstein, 2010) and Psychology. Gradually, this area has fuelled more interest and curiosity by applying longstanding paradigms and methodologies in the research field (Fisher, 2002; Braunberger, 2000).

### **1.1. History of permanent/indelible ink**

#### **Ancient Greece**

The phenomena of permanent ink on skin has been thoroughly documented for centuries. ‘Tattooing’ however has been difficult to trace back in history. The term ‘tattoo’ only gained popularity during the 18<sup>th</sup> century with James Cook’s journey to Polynesia (Fisher, 2002). Fisher (2002) proposed that the ‘historical narrative’ of permanent ink changed along with changes within societies. Historically, the practice of permanent ink on skin was commonly used as a punitive method to identify criminals. For example, during the Ancient Greek era, it was used as a method for claiming others as property and identifying those that were considered to be deviant individuals. Furthermore, slaves were ‘inked’ to claim them as property (Firmin, Tse, Foster, &Angelini, 2008, Fisher, 2002).

On the other hand, in Ancient Greece, permanent ink was also used for religious reasons. It served as a way to communicate religious affiliations to others. More specifically, tattoos of religious symbols were given mainly to Saints in order to preserve the “Christian

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message and to serve as reminders of God's work for generations" (Firmin et al., 2008, p. 195). Thus, historically, permanent ink was used as a 'communicative tool' to symbolise some significance or role that the individual fulfilled in their society. The ink was used to 'brand' the status one had in society. It thus became a practice regarded to provide both "physical as well as social" belonging (Fisher, 2002, p. 91).

The practice was later adopted by the Romans who used it primarily for power and control over subordinates and slaves. Positioning this imbalance of power in the Foucauldian framework, it became a practice with the intention of "easily controlling their [slaves'] movements by means of the external mark upon these individuals. Their bodies would act as agents of the state emitting a visible sign of their social role" (Fisher, 2002, p. 92). This practice spread throughout the rest of Europe.

### **Indigenous practices, Civil War, Criminality**

With the Western colonisation of Africa and Asia, permanent ink was used as a sign of the 'primitives' becoming colonised (Fisher, 2002). James Cook coined the term '*tatau*', which was later translated into the English word 'tattoo' after travelling through the South Sea Islands. The word '*tatau*' later spread through the rest of Europe, Spain and France (Fisher, 2002).

Later, during the American Civil War, a new 'tattoo culture' was created whereby soldiers would acquire tattoos as a means of symbolizing their unity. It was also used as a way to establish hierarchical structures in the military in order to better identify their own men when at war.

During the late 1800's, the cryptography of criminals' tattoos became of considerable interest to criminologists in France and Italy. It was believed that the images were a symbolic

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representation of criminality and the types of crimes prisoners had committed (Fisher, 2002). These acts appeared to signify a shift in the motivation behind tattooing: it moved from a non-consensual practice of power over others (e.g. slaves and punishment), to a practice of one's own expression and symbolic representation of the self, an act of marking of the self.

Of the research compiled across disciplines, most of this literature places emphasis on the observable reasons and motivations why people have the need to express themselves through body art (Antoszewski, Sitek, Fijalkowska, Kasielska & Kruk-Jeromin, 2010; Johnson, 2006). Some of these motivations include loyalty to a partner, initiation into a gang, expressing one's individuality as a young adult (Antoszewski et al., 2010, Johnson, 2006) and making a fashion statement (Firmin, Tse, Foster, & Angelini, 2008).

Some psychiatric literature seems to suggest that tattoos are linked to deviant behaviour. Others argue that it can be seen as a form of self-harm or self-mutilation (Pitts, 1999), to be present in feeling the pain.

Limited contemporary literature in the field of Psychology suggests that there has been an alteration in the way tattoos (and the motives behind tattoos) have been conceptualized. There is also greater sensitivity to understanding that tattooing takes place within a broader social, cultural and political context. The dominant perception of 'people with tattoos' was formerly associated with negative personality traits (i.e. borderline, deviant personality types) and viewed as pathological. With recent curiosity and development in the field, however limited, research has shifted to exploring more indirect ways of understanding the process that informs the desires and motives behind tattooing (Johnson, 2006). Thus, this current study, informed by limited contemporary literature, attempts to explore possible symbolic meanings behind tattoos (and the act of tattooing) from a psychoanalytic perspective.



## **2. Review of literature**

### **2.1. Contemporary motivations/reasons for body art**

Despite historical practices involving indelible ink, more contemporary literature focuses on exploring motivations or intentions behind getting tattooed. During the 1980's there was an increase in this practice (Sweetman, 1999). It was once considered a common practice among sailors, criminals, gangs, counter-culture groups, and social outcasts (Irwin, 2001). But a shift occurred from tattoos being viewed as anti-fashion, anti-establishment, to becoming relatively mainstream and fashionable. DeMello(2000) rightly argued that tattoos have shifted “from being a symbol of the outcast to that of the rock star, model, and postmodern youth” (p. 49).

To date, contemporary research focuses mainly on understanding the concrete and conscious reasons for obtaining tattoos (Karacaoglan, 2011). For example, a study conducted by Antoszewski et al. (2010) in Poland, examined the demographics of individuals (n = 492) who had tattoos in their sample population. The results indicated that tattoos were more popular among males and the age of obtaining a first tattoo was an average of 19 years. Furthermore, analysis of the data based on the individual's educational level revealed that the participants did fairly well (medium level) in their schoolwork but most participants had an incomplete secondary school education level. Further questions around risky behaviours were explored and results indicated that nearly half of the participants in the research sample smoked. More participants abused alcohol than not.

In terms of conscious motivations, having a tattoo seemed to be perceived as being sexually attractive to others and facilitated positive social feedback after body ornamentation.

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Antoszewski's and colleagues' data analysis revealed that the most common motivation was about 'marking individuality', followed by an attempt to enhance their self-image.

A similar study was conducted by Roberts and Ryan (2002), consisting of a large sample size (n = 4595). The rationale for this study was informed by literature that placed emphasis on the social environment of the participant and its correlation with risky behaviours. More specifically, the literature emphasised that participants who had grown up in broken families and of low socio-economic status were more likely to have tattoos (Antoszewski et al., 2010). However, results did not show a strong correlation with the abovementioned hypothesis. Furthermore, literature has not been able to show a clear correlation between troublesome childhood experiences and the desire for getting a tattoo. This appears to be backed up by research that suggests that there may be multiple motivations behind tattooing (Antoszewski et al., 2010).

Related studies exploring contemporary conscious motivations for being tattooed indicate overlapping, but diverse, reasons. The primary motivations seem to range from a way of marking individuality, to reasons linked to fashion and cultural membership (Antoszewski et al., 2010).

### **Tattoos as freedom from constraints**

A study conducted by Irwin (2001) examined various reasons for the growing popularity of tattoos. Irwin argued that for young adults, tattoos were viewed as a "deviant attraction" (Irwin, 2001, p. 55), highlighting the rebellious nature of the act. Further, this attraction would suggest more peer interaction (for example establishing gangs), defying rules and emphasising masculine traits. These practices were termed 'negative deviances' (p. 55) in the study due to the act of tattooing being characterised by defiant social rules and norms.

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The same study also suggested that tattoos signified freedom and autonomy (Irwin, 2001). According to Irwin (2001), women use tattoos to symbolise strength and assertiveness rather than vulnerability and fragility. It was also suggested by Irwin (2001) that both men and women often use tattooing to symbolise life transitions (for example going to university, having children, changes in intimate relationships) that were meaningful to the subjects. These symbolic transitions were termed 'positive deviant practices' (p. 56) as they were still considered to obey dominant social norms.

A follow up study, conducted by Irwin (2003), pointed out that scholars were using both negative and positive deviance frameworks to understand tattoo practices. Further, she argued that individuals could use both positive and negative deviant practices as a means to "maintain a privileged status on the fringe of society" (p.27). She continues "...elite collectors and tattooists represent an example of simultaneous positive and negative deviants because they combine a conflicting set of norms and values and inspire a variety of responses from others" (Irwin, 2003, p. 27/28). Some tattooees, Irwin (2003) observed, often tattoo for fun and will primarily get a small tattoo that is easily covered up. This group of tattooees run the smallest risk as they still maintain a level of adaptability in society. At the other end of the extreme, however, tattooees who ink most of their bodies, to some degree violate what is socially acceptable: "they serve as the trend setters within the world of professional tattooing" (Irwin, 2003, p. 30). Tattooees who typically strive to ink their whole body only are acknowledged and admired by others similar to them in their 'profession.'

### **Tattoos: fashion accessory, or deeper meaning**

Sweetman (1999) argued that the most dominant motivation for body modifications is attributable to fashion. From this point of view, tattoos, previously regarded as a taboo practice are downplayed. According to Sweetman (1999), body modifications have created an

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ever-growing consumer-culture where what is fashionable evidently becomes popularised. However, given that fashion is never static, Sweetman also questioned whether there was more to body modifications. The permanence of tattoos certainly raises questions about it simply being about a fleeting fashion trend. In the end he posits an argument for both sides of the coin: That is, while body modifications may be permanent fashion accessories, they may also express a deeper personal meaning. Sweetman (1999) concluded that fashion statements were more likely to be made by participants who were less tattooed. According to Sweetman (1999), in these cases, “there is indeed an extent to which their involvement can be described as a little more than a fashionable trend” (p. 52). However, he argued that participants who were more tattooed had a different motivation. For these participants, the permanence of their tattoos was seen as a fundamental element to their motivation related to expressing fragments or parts of themselves.

It is often claimed that the motivation for body modification is linked to life transitions (Lemma, 2010; Irwin, 2001). What these studies however fail to explain is the function of unconscious desires, fantasies and object-relations that may underpin the above explicit motivations. For this reason, these studies tend to provide a superficial understanding of motivation while neglecting the underlying reasons and unconscious processes linked to tattooing (Lemma, 2010).

A study conducted by Johnson (2006) set out to understand the underlying meanings and processes behind obtaining tattoos. The study aimed to understand “feeling, emotion and human awareness of expression” (Johnson, 2006, p. 45) and suggests that tattooing is an expression of symbolic art on the skin. Johnson uses Paul Willis’s (1990) framework, in constructing the argument that symbolic creativity is part of the human condition. In his words, humans are expressive beings, filled with “signs and symbols to establish identity, presence and meaning” (Johnson, 2006, p. 48). Similarly, Freud viewed the skin as an agent

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to the processes experienced in the mind (Lafrance, 2009). This framework of understanding promises a more in-depth conceptualisation of tattooing as an expression of the self and a shift away from exploring tattoos as an expression of stereotypical 'brands' (Johnson, 2006).

What becomes evident when using this framework of understanding is that the body, more specifically the skin, may be used as a canvas to express inner states of the self. Instead of thinking about the body (skin) and mind as two separate entities (body-mind dichotomy), the dynamic interaction between the two creates a much more powerful understanding of emotional expression, the internal world of the subject, and unconscious mental states. Rosenblatt (1997) emphasises the function of a tattoo as something that creates awareness of "the latent magic within them... it can be a way to get in touch with the private, intuitive-self" (Johnson, 2006, p. 50) and find a way to express the multi-layered meaning structures deemed unacceptable to society.

Alcina (2009) conducted a qualitative study around the function of tattoos and the role of identity. She hypothesised that tattoos served as anchors for personal narratives (Alcina, 2009). Although her thesis was primarily informed by sociological theories, her findings yielded significant results in understanding the meaning and common themes implicit in tattooed narratives. In her results, she suggested that there were three main themes attached to tattoo narratives: remembrance, anchors for the self and metaphorical representations. Firstly, the theme of remembrance was informed by 'notes to self,' where these tattoos served as reminders of how the individual should live their life (Alcina, 2009). She suggested that these tattoos served as reminders to implement a certain philosophy in life situations. Implicit in this, it would seem that the individual had experienced events in their life that they now chose to live differently. Here, the individual may perceive the 'past self' in relation to the aspiring 'present self'; what Capps (1996) viewed as the "tension of selves across time" (cited in Alcina, 2009, p. 66). Further, her results suggested that tattoos served as a method

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for remembering important people in the participant's lives. These were usually individuals who played a very important role in the life of the participant. It served as a remembrance and a honorary symbolic representation of the significant other. Alcina's (2009) results suggested that tattoos were used as indelible markers for geographic places as well as significant points in one's life (Alcina, 2009). These were primarily informed by the attainment of developmental milestones, the survival of natural disasters as well as personal achievements.

Her second theme suggested that tattoos served as an anchor for the self. This theme highlighted the duality and multiple selves that are characterised through the journey of life-events. Her results suggested that tattoos demonstrated parts of the self as constructed by the participant's experiences. Lastly, Alcina (2009) suggested that tattoos were metaphorical representations of life-experiences. According to Alcina (2009), these metaphorical representations served as internal conversations with the self. Here, tattoos were characterised by the internal dialogue of the participants with multiple parts of the self.

### **2.2. Making the unconscious, conscious through skin**

Before a detailed theoretical framework is provided, it is essential to supply an understanding of the importance of the unconscious and its relation to the external world and consciousness. The cornerstone of psychoanalysis is the function of the unconscious and its dynamic relationship with conscious states. The unconscious is generally understood as a part of the mind which safe-keeps unknown or difficult secrets (Frosh, 2002). It is the part of the mind which is not regarded as rational. For Freud, there exists an association between the unconscious and repressed memories. He argued that "the repressed is the prototype of the unconscious" (Freud, 1923, p. 353). Part of the unconscious comprises memories that exist out of awareness that seek expression as a form of compromise. In Freudian psychoanalysis,

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the difference between unconsciousness and consciousness exists because some memories have been repressed (Frosh, 2002).

Since Freud's explanation of the unconscious, post-Freudian schools of thought have radically changed some of his original ideas. For Object Relations theorists, the unconscious exists within a relational framework (Frosh, 2002). For Object Relations theorists, unconscious processes are built on the foundation of the baby's relationship with early attachment figures. Although some of these theorists still place emphasis on drives as instinctual forces, they posit that these drives are informed by the relational phantasies of early childhood experiences (Klein, Heimann & Money-Kyrle, 1971; Frosh, 2002). For many of these theorists the "unconscious does not even exist until experiences of desire and frustration occur, requiring a split in the mind to enable such trauma to be contained" (Frosh, 2002, p. 18). What follows is an exploration of some key concepts of psychoanalysis with particular emphasis placed on the theoretical understanding of Object Relations.

### **2.3. Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis**

Piaget argued that an infant begins to understand their world (the body and self) through symbols and representations that are cognitively processed. This is significant when working from a Psychoanalytic framework where desires and unconscious fantasies yearn for manifestation through symbolic communications, actions and bodily expression. The theoretical framework was informed by work on infant development, their understanding of the world through 'the body self' and the development of symbolic representations in their inner world. The discussion of the theoretical framework is divided into two sections aiming to a) address the importance of attachment with early caregivers, initially through the 'body ego' and b) how this interaction between the infant and caregiver plays a role in containment of the self. These two sections then provide the foundation of Object-Relations Theory and

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how the abovementioned concepts are applied to understand the significance of tattooed narratives and their representational meaning linked to internal states.

Alessandra Lemma, in her book titled *Under the skin: a psychoanalytic study of body modification* (2010), points out that Freud saw the body as “the starting point of mental functioning” (Lemma, 2010, p. 92). Freud emphasised ego states from the first day of birth, highlighting that the ego is inextricably linked to bodily sensations – hence the term ‘bodily ego.’ Further, Winnicott (1960) understood the skin as central to establishing an integrated self within the context of a nurturing infant-parent relationship (Lafrance, 2009). Three major psychoanalytic contributions, attachment, models of containment and object-relations, appear important in providing a more in-depth understanding of the topic.

### **Attachment and the mother**

Bowlby (1958), Ainsworth (1969) and Winnicott (1960), are some of the main psychoanalysts who have discussed attachment relationships as central to understanding the formation of the self and subsequent patterns of relating. The establishment of relations with other objects in the world follows three phases: “(1) an undifferentiated or objectless stage, (2) a transitional stage, and (3) a stage of object relations” (Ainsworth, 1969, p. 974).

Winnicott (1960) emphasised that the primary role of a caregiver should be to provide a ‘holding environment’ for the infant (Dales & Jerry, 2008). Here, the ‘good-enough mother’ is able to attune to the needs and anxieties of the infant, mirroring and adapting to the needs of the infant. In doing this, the infant is able to engage with the mother through regulation, disruption and repair, while the caregiver responds to (metabolises) the distress of the infant. By the caregiver being able to hold the distress, the infant’s anxiety or affective state is regulated. Thus, in the first few months of a baby’s life, they are dependent on the



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attunement and 'holding' of the 'good-enough' caregiver. Attunement and holding occur via the body through mirroring vocalizations, touch, and eye contact.

Both Ainsworth (1969) and Winnicott (1960) postulated that babies are born with somatic (libidinal) drives that require a degree of control and regulation from the caregiver. When the caregiver is able to attend to these bodily states, the baby is able to integrate fragmented psychic/libidinal states into the body (Lemma, 2010). Essentially, the first contact with caregivers is that of body contact. The baby experiences and learns through its body. Thus, reliance on how the body was experienced as a baby becomes fundamental in future interactions with others.

The very essence of attachment with the caregiver has consequences for the development of the body ego and the formation of self and object states. In other words, attachment relationships prescribe significant meaning to the body and bodily states. Not only is this crucial for early infant-caregiver attachment, it also extends to relationships beyond the care-giving phase. The way the body is experienced (be it related to through envy, love, hatred or possessiveness) is internalized, setting up an internal relational pattern. Lemma (2010) posits that if the attachment relationship is problematic, the baby begins to internalise a sense of essentially being stuck in a body where they feel "neglected, ashamed or intruded upon" (Lemma, 2010, p. 6). These experiences set up particular intrapsychic conflicts characterised by confusion about a 'depersonalized body', a sense of not belonging in one's own body (feeling uncomfortable in one's own skin).

The above is crucial in understanding the development of the 'body self'. What essentially happens during the period of mirroring is the establishment of relating to, and experiencing, an object. Further, the baby, through an unconscious process of internalisation, establishes certain foundations for what would constitute their internal world and the way

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they relate to objects (other persons or their own body). For the baby then, the way the mother responds (be it with love, hatred, possessiveness or envy) will become the way the baby experiences their reality (Lemma, 2010).

In summary, Lemma argues that “the self’s earliest experience of itself will therefore be partly dependent on the quality of the libidinal cathexis of the body by those closest to the baby. The quality of the mother’s desire, and her capacity to enjoy the baby’s body, shapes the subjective experience of being-in-a-body and hence, of the self’s desirability” (Lemma, 2010, p. 56). Lemma further posits that the interpersonal relationship between the caregiver and baby is crucial for the eventual establishment and realisation of the separateness and ‘otherness’ of bodies.

### **The container and contained**

#### **Bion**

As discussed in the above section on attachment, the role of the caregiver is critical for internalising contained and regulated emotions. This is however somewhat different from the process Winnicott described as a ‘holding environment’. The mother (caregiver) of an infant is at first experienced as a container that holds her thoughts and feelings together with the emotions of the infant. Here, the anxiety of the infant is projected onto the caregiver which should then optimally be contained and regulated. Through containment and regulation, the uncontainable feelings are modified. As the infant gets older, they develop the capacity to internalise the ability to self-soothe and would thus experience thoughts and feelings separate from the caregiver. The individual is then able to contain and regulate their own feelings and emotional states (Bion, 1962).

However, what Bion did not discuss or address was the role of the body in the process of containment. His model focused mainly on the psychic aspects of containment.

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### Pollak

Pollak (2008) introduced a 'body container model.' Pollak's model aimed to reintroduce the concreteness and function of the body into psychoanalytic discourse. This model integrated Freud's model of the 'body ego' with Bion's theoretical model of containment. Consequently, Pollak(2008) argued that this framework "offers new insights into the psycho-physical organization in primitivemental states and may contribute to the understanding of the complementarystructural relation between embodied and represented human experience" (p. 487). Freud posited that the bodily ego is critical for eventual symbolic representations (Pollak, 2008). Therefore, the psyche emerged as a result of the body being in the world. Pollak uses the assumptions of Bion's model to concretise the function of the body. According to Bion, there are three assumptions linked to the mind as a container. Firstly, this concept draws on multidimensional levels. Secondly, it creates boundaries between the internal and external processes. Further, the body serves as a functional opening, allowing for mental representations in the mind. Lastly, this meta-physical space has the potential to internalise into the self, as well as externalise into the world (Pollak, 2008). The association that Pollak (2008) established was similar to what Freud argued: The existence of a body ego requires the existence of a body container and not merely a meta-psychological abstraction of mental space. Bion(1962) assumed an "analogous relation between the symmetryof the two sides of a body and the symmetry in object relations, and saw in both a primal foundation for the later development of conceptions" (Pollak, 2008, p. 113).The function of this body-container then is "a transcendental preconception that permanentlyexists within the tense duality of oneness and two-ness, between being anever-present formal separate actuality, and an endless self-creating realitywithin the context of object-relations" (Pollak, 2008, p. 489).

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Bion's model provides an understanding of how early attachment interactions with the caregiver becomes a prerequisite where the infant learns to contain their own feelings and emotions in a 'mental space'. Pollak's model however highlights the use of the body as a container that fills a physical space in the world and that is used as a means of communicating intra-psychic processes to the world. Pollak's model highlights the important use of the body that acts as a container for different states. Where the body acts as a container, it also establishes separateness between the inner world and reality. This has implications for understanding the use of the body (and skin) in the current study. The body then, is seen as the vehicle of communication between the intra-psychic world and external reality. The body is used to make sense of and communicate between these two realities.

### **Object-Relations Theory**

Thus far, an understanding of the body and attachment has been provided to highlight the importance of early caregiver interactions. Object-Relations theorists use early caregiver interactions to understand the dynamic pattern of later interpersonal interactions. That is because these early relationships with the caregiver are represented in the inner world together with other phantasies. In this section, the core theoretical framework is outlined and discussed.

As outlined above, what makes object relations theory so valuable is its emphasis on internalised relationships. This theory essentially postulates that humans are innately object seeking and highlights the intricate complexity "between the self-formation, the environment and the emotional provisions provided by the significant other person" (Elliot, 2002, p. 69). Unlike Freudian psychoanalysis, that views the individual as constructed by drives and unconscious desires, Object Relations Theory argues that these are not purely internal states, but exist in relation to the dynamics of interacting with others (Elliot, 2002).

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### Melanie Klein

Klein is regarded as a post-Freudian and a pioneer of Object-Relations Theory. She challenged the notions of Freud's instinctual drives and human destructiveness (Elliot, 2002). For Klein, human destructiveness evident in grief, anger and envy were considered "central to the achievement of mature and creative living" (Elliot, 2002, p. 80). Klein worked as a child psychoanalyst for many years. In her observations of children, she challenged Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex. Klein argued that there are feelings of anxiety and psychic conflict that existed prior to the Oedipus complex (Elliot, 2002). These anxieties were regarded as a normal part of infant psychological development, gradually shifting from paranoid anxiety (paranoid-schizoid position) to depressive anxiety (depressive position) (Elliot, 2002). Therefore, this meant that "anxiety over destructive wishes flow[ed] from the earliest relationship with the mother, and that babies routinely project anxiety outwards, attacking in fantasy the mother, or parts of her body" (Elliot, 2002, p. 81). Klein emphasised the importance of unconscious phantasies that the infant would project onto the caregiver. Consequentially, if the communicated anxiety of the infant could be tolerated by the caregiver, then this assisted in "emotional growth and symbol formation in the child's psychic structure" (Elliot, 2002, p. 82). If, however, the caregiver was unable to tolerate these anxieties, emotional development was limited or halted.

Whereas Freud thought phantasies were the outcome of unacceptable frustration in the real world, Klein argued "everything that happens, arises from a bed of phantasy, the production of unconscious ideas is simply what the mind does, beginning at the start of life as mental representations of the biological life and death drives" (Frosh, 2002, p. 51). Phantasy is thus central in Klein's understanding and "all reality is read through the lens of phantasy" (Frosh, 2002, p. 53).

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According to Lemma (2010) there exists three kinds of phantasies in adulthood: self-made phantasy, perfect match phantasy and reclaiming phantasy. These types of phantasies are used as methods to maintain internal equilibrium. Lemma (2010) argues that the *reclaiming phantasy* is a function of the unconscious to “rescue the self from an alien presence felt to now reside in the body” (Lemma, 2010, p. 5). The *perfect match phantasy* is an unconscious desire to create an idealised self. According to Lemma (2010), this idealisation is primarily informed by the need to be loved and desired by others. Lastly, the *self-made phantasy* is characterised by envy. It typically results in an attack on other objects. This phantasy is typically informed by the need for independence and the belief that the self is created independently (Lemma, 2010).

### *Projection and Projective Identification*

The caregiver, through a process of projective identification, receives and modifies projectionsthereby making them more tolerable for the baby. Here, the caregiver (external object) is able to respond to and tolerate the destructive feelings of the baby. It is in the modification and containment of these projected states that the baby is able to successfully integrate good and bad parts of the self through introjection (Frosh, 2002). Klein argued that this was part of the Paranoid Schizoid Position where “identification by projection implies a combination of splitting off parts of the self and projecting them onto another person” (Klein et al., 1971, p. 311). Thus, projection identification aims to serve two functions. Either, “it involves placing parts of the self into an external object to deal with anxiety, or so as to preserve something good and loving, to place it elsewhere for safekeeping” (Frosh, 2002, p. 37).

These ‘anxiety positions’, as outlined by Klein, are due to unintegrated ego-states in infancy. Klein argues that due to these destructive feelings, the infant becomes anxious

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because they fear retaliation on the part of a caregiver. As a result, these bad parts (destructive feelings) are felt to be intolerable. The infant splits the caregiver (or part of object) into good and bad to reduce anxiety (Elliot, 2002). This enables the infant to keep the idealised object separate or apart from the destructive or persecutory object (Elliot, 2002). Therefore, “in projection, the infant projects both positive and negative feelings outwards; in introjection, the infant takes into itself what it imaginatively perceives of others and the outside world” (Elliot, 2002, p. 84). Essentially, what may happen in later life then, is dependent on the experiences of the caregiver. Waska (2002) argues that some individuals deal with paranoid-schizoid states in adulthood, “acting out their anxieties of primitive loss, sadistic guilt and persecution” (Waska, 2002, p. 373). Here, the individual experiences the object as abandoning and persecutory and this generates “endless despair, mistrust, emptiness and persecution” (Waska, 2002, p. 373). Waska argues that the individual will experience love as hatred, turn “security into abandonment, and knowledge into chaos and confusion” (Waska, 2002, p. 374). Waska argues that these phantasies that may be evident in infancy, may also be expressed in adulthood. Here, the individual may assume the paranoid-schizoid position due to fear of losing the object in their inner world and so may seek ways to keep (preserve) the object.

Similarly, Lemma (2010) argues that through this unconscious process of splitting, some people in later life have the need to project themselves into others as an ideal self. This projected self serves the function of making the self appear perfect in relation to the other. Similarly, Freud, in *On Narcissism (1914)*, argued that “what man projects before him as ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood. The vicissitudes of identification are such that the fate of the idealised other can be uncertain depending on the self’s capacity to grant the other its separateness and autonomy” (as cited in Lemma, 2010, p. 29/30). Thus, Lemma argues that there may occur a level of narcissistic fragility that was

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internalised into the body self. As a result, there is a constant need for desirability due to previously being deprived of it. In relation to this argument, Lemma (2010) posits that:

The more we are deprived of the experience of being ideal for the other at least some of the time, and most crucially, if this deprivation occurs in the early months, the more difficult it is to live in an ordinary body. Idealisation then becomes more urgent, more rigid and uncompromising... which is fuelled by the perfect match phantasy, that is, that through beautifying the surface of the body, the self and the object will be tied together in a mutually admiring gaze” (Lemma, 2010, p. 30).

Lemma thus argues that unresolved narcissism (narcissistic fragility), the need for love and approval from a significant early object is in later life represented through methods of beautifying the body or skin. Beautifying the skin or body may become a means of reducing anxiety and the fear of abandonment.

### **2.4. Understanding attachment, containment, object-relations and tattoos**

#### **Value of aesthetic visualisation in psychoanalysis**

Segal (cited in Klein et al., 1971) described the significance of aesthetics from a psychoanalytic perspective. As with the theoretical framework discussed above, she posits that the discovery of unconscious processes, phantasy and symbolism has assisted in understanding and interpreting works of art psychoanalytically. Phantasy may be considered as key in understanding much of the unconscious desires that are represented on the body. According to Lemma (2010), the body is the enabler of phantasy as well as the ‘embodier’ of phantasy. If the body provides a space for representation, then it may also be viewed as a space where these phantasies can be captured and enacted (Lemma, 2010).

Segal argues that aesthetic images are informed by and can be understood through the depressive position. As already mentioned, the depressive position is assumed when the infant realises that the caregivers are separate from him or herself. According to Segal, Proust describes the need for, and function of art. According to Proust, “an artist



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is compelled to create by his need to recover his lost past” (Klein et al., 1971, p. 388). Segal’s review of Proust’s artwork is psychoanalytically interpreted as the past being re-captured. In his art, “all his lost, destroyed or loved objects are brought back to life” (Segal, as cited in Klein, 1971, p. 389). Proust re-captures objects of his world that had ‘passed away’ through his art. He integrates this process of mourning with visual imagery to re-create a permanence of these significant objects in his life. Melanie Klein illustrates the same process when she argues, in her book “*Mourning and its relation to Manic-Depressive States*” (1940), that “mourning in grown-up life is a re-living of the early depressive anxieties. Not only is the present object in the external world felt to be lost, but also the early objects in the internal world” (Klein et al., 1971, p. 390).

Essentially what then arises is the need to re-create the lost world. Segal points out that:

All creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair – it is then that we must re-create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life (as cited in Klein et al., 1971, p. 390).

Segal captures the essence of objects of loss and how they are able to remain ‘alive’ in the phantasy world. She argues that this could be done through the use of art and aesthetic visualisation. Segal emphasises that art is used as an attempt to re-create and represent the significant object. A similar argument may then be adopted for the use and meaning of tattoos.

Based on the main theoretical framework and Segal’s work on aesthetic visualisation, tattoos could then be viewed as projected states of the individual’s internal world. Similar to Segal’s interpretation, Lemma (2010) argues that the body is perceived as an existing recollection of experiences of our past. She specifically argues that the body is functional in tracing “infantile modes...in how we relate to our body as the site for loving exchanges or for

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the expression of hatred, in how the body may be experienced as a source of pleasure or of anxiety” (Lemma, 2010, p. 56).

Tattoos may also serve as a representation of a dialectical relationship. This means, that tattoos are viewed as representations of “desires for closeness and distance, commonality and difference, identification and individuation” (Karacaoglan, 2011, p. 5). What can be inferred is that tattoos provide a “standstill of unconscious conflicts” (Karacaoglan, 2011, p. 5) in order to attain a sense of stability. Furthermore, Lemma (2010) argues that body modifications (tattoos) may be an unconscious attempt to reclaim the body. By reclaiming the body as one’s own, feelings of alienation or otherness disperse. This reclamation (what Lemma termed the reclaiming phantasy) further facilitates the establishment of body boundaries, of separateness and mastery.

### **Tattoos as transitional objects**

Ogden (1985) defines a transitional object as:

A symbol for separateness in unity, unity in separateness. The transitional object is at the same time the infant (the omnipotently created extension of himself) and not the infant (an object he has discovered that is outside of his omnipotent control). The appearance of a relationship with a transitional object is not simply a milestone in the process of separation–individuation. The relationship with the transitional object is as significantly a reflection of the development of the capacity to maintain a psychological dialectical process (Ogden, 1985, p. 132).

Winnicott’s model (1953) of early childhood relations makes use of the ‘transitional object’ concept. Winnicott argues that transitional objects are ‘compensatory’ in that they reduce anxiety in the “absence of the mother” (Woodward & Ellison, 2010, p. 47). Here, objects are simultaneously used to “form and preserve a sense of self as well as relationships with others” (Woodward & Ellison, 2010, p. 47).

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Similarly, Baker (2001) conceptualises the process of loss and mourning by explaining the function of a transitional object to reduce anxiety. Contrary to how Freud viewed mourning as the “detachment of libidinal ties” (p. 55), Baker argued that the transitional object assists in a transformed dialectical relationship with the object of loss, creating a “sustaining internal presence, which operates as an ongoing component in the individual’s internal world” (Baker, 2001, p. 55). Baker provides the argument (as supported by Bowlby’s attachment theory) that a transitional object is sought following the death of a significant other (Baker, 2001). He argued that this is in fact an adaptive strategy to deal with the loss of the other. It could be argued that loss stimulates Paranoid-Schizoid needs for fusion but this is instead followed by the use of transitional experience, where the object is perceived as both ‘me/not me’ in order for the continuation of a dialectical relationship. The individual then seeks an ongoing relationship with their love objects (Baker, 2001).

Karacaoglan (2011) suggests that separation-individuation conflicts, as proposed by Winnicott, are common in individuals who have tattoos. Instead of assuming a successful transitional object position, the “internal object becomes unreliable and provides no security” (Karacaoglan, 2011, p. 94). Therefore, the collapse or failed integration of a transitional object in earlier life may lead to a desire for permanent tattooing. Here, the permanence of the ink under the skin is seen as a compensatory strategy. It is the threat to the self and the experience of anxiety that creates the need for a permanent symbolic representation of the self. For this reason, Karacaoglan (2011) points out that the act of tattooing occurs in two phases. The first phase begins with a vague desire to be tattooed. He suggests that these desires are due to feelings of unease and anxiety. The second phase occurs when the individual conceptualizes the design of the tattoo. After the individual has been tattooed, a

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period of relaxation sets in. The individual then feels more calm and secure in his or her own skin. When examining the act of tattooing as a two-phase model, the first phase may be related to the paranoid position that Klein discusses. This paranoid position may also be regarded as a regressed position (early conflicts - for example the termination of a relationship or developing symbiotic structures in relationships that transgress boundaries with the object) that the individual is faced with, followed by the adoption of a depressive position (Karacaoglan, 2011).

It could therefore be argued that tattoos serve a similar transitional process as outlined by Baker (2001). In understanding mourning and the threat of object loss, it may be suggested that tattoos reduce this anxiety and enable an ongoing internal relationship with the object. Alternatively, tattoos may serve as a compensatory strategy where early transitional (constant) objects have failed and more permanent ones are sought. It could also be suggested that tattoos replace transitional objects in an attempt to become symbols of more permanent transitional objects.

### **Tattoos creating a second skin of containment**

Up until now, this discussion has mainly focused on the symbolic representation of the unconscious and internal worlds. It could be considered important to also give some attention to the function of blood and pain as part of tattoo practices. Bick (1968), a follower of the Kleinian school of thought, provided the most valuable psychoanalytic understanding of the skin and containment. It has been mentioned that tattoos may serve the function of establishing body boundaries and 'otherness'. Tattoos may also create, what Esther Bick (1968) termed, a 'second skin'. For Bick the function of the skin was three fold. She argued that the skin could be viewed as serving "a primal skin function, defensive second skin phenomena and providing adhesive identity" (Willoughby, 2001, p. 179). The primal skin

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function was dependent on early experiences of containment with the caregiver (Willoughby, 2001). Bick (1968), for example argued that the mother's ability to act as a container was essential in assisting the child to internalise containment. She however posited that if the mother had failed at practicing containment, the baby would search for other forms of containment. Therefore, any form of recognition through smell or touch could be internalised as an object "that holds parts of the personality together" (as cited in Lemma, 2010, p. 161). This 'second skin' thus acts as a primitive defence mechanism that attempts to hold together the self during anxiety provoking situations. Bick argues that the second skin is a "faulty formation" due to its return to the body serving a defensive capacity (Willoughby, 2001).

Following the above assumptions, it may be the case that the blood and pain evident in tattoo practices may also serve as reminders that the body has boundaries and can thus be contained.

Essentially the skin may be seen to serve as a container of inner unconscious conflicts. It has been suggested that tattoos are normally acquired during or after difficult periods in life. It may be the case that the tattoo serves as a primary body container of this crisis, highlighted by a frantic search for an object of containment. Bick's writings point to the importance of the skin as a shell, containing and holding together primitive experiences (Willoughby, 2001).

The above idea is evident in a case discussed by Kwintner (2011). She describes one of her patients as being an excessive drinker who was covered in tattoos. The patient added another rose tattoo every year after her mother's passing. The patient had difficulty talking about the death of her mother as she said that it would be unbearable for others (the therapist) to hear her talk about it. Kwintner (2011) points out that the excessive drinking aided in the

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suppression of these painful memories. The tattoos, on the other hand, served a different purpose.

It was not an erasure; rather it was an inscribing. What was its function? Sue was aware that the painful sensations she felt during the tattooing quieted her mind. In fact, she described the painful process, rather than the design and its symbolism, as the main reason for having the tattoo, so that she was always looking forward to the next one. For Sue, tattooing seemed to me to be...“a mode of communication, a primitive form of object relations, and a pathway for psychological change” (Ogden, 1983, p. 21). But instead of seeking out another person, she used the surface of her body as a container for her mind (Kwintner, 2011, p. 258).

Lemma argues that in her experience as a psychoanalyst, the tattoo may also serve as a cry for help. It may be a means to communicate that all is not well and that the individual has difficulty dealing with experiences in their life. She argues that “the tattoo can be a visible mark of personal distress – made visible presumably because there exists in the mind an object who needs to look and see the damage” (Lemma, 2010, p. 164).

### **2.5. The skin as an enabler of narrative**

Narratives are valuable in the light of contextualising the stories told by people. It connects parts of stories that are significant to the individual and his or her life (Hall & Powell, 2011). These narratives are constructed meaningfully and intentionally. Bruner (2001) argues that narratives are representative of the “pulling together of parts of a self that is then known within an environment that is subjectively experienced. From this viewpoint, stories can be considered as carrying themes or “selves” that make up a larger, overarching self-narrative” (as cited in Hall & Powell, 2011, p. 2).

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### **The plot of narratives**

In Peter Brooks' book, *Reading for the Plot* (1984) he argued that our lives are narratives. The stories told are informed by experience. Alternatively, he suggests, that the stories told may be informed by dreams and imagination (Brooks, 1984). Brooks suggest that in every narrative there is a predominant plot present, an intention of the story with an implicit meaning.

### **The plot beyond the pleasure principle**

Freud's emphasis on drives of life and death captured the true essence of the dynamics in the way narratives are told (Brooks, 1984). In Freud's essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he provided the reader with "a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end, and how each individual life in its own manner repeats the master plot and confronts the question of whether closure of an individual life is contingent or necessary" (Brooks, 1984, p. 96/97). Essentially, how Brooks (1984) makes sense of this essay written by Freud, is that it fundamentally captures the 'narratability of life'.

The outline of this section which has drawn on Brook's (1984) book has been discussed with the intention of creating an awareness of the psychoanalytic function that narratives may serve. Further, it is included with the intention that narratives serve as implicit functions of "investments of desire and the effort to bind and master intensive levels of energy" (Brooks, 1984, p. 143). According to Brooks, these levels of energy orientates narratives to be thematic. This thematic orientation gives emergence to underlying desires, drives and their vicissitudes (Brooks, 1984).

### **Embodiment of narratives**

Bodies over the centuries have served various functions. We cannot exist without our bodies. There are times when we are in our bodies and feel part of our bodies, whilst at other

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times may feel alienated from them. In psychoanalysis, the body is viewed as belonging to ourselves, but simultaneously belonging to others. Thus, the body in psychoanalysis is characterised as an “object of emotions” encompassing both love and disgust (Brooks, 1993). According to Brooks (1993) the body may function as a space that represents regressed states of infantile symbolism. This infantile symbolic space is characterised by the return to the “original object of symbolisation” which is present in the early attachment relationship with caregivers (Brooks, 1993, p. 7).

Narratives may become embodied. Based on this assumption, it may be argued that one form of these embodied narratives exists as body art. Hall and Powell’s (2011) term for embodied narratives is ‘inscribed narratives’ (tattooed narratives). These are not only forms of self-expression (narrative sign), but also represent a story of one’s life-journey.

Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005) analysed tattoos that were published in a Finland magazine. The analysis indicated that the tattoos were linked to the participant’s life story (narratives). It became evident that the body was used as an enabler for the participant’s narrative (life history) and serves as a representation of a meaningful experience, either consciously or unconsciously. The body thus becomes a means through which narratives are constructed and told. Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005) concluded that the body is used in two different ways during the narrative. It is used to tell a story (through the tattoo –symbolic representation) but also to tell a story about the body (expression of experiences).

Tattooed narratives may implicitly suggest mastery and control of certain aspects of the self, or of the permanence of others ‘under the skin.’ Capturing dramatic, traumatic or significant events through tattooed narratives leads to a deeper process of understanding and ‘healing.’ This, in turn, results in a change in understanding as well as experiencing the self



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(Oksanen&Turtianen, 2005). Similar to the narratives they construct when verbalising the experience behind the tattoo, “life is constantly discussed in relation to tattoos that serve as memory maps and tool kits helping subjects to structure their experiences”

(Oksanen&Turtianen, 2005, p. 120).

Sarnecki (2001) argues that individuals may have the desire to get tattoos as a way to deal with personal trauma. Similar to Oksanen and Turtianen (2005), Caruth sees tattooing as a way of healing trauma. Considering the process (ritual) and preparation of tattooing, the pain may be representative of a traumatic experience in one’s life, but with a certain degree of control and at the hands of another (tattoo artist) (Sarnecki, 2001). Caruth (1996) views the pain experienced by the individual as being an enactment of a traumatic experience in a novel and creative way, in turn, producing new meaning. Sarnecki (2001) uses the author, artist and commentator, Trachtenberg (1998), to demonstrate her argument about trauma, pain and enactment through tattoos. She describes Tractendeberg’s (1998) book in relation to his tattoos in the following way:

Trachtenberg's tattoos become the narrative tool he uses to penetrate the surface of his life, plumb its depths, and transform it into meaningful text. Each tattoo, illustrated on the title page of every chapter, leads into chaotic twists and turns of mind and body that represent the author's life experiences, preserved in pictorial recollections. The tattoos are keys that unlock the mysterious processes of memory, helping to unravel the tangled narrative strands that weave together a lifestory both unconventional and altogether human. The provocative chapter headings with their accompanying illustrations, "I Acquire a Wound" and "I Go Primitive," capture our imagination and invite us to probe the author's motivations for acquiring his body art (Sarnecki, 2001, p. 38).

The above extract highlights the interrelatedness of mind and body, the conscious and unconscious, as well as narratives informing tattoos. It illustrates that tattoos have meaningful and significant narratives waiting to be told, understood and heard. It is informed by symbol formation, representation, phantasy and multiple parts of self-states.

### **2.6. Conclusion**

This section has explored how perceptions and use of tattoos have changed over the centuries. It has been argued that tattoos not only have explicit meanings based on contemporary fashion trends and needs for autonomy, they also appear to hold implicit, personal, symbolic meanings. These can be explored through a focus on life narratives, decisions and motivations in obtaining specific tattoos, and through a focus on significant moments in people's lives. It was also highlighted that people often decide to get tattoos during times of transition. These transitions were typically captured and made permanent through tattooed narratives. Thus, narratives on the skin appeared to be informed by a method of self-expression. Theoretical frameworks were discussed, focussing particularly on Attachment Theory and Object-Relations Theory, to capture the complexity of intra-psychic processes and its relation to interpersonal dynamics. Early identification with caregivers, containment, symbol formation and projective processes were explored. The theoretical framework was then applied to the act of tattooing to highlight the interaction and embodiment of significant narratives and identification with internal objects. The current study therefore questions whether tattoos are significantly related to specific periods in the person's life as informed by their narratives? Furthermore, do tattoos serve any specific function or role as a symbolic representation on the skin?

### **2.7. Objectives**

The rationale for this study is to integrate the contemporary practice of body art into a psychoanalytically-informed framework. Much research has been conducted in the area of psychiatry. These studies tend to link tattoos to deviant and risky behaviours as well as personality disorders. The aim for this study is to provide an alternate framework and context in which to understand body art from a psychoanalytic perspective. This study aims to explore

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core narratives associated with tattoos and the act of tattooing in the context of participants' life stories.

### **2.8. Questions**

- a) How, from a psychoanalytically-informed framework, can we best understand the symbolic and representational process through the tattoo narrative?
- b) What core psychodynamic factors appear salient in the subjects' experiences and past history?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Design**

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative framework was used. A case study design was adopted specifically focussing on narratives of the subjects. For many years, psychoanalysts have used case studies to understand their patients (Kvale, 1999). The nature of case studies allows for extensive investigation. According to Holloway and Jefferson (2007), narratives are usually a component of case study designs. Furthermore, case studies enable the researcher to understand how participants construct their narratives. In the present study the case study approach was chosen to explore personal narratives linked to, or informed by, body art. Case studies enabled the researcher to explore the nature of the subjects' internal worlds, their background histories and other contexts that appeared relevant to their lives (Mertens, 1998; Holloway & Jefferson, 2007).

Narratives are important vehicles of unconscious and conscious meaning when considered from a psychoanalytic point of view (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990). In this framework, compositions of narratives are embedded in the 'meaning-making' of the participants' world, shedding light on individual's internal world (motive, fantasies, object relations etc.) (Cartwright, 2004). Further, according to Holloway (2007), the narrative approach allows for an agenda to develop freely during interviewing. The psychoanalytically informed case study design takes the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle' a step further and attaches much more significance to the interaction between that of the researcher and participant. According to Cartwright (2004) psychoanalysis should not be viewed only as a treatment technique, but can also be practiced as a research methodology in and of itself. This is particularly the case when the researcher seeks to explore the possible implicit meanings in research participant's narratives.

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### **3.2. Research participants**

Subjects (4 females, 2 males aged between 23-42) consisted of individuals who had existing permanent tattoos. Seven subjects were initially selected. One of the subjects however withdrew during the initial phase of the study. It was desirable to select subjects from more than one tattoo shop/studio to avoid monotonous data collection and to gather as many diverse, detailed narratives as possible around the phenomena of their body art. Literature suggests that the demographics of people who attain body art are mostly White and live in urban communities. The ages and occupations of tattooees vary (Antoszewski, Sitek, Fijalkowska, Kasielska & Kruk-Jeromin, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Armstrong, Roberts, & Koch, 2002). There was thus no age restriction or occupational criteria for participating in this study.

### **3.3. Sampling methods**

The primary method of sampling drew on purposive, convenient sampling strategies (O'Leary, 2010). Subjects were located at two separate tattoo parlours. It is here where initial contact was made with the participants. Interviews were conducted in a separate room/office space. The sample was drawn from the environment where the phenomenon of body art is most prominent and subjects were most conveniently accessible. Subjects who already had existing tattoos were selected. Subjects were selected based on their willingness to participate rather than the amount of tattoos they had.

### **3.4. Data collection techniques**

Data was collected in the form of hourly, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews using the Psychoanalytic Research Interview (PRI) (Cartwright, 2004). This form of data collection has been adopted since the emergence of Freud's writings but since then has faced various challenges around it being regarded as a research method (Kvale, 1999).

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For clinicians who work primarily with case studies, “the psychoanalytic interview is a useful model for qualitative research in numerous respects” (Kvale, 1999; as cited in Hollway et al., 2007, p. 32). The psychoanalytic nature of the interview also facilitates the exploration of valuable psychoanalytic processes such as the dynamics of free association, transference and countertransference. According to Freud (1963; as cited in Kvale, 1999) “the patient’s free associations correspond to the therapist’s evenly-hovering attention” (p. 94). Therefore, for the psychoanalytic research interview, the intention was to stay with the participant and what they were saying and thinking, rather than concentrating on ways to validate the information empirically (Kvale, 1999).

According to Cartwright (2004), 3-4 Psychoanalytic Research Interviews per participant would optimally allow narratives to be explored collaboratively and in-depth. However, for this study, due to time constraints, a maximum of two follow-up interviews were conducted after the initial interview. An interview schedule was drawn up (see Appendix 1) covering some of the key aspects that required exploration. Some follow-up probes were also used to facilitate information collection and conversation around the area of study.

In order for the researcher to have familiarised herself with the interviewing process, an initial period of pilot interviewing was conducted. This was to determine the estimated suitable length of an interview and also how best to engage in the dynamics of the interview.

Data collection followed two stages:

- a) The first interview was conducted in the body art shop. Here the emphasis was placed on unstructured interviewing and free association (Cartwright, 2004). This stage allowed for emotions, feelings and thoughts to arise giving the researcher insight into

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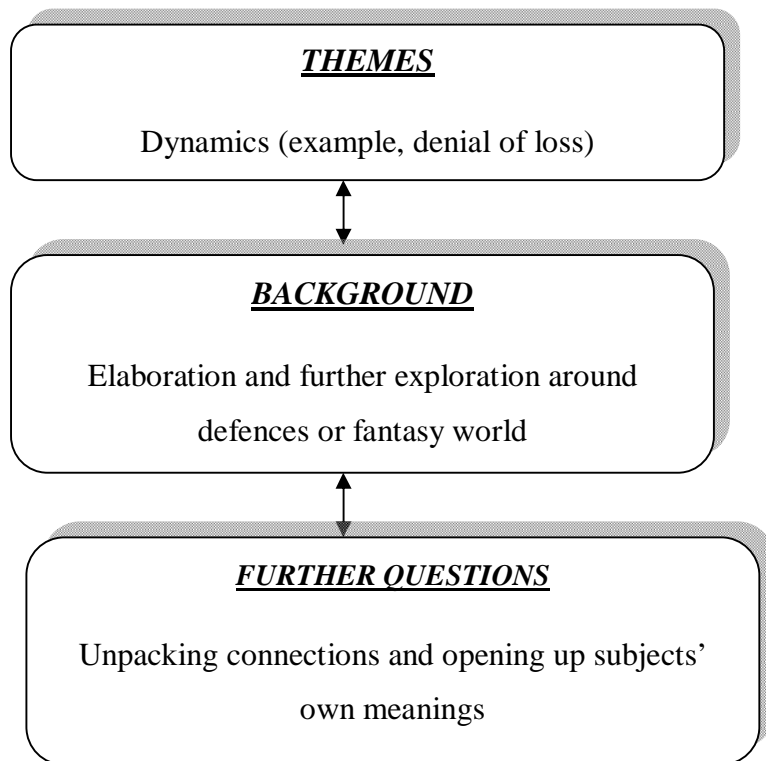
the participant's internal world. According to Hollway et al. (2007), "free associations in narrative reveals significant personal meanings which are not necessarily obvious" (p. 39). Furthermore, it allowed the participant to experience and reflect on the experience and motivations for the tattoo. It served as the initial starting point of the subjects' narrative and associations that were significant to understanding the participants' body art. These feelings and emotional states were important to capture in relation to their thoughts about their tattoos and related subjects.

- b) The second stage of the data collection primarily consisted of follow-up (background) questions about the initial interview and was more structured around specific questions (Hollway et al., 2007). Further emotions, feelings and observations of the previous interview were explored in relation to the 'tattooed narrative.' The aim of this stage of data collection was to allow for clarification as well as preliminary interpretations (clarification around reflections) of what the researcher understood from the participants' narrative and associations. According to Hollway et al. (2007), the second interview should follow a week after the initial interview with the participant. Therefore, for this study, the second interview was scheduled a week after the first interview with the participants.

In sum, the aim was thus to remain flexible during the interviews, but also remain cognisant not to stray from the narrative that was captured by the body art. Flexibility and awareness of the interview created a space for feelings and emotions to be evoked that gave rise to transference, projection and other unconscious defences.

The diagram on the next page illustrates the process of data collection in relation to the subjects' narratives and underlying themes:

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### **3.5.Instruments**

#### **Interview schedule**

An interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was drawn up. Although it did not form the core of the interview for reasons discussed above, it ensured that the main topics of interest were covered and explored in depth. Questions allowed for flexibility and further opened the agenda for the narrator to tell his/her stories in a non-directive way (Hollway et al., 2007). The main areas of importance focused on the story (narrative) that informed symbolic expression of the tattoo. The aim was to capture the process experienced, what it symbolised to the subject, as well as what underlying processes informed the decision of getting a permanent tattoo.

It was important for the purpose of this study, to also gain an understanding of the subject's background, specifically their childhood relationships, as the main framework of



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psychoanalysis places much emphasis on the context in which the child grew up as well as the availability of attachment objects (Lafrance, 2009).

### **Voice recorder**

A digital audio recorder was used to record the interviews verbatim. It facilitated data analysis when transcribing the interview. Further, it allowed the researcher to note the tone of the participant's voice when certain reflections on the part of the participant were required. It also enabled the researcher to reflect further on the material while transcribing data. The reflective capacity of the researcher resulted in the facilitation of a deeper understanding of the participant's narrative and what type of feelings and dynamics it evoked between the participant and researcher.

### **3.6. Analysis**

As Kvale (1999) proposed, the essence of the psychoanalytic technique lies in the interpretation and meaning the analyst attributes to the data and context it generated. The analysis of the (psychoanalytically informed) case studies followed 3 stages of analytic enquiry and understanding as proposed by Cartwright (2004).

When conducting and transcribing the interview, the researcher paid careful attention to feeling states presented in the interview. These, Cartwright (2004) suggests, help the researcher reflect on "observer bias, transference and countertransference" (p. 226). Observation of feeling states attached to narratives were used as a way for the researcher to reflect on the interview and shed some light on the expression of emotions that were evoked for both the researcher and the subject, making it a "corroborative source of information" (Cartwright, 2004, p. 226). According to Kvale (1999), what defines the psychoanalytic interview is the nature of the "human emotion interaction" (p. 94).

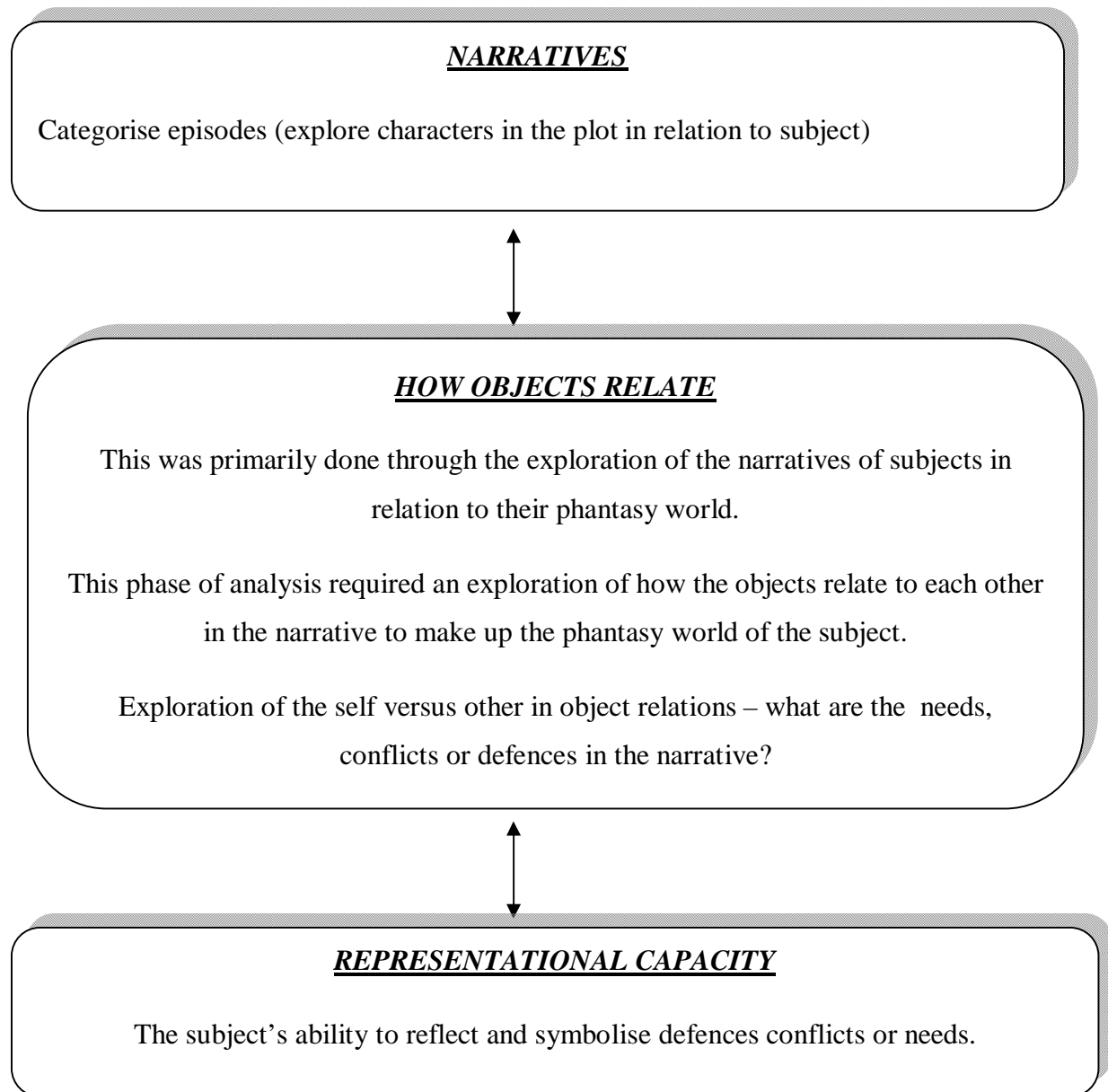
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The primary motivation for this study was to explore the construction of (unconsciously informed) narratives that symbolise aspects of the self as expressed through body art. During this phase of analysis, much attention was placed on the ‘characters’ and the ‘atmosphere’ of the narrative being constructed. This phase also included observing and noting the process of countertransference whilst the subject was talking about their narratives.

The third stage of analysis, as proposed by Cartwright (2004), included the exploration of object relations and identifications within the narratives. Thus, careful attention was given to the location of the subject in his/her own narrative. When paying careful attention to how the subject located him-/herself in the narrative, careful attention was also paid to the subject’s relation to other objects, underlying fantasies (phantasies) and defences (Cartwright, 2004). The aim of this stage of analysis was nested in the implicit assumption that “narratives serve as metaphorical representations of different aspects of the interviewee’s internal world” (Cartwright, 2004, p. 232). Cross-case analysis was also used to highlight certain themes and contexts.

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A diagram is provided below to illustrate the process (different levels) of data analysis:



### **3.7. Reliability and validity**

#### **Generalisation**

Over time, concern around the generalisability of case study designs have been deliberated (Kvale, 1999). The main concern is around context specificity. What is provided in the context is what makes it difficult to generalise to other contexts. Therefore, Kvale (1999) suggests that the case study design calls for “analytical generalisation” (p. 107). By ‘analytical generalisation’, he implies that judgement of one situation over another should be employed.

#### **Reliability**

Ensuring reliability of the results depends on whether two or more people could come to the same conclusion. Therefore, in order to establish reliability, it was important for the researcher to explain clear stepwise procedures of data collection and analysis (see methodology section: data collection and sample selection).

#### **Credibility**

Importance was placed on the ability of the readers to understand the inferences made and how the researcher came about her inferences. The interpretive work from a psychoanalytic framework placed even more pressure on the researcher to show that the data obtained and interpreted followed a clear, deductive course.

#### **Ethical concerns**

Attempting to incorporate elements of psychoanalysis into data collection raises some ethical considerations regarding encouraging participants to explore aspects of themselves that they may not have been aware of. Kvale (1999) mentions this in his article, as the subjects are required to make connections in their narratives that may not have been readily accessible to them. This may have emotional implications for the subjects as they become

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aware of certain dynamics. When adopting psychoanalysis as a data collection strategy and method of analysis, it is important to note that the subjects had “not asked for interpretations leading to fundamental changes in the way they understand themselves and their world” (Kvale, 1999, p.106). Therefore, it was important to keep this in mind for data collection as no attempt was being made to change the thoughts or behaviours of the subjects (Kvale 1999). Participants were offered counselling (as outlined in the informed consent document) in the event that the interview unduly distressed them. None of the participants required psychological interventions following the data collection period.

### 4. Analysis

Several themes became apparent across the narratives of the six subjects. The aim of the study was underpinned by the assumption that tattoos were informed by narratives and would provide some insight into the subject's internal world where there exists links between phantasy, defences and conflicts.

Using a psychoanalytically informed framework to analyse the data, the method revealed three main themes. The analysis revealed an overarching theme linked to tattooing representing a 'reminder' of some life journey or experience for the subjects. It appeared that many subjects used tattoos as a way to remind themselves of things they had gone through as well as experiences that they felt they had missed out on in life. It also seemed that tattoos, as informed by background narratives in the interviews, served as a means of engendering psychic strength during times of weakness and despair.

Provided below are the main themes associated with the idea that tattoos served as 'reminders' of experiences. Here, tattoos appeared to be symbolic reminders of:

- a) Loss: Of a loved one (Death); perceived loss of a significant internal object
- b) Identification with destruction (Feeling of being watched, dramatisation of conflict between good and bad)
- c) Seeking the divine self (Tattoo as an anchor for the self, eternal liberation)

#### 4.1.LOSS

##### a) *Real loss of a loved one*

Losing a loved one was perhaps the most dominant narrative. Four of the six subjects had tattoos marking the loss of someone in their life. What was interesting was that the narratives about the tattoos occurred at a more conscious level than some of the other themes.

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When enquiring about these tattoos, the subjects explicitly stated that it was linked to a specific loss. Further, it appeared that these tattoos were planned and well thought out, rather than impulsively attained. Although the tattoos appeared as conscious ‘markers of remembrance’, it appears that their motivations, their need for transformation and ‘relocation’ of the lost object, occurred at a more unconscious level. Provided below are some of the subjects’ narratives linked to tattoos regarding the death and mourning of a loved one.

Louise is 39 years old, has never been married or had children. For her, her sister’s children were like her own. She has eight stars on her left arm, three signifying nephews and five, her nieces. On her right inner arm, she had tattooed all the birth dates of her nieces and nephews. Louise had lost one of her nephews post birth. Her family never wanted to talk about it and so she decided to get a star tattoo with angel wings on her left upper arm signifying that he was now an angel.

*Louise: Now, I’m, very proud of the tattoos that I have on my body at the moment because they signify very uhm meaningful, uhm, they’re very meaningful.*

*Researcher: Mmm, ok, so going from something that was impulsively done*

*Louise: something playful...*

*Researcher: ...to now getting something that signifies meaning in your life?*

*Louise: Ya, like uhm, I have this one here, which are my nieces and nephews names, and uhm, Jason\* which is uhm, my nephew’s name, he passed away two weeks after birth... My sister got told that she would never be able to fall pregnant, and fell pregnant and unfortunately came to Durban to have Jason\* and when she came to Durban...they had to perform an emergency caesarean and the paediatrician gave them the choice of keeping him alive cos he was on oxygen at the moment and they didn’t know the extent of the brain damage or they had to take him off the ventilator. And it’s very sad and my sister said he’s an angel which signifies the angel wings that I have.*

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Captured in the abovementioned quote, Louise appears to emphasise a significant point. She positions herself opposite the loss object. The object, that is her nephew, now is transformed into a physically represented idealised (angelic/holy) object. We might say that although the real object tie was broken through the loss, attachment to the object still remains as an internal presence in Louise's internal world as represented by the tattoo.

Patrick had also decided to 'mark' the loss of his mother shortly after she passed away. Similar to Louise's abovementioned idealised (angelic/holy) object, Patrick had decided to remember his mother by having a tattoo of a cross on his lower arm. Patrick, 41 years old was one of two male subjects that were interviewed for this study. His tattoos were very masculine, inked all over his upper body, creating a full 'sleeve' on each arm. He loved his mother very much and when she passed away, he decided to get a tattoo of a cross as a tribute to her. What also appeared to be interesting while describing the tattoo, was that he compared it to 'Mexican gangster' tattoos he had observed in movies. Thus, the tattoo appears to represent both 'good' and 'bad' aspects.

*Patrick: You know the loss, on weekends she wasn't there anymore. Once a month I would go home and spend time with my siblings and she's not there. So it (the tattoo) was like a tribute to her... and it's also like the tattoos that Mexican gangsters have you know....*

Embodying both good (holy) and bad (gang members) objects was very significant in Patrick's life. The loss evident in reality predominated in his internal world.

Kelly (23) was the youngest subject in this study. She had lost her brother traumatically as a result of not being able to pay his drug dealer. She didn't see her brother very often. Kelly mentioned that her mother kept her away from the world and the rest of her family. Although her brother was a 'heroin junkie' she felt that she was the only one who could help



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him. She had decided to remember him by tattooing a Nazi sign in flames on the back of her right hipbone.

*Kelly: I have a swastika, which is a symbol of like infinity, like if you spin a cross it creates a circle and its infinity and I got that because five years ago my brother was murdered so I have his name and I have a swastika, uhmits a Hindu symbol and it's been around forever.*

In the above quote, Kelly chooses a particular symbol to signify the loss of her brother. She mentions the word 'infinity' numerous times while talking about her brother in relation to the tattoo. She captures the nature of a transformed internalised relationship with her brother as being endless, representing a relationship that goes on forever. It appeared that the swastika was Kelly's conscious symbolic representation of infinity. The swastika is well known to represent negative, destructive aspects which may also be evident in Kelly's world. At a more unconscious level, it may also have been a representation of anger and aggression towards the loss of her brother.

### **b) Dealing with perceived loss of internal objects**

This subtheme appeared to be more implicit during analysis than the abovementioned subtheme. What became evident was the apparent perceived loss of significant people in the subjects' lives. Similarly, it became evident that desires and phantasies were more prominent in this subtheme. Here, the subjects communicated the desire for i) unconditional love from an internal object that seemed to be rejecting, ii) the phantasy that a divorced family could come together again or iii) the loss of an infantile self due to adopting a 'saviour role' in childhood. These three themes generally encompassed perceived loss of internal objects.

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### *i) Reinstating an unconditional love tie*

Tattoos appeared to represent the need to reinstate an initial object relation in order to revive desires that had been lost and longed for. The case of Dianne will be explored here to provide a more explicit understanding of her narratives related to the longing for love and acceptance. Dianne is a 24-year-old female who had tattoos on most parts of her body. She acquired her first tattoo at the age of 15. Her first tattoo was a Chinese symbol signifying love. At the time of the interview, she was training to become a tattoo artist. In the first interview with her, feelings of protection and care were evoked in the relational dynamics. However, in our second encounter, the dynamics were somewhat different. Although she remained shy and expressed some discomfort when affective shifts were brought to her awareness, her beauty seemed to be emphasised by her colourful tattoos, resulting in a feeling of captivation on the interviewer's part. The first tattoo Dianne chose to discuss was a tattoo of a rose on her ankle. She got the tattoo as a reminder of her baby that she miscarried. The baby's name was going to be Alexandra Rose.

A lot of reference was made to the fear of being hurt and rejected by others as will be seen in the extract below. In the second interview, she had talked about the need of expressing unconditional love towards others around her, especially toward her father. As we spoke about the rose that symbolised unconditional love to her, she also mentioned that the rose signified the birth flower of her father (a Gemini star sign). She felt that it was important to incorporate elements of her father:

*Dianne: Ya, uhm the rose is also symbolic because uhm my father, because he was there with me for it, like in the beginning and he's a Gemini and the rose is a birth flower for the Gemini...*

It appeared that the loss signified more to Dianne in her internal world (perceived loss) than only being a reminder of Alexandra Rose (her baby) (real loss). Her parents were

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divorced when Dianne was three years old. When her father moved to Johannesburg, she and her older sister saw their father once a year. They grew up in an unstable, disorganised environment, moving around with their mother. It appeared that the loss of the baby was more meaningful in that it signified the need for unconditional love that Dianne herself was longing for from her father specifically. Thus, the real loss of her baby triggered her feelings and thoughts of losing her father. These needs she required from her love object were confirmed in the second interview:

*Dianne: I know for a fact like, I also, like I'm very clingy with my dad and like I crave his attention and his approval and all of that, so it (the rose) was also like I wanted him to say like, look how beautiful it is...*

Dianne was seeking confirmation from her love object, but also a permanent and constant object. In the second interview, I reflected on Dianne's dominant narratives of abandonment, hurt, rejection and guilt. I invited her to share her thoughts on this entrenched pattern of perceived loss and abandonment:

*Dianne: Uhm thinking about it now, uhm, its actually... wow, (giggles nervously), uhm maybe it's also got a connection to when my parents got divorced when I was so young, like maybe it's that I should've held on for a little longer, maybe everything would have been alright.*

*Researcher: So it's that sense of loss...*

*Dianne: ...without knowing almost, ya*

The themes that were evident in Dianne's narrative were associated with the perceived loss of her father shortly after the divorce. Here, Dianne, almost in desperation, felt that she should have held on a little longer. This appears to be an attempt to concretise and make the object more permanent and hold on to the perceived lost object in order to override and manage the perceived loss.

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After having lost her baby, Dianne reports that she wrote numerous letters explaining to the baby how sorry she was for not being able to save her. It almost seemed as if she felt guilty for abandoning the baby. It appeared that her internal object was blaming her for having abandoned her baby, just like she blamed her father for having abandoned them. These two narratives were similar in conveying the need and unconscious desire for unconditional love and acceptance from the internal love object.

*Dianne: I always felt that the child would blame me for losing her (uncomfortable laugh). I wrote letters to make, to help me feel better trying to explain you know... I felt like a lot of guilt 'cos(because) I believed that the child had a spirit and was really there so you know I was always trying to justify myself but there wasn't really anything to justify, ya*

*Researcher: Why did you feel that it was so important for you to communicate that you would love her?*

*Dianne: I have no idea, it was just that need was just there*

It appears that Dianne's tattoos served as a method of reinstating her internal objects in order to confirm and concretise her love for them. Here, the act of tattooing seemed to aid in 'relocating' feeling and thoughts about internal objects onto the skin. For Dianne, it was a relocation process that helped to reaffirm internal states that required more concrete, physical reminders. Her dominant narratives involved fear of rejection and abandonment, at the same time, desiring her love object to confirm and reinstate their love for her. It appeared that love and security was not confirmed often and therefore she desired the affirmation of love. Once confronted about the letter writing in the interview, she was able to identify that she could not really understand why she felt the need to confirm her love to her father and unborn baby. At the same time, Dianne appeared to need confirmation from her love object (father). One of her tattoos, a rose with the words, "*I love you more than you know. Love Dad*" (tattooed in

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her father's handwriting), further confirmed the need for affirmation from her love object. In order to create the permanence of love in her inner world, she was able to transform and concretise this love object. Dianne therefore was able to identify with feelings she thought her unborn baby would have, that of rejection and abandonment. She however was also able to identify with the desire and need to confirm her love and to reinstate love for the object.

### *ii) Phantasy of a family*

After the divorce, Dianne mentioned that her parents could never be in the same room together as it would end up creating a lot of tension. What was so captivating was how Dianne incorporated elements of both parents into one tattoo, unintentionally. After her father was diagnosed with cancer, she felt the need to show him that she would do anything for him. To support her father, she had shaved her hair and got a tattoo of a rose in rainbow colours.

Her mother always called Dianne 'rainbow child' due to her free-spirited nature. Her father, as mentioned, is a Gemini star sign and therefore has a rose as a birth flower. In this sense, the tattoo appeared to represent a coming together of mother and father, a phantasy (or unconscious wish) that she perhaps had of not only feeling unconditionally loved and accepted by her father, but also the desire of having a family with both parents.

More thoughts were brought to mind around the combination and what it could possibly have signified. It appeared to be an attempt to realise her phantasy of keeping both her mother and father together permanently. I invited her to explore the possible intention behind the combination of these two elements. When enquiring about these elements, Dianne had the following to say:

*Researcher: So you said that your father's tattoo was the most thought about, uhm and you wanted to capture your love for him, and also your mom, so you combined both*

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*elements into the tattoo and I was just wondering if that was significant for you to put them together permanently?*

*Dianne: I think so (nervous laugh), I have lately been secretly hoping my parents get back together although I know it will never happen but like ya... That would be cool (giggles).*

Dianne confirms that this was a fantasy and she knew it to be unrealistic. The elements combined by reminders of her mother and father seemed to signify her phantasy of having her family together in one place, communicating the unconscious desire of a whole family. It appears that Dianne found a way to express and transform this unconscious phantasy in something more concrete.

### *iii) Capturing missed out elements of an infantile self*

In the first interview with Louise, she had mentioned that her first tattoo was of Mickey Mouse. She had said that it was a very impulsive decision and not something that was very acceptable in her catholic home and at the convent school she attended. After the tattoo was completed, Louise went to show her mother, whom she described as very liberal. In the interview, she presented herself as a very strong, rational, 'in control' and mature person. The fact that her first tattoo was a cartoon character seemed somewhat out of place, until her narratives were further explored.

She described herself as 'the pillar' in her family, holding them together. Further, she emphasised that she was a 'closed' kind of person regarding her thoughts, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. She appeared to present herself as strong, driven and a protector for people in need. As our interview progressed, it appeared that Louise was 'the protector', what we eventually termed 'the saviour', in almost all areas of her life (particularly in relationships, work and family). Implicitly, she seemed to derive this from an identification with her mother who protected a very disorganised family from her father's alcoholic habits. When discussing

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her childhood, she found it difficult to recall any good memories or specific times that she could make reference to. It appeared that Louise felt very absent in her own childhood. This appeared to be confirmed in the interview where the transference-countertransference relationship appeared to be characterized by vague, but serious, stories. Still further, whilst conversing about her childhood, it appeared that her affect was very restricted.

As mentioned, Louise had inked eight stars representing child relatives on her arm, including her nephew who had passed away. On the other arm, she had all the nephews and nieces' birth dates, signifying all the children that were close to her. It was interesting to compare common elements (Mickey Mouse and the stars) of the tattoos as it seemed to create a better picture in relation to her narratives. She seemed to not only adopt a role of a protector for others, given the 'child' themes in the tattoos, it seems that this 'protection' was particularly focused on the needs of children and the protection of 'child' hurts. Louise appeared to identify with child needs as represented by the two child-like tattoos.

Over the period of the three interviews, it appeared that Louise shifted from being very guarded to being expressive and comfortable. In the first interview, she was opposed to unveiling her vulnerable side by responding with vague and well-formulated rational comments. In the second interview, however, she seemed to respond to comments more spontaneously, also being able to identify times where she tried to protect others. As the interview progressed, she spontaneously began to identify patterns that were previously implicit. In the second interview, when talking about her past relationships, she threw her hands up in amazement, expressing her sudden frustration with the way she was living her life. She was referring particularly to the way she would adopt the same 'saviour role' across many aspects of her life. In the extract below, Louise discusses a relationship she had with a former partner who was having financial difficulties at the time. She and her former partner

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had been in contact after the break-up. According to Louise her former partner needed some financial assistance and ‘needed’ Louise:

*Louise: Like in the past, in the past couple of weeks I’ve been wanting to know what she is doing, and who she is doing it with and uhm, I’m not on her facebook, I’m on her bbm. I said put me back on bbm, and so we can, you know, if you need anything, there is the saviour going back again! (frustrated tone of voice).*

It was only in the third interview that her feelings of being with children and still being a ‘big baby’ were mentioned and explored. This introduced some anxiety and excitement into the interview. I invited Louise to make associations around how she understood her apparent need to be needed by others:

*Researcher: Is there any significance in why you feel the need to be needed?*

*Louise: Uhm, I think, I think I became like that protector of my sister when my dad was abusive towards us, you know because she was four years younger than me, so if I was 12, she was 8. So I probably, if I have to go back deep like that, have to say the protection came from maybe there?*

When I invited Louise to explore the association between ‘protection’ and the tattoos representing her nieces and nephews, she concluded the following about her childhood:

*Louise: Ya, I think because of all the abuse that my mom and dad experienced, Carol [sister] and I were shoved to my aunt and you know, before I knew it, I had grown up.*

*Researcher: So what is it that you’re trying to capture?*

*Louise: The child inside of me.*

*Researcher: Is there a connection?*

*Louise: Yes definitely, I’m a big child, you know, I [pointing to her t-shirt] Captain America (laughing), you’d die if I told you what socks I was wearing...spider man socks... so there is a certain element of my childhood that I’ve missed that I am*



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*trying to relive in whatever way I can. My 'bbm pic' is spider man jumping out of his shirt saying: Don't worry, I'm here to save you!*

*Researcher: Well I guess that incorporates you very well, to save them, but it's an animation*

*Louise: There we go! Ya!*

As seen above, Louise allowed herself to free associate about her tattoos and was able to gain some insight into her pattern of caring for others. She was also able to identify where it started and linked it to her experience of 'not having much of a childhood'. In short, part of the narrative behind her tattoos expressed the need to be a child again (unconscious wish). Simultaneously, Louise identified with the 'saviour role' of her childself by becoming the saviour of the child. Her identification with both 'the saviour' and 'child self' appeared to be her solution to her difficult childhood. It appeared that tattoos could be used as an expressive medium through which Louise could 'relocate' and transform the difficulties apparent in her childhood. Not only was she able to capture and reinstate a lost 'infantile self' but also identify with being the child's saviour. Both these identifications were represented in her tattoos.

### **4.2.IDENTIFYING WITH DESTRUCTION**

Subjects presented with features that could be linked to identification or creation of a destructive self. This was most evident in the expression of desires and needs that appeared contrary to other aspects of their personality or other aspects of their personal circumstances. Two subjects vividly illustrated this theme in their use of tattoos.

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### *a) The good object turning bad*

When initially meeting Kelly for our first interview, I was stunned by her appearance and carefree manner. She had a nose piercing and a piercing on her upper cheek. She was wearing dark make-up and had black dyed hair. Kelly seemed very comfortable but was also guarded. Although she appeared to be very comfortable talking and expressing her opinions, what she was saying and what she was bringing into the transference with me seemed to be inconsistent (an apparent disconnection). She seemed to move between extremes in her narratives: from victim to saviour, frightened to frightening, and innocent to destructive. After our first interview, I felt ungrounded, lost and scared. It appeared that she was able to present herself as very detached and carefree, leaving me carrying her paranoid and dark feelings that seemed to represent projections of her inner world.

Kelly has been through a lot in her life and had to endure traumatic events that appeared to be very destabilising, creating a very dark inner world. Her internal world appeared to be made up of objects that had hurt her when she tried to love them. Kelly seemed to be attracted to destructiveness and dark thoughts. It was significant that she could tell me about disturbing aspects of her childhood without any emotional connection or affect.

Of significance was the way Kelly explained how she would meet people or potential partners. It almost seemed like she was playing a game where she would latch onto her prey and draw them in without them knowing. I was wondering if what she was explaining regarding relationships was based on her internal working model where her good objects turn bad.

*Kelly: I don't really go out, like I socialise and I'm very friendly and very approachable and I know that I can capture someone and kind of draw them in and you know whatever... I think I lose the interest almost. I'm attracted to people who*

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*need something and as soon as I've fulfilled my need of that or whatever then there's no real purpose.*

*Kelly: I think I draw people in very close and I almost like take off a mask so they can see what they're getting into and then I take my distance and then I see what happens from there.*

*Kelly: Just what I've been told from people you know, meeting me that's what happens, they meet me, ah you so great you're so awesome you know whatever you know then I think, but don't get too close because you don't actually know, you know, shiny things can be dangerous too kind of thing...*

In the abovementioned quotes, she speaks of 'drawing in' her objects that she identifies with, simultaneously identifying with the sense of destructiveness. Her object relations appeared to be predominantly informed by a destructive self.

What remained interesting about Kelly's tattoos was that most of them signified both an innocent and destructive element. It appeared that her tattoos described a destructive side to things that were ordinarily beautiful and innocent. Her tattoos seemed to depict her narrative in such an accurate way: everything that she knew as beautiful and had experienced as love was destroyed or became destructive towards her. It could be argued that these destructive properties were internalised, creating an inner world of destruction. One of Kelly's other tattoos, just above the swastika, was a heart with pins stuck into it. When exploring her family dynamics, she described her mother as being very abusive toward her. Her mother was described as an object in Kelly's life that was frightened while Kelly appeared to be frightening. The way her mother related to her appeared to be evident in other aspects of Kelly's life:

*Kelly: Part of my complex comes from my mom she would take me to psychiatrists and psychologists and kind of throw me in the room and say and scream to the doctor,*

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*'diagnose this child with something, schizophrenia or something cos she is not normal'.*

*Kelly: Like I went into rehab for a nervous breakdown which also didn't help much cos they also kept me away from everyone cos you know they kinda said, ah she's a Satanist and she's gonna put spells on you and possess you and that kind of thing. So I wasn't really allowed to talk to anyone and my addiction was ....what they said I was addicted to was exciting abusive relationships.*

Kelly makes reference to her 'destructive abilities' and being addicted to abusive relationships. It seemed that she had internalised these feelings as a child (I am a scary person) and now identified with them and made sense of herself with reference to them:

*Kelly: I think one of my deeper fears is getting close to people, I kind of feel like when you get close to someone they get taken away or they leave or die or they decide they can't be my friend or they can't date me or can't handle me or whatever.*

*Kelly: There's a quote that never left me by Oscar Wilde and he said: People are afraid of what they don't know, and what they are afraid of, they destroy. I was so advanced for my age and my mom didn't understand that. She knew that a baby you know, there are certain things that babies do and I was doing this that babies don't do yet.*

*Researcher: And she feared that?*

*Kelly: She feared it, ya and my whole life it was like, 'you're a Satanist' and this and that and whatever.*

Kelly captured two significant parts of her life in the above-mentioned quotes. Firstly, she made reference to the fact that she was an innocent baby that needed love and care, but instead was feared. It appeared that Kelly's internal love objects were scared of her, just like her mother was scared of her being advanced for her age. Further, Kelly felt that there only existed temporary love objects because they either hurt her further, or get taken away. This was also represented in her tattoos where good objects turned bad.

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### b) *Watching and being watched*

Patrick grew up in a family that wasn't very wealthy or financially stable during what would be regarded as the apartheid era. He mentioned that both his father and mother were honest, hard working people. When he turned 16 he was offered a job as a bouncer at a club. According to Patrick, he was a very masculine young man and started to make a name for himself as a bouncer. He was involved in bodybuilding and became 'a bit of a bad boy.' Later, he was offered other opportunities where he could make more money as a bouncer selling illegal drugs. He established a reputation as a drug dealer and was financially very well off. One night after he was bouncing at a club, he was in a car accident and lost both his legs. After this incident he decided to withdraw as a 'wheeler and dealer' and tried to walk what he called the 'straight and narrow path.'

His first tattoo was a tribal design inked on his whole back when he turned 21. He emphasised that it had taken 3 hours to complete. When I asked him about the idea and the design, he mentioned that he had once seen it in a movie '*We once were warriors*' and thought that '*it looked cool*'.

*Patrick: Tattoos weren't big back then you know, people go and get a small tattoo, you know. My first tattoo was my whole back. I saw the movie 'Once we were warriors' you know and thought that it looked good, it's like a tribal thing you know.*

*Researcher: So, tell me what attracted you to the idea?*

*Patrick: The whole look, the image you know, not everybody had it, it was different.*

Although he had left his 'warrior' lifestyle behind and tried to downplay it in our interviews, he appeared to glamorise it. His descriptions were like scenes in a movie presented in a very detached manner.

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*Patrick: The money came quick, and fancy cars, girls, motorbikes, that lifestyle you know....*

*Researcher: So you were building this kind of persona, masculine, strong and then on the other side, sounds like a very risky lifestyle. So tell me about this lifestyle?*

*Patrick: It's like straight out of the movies. What you see, that's how it is....*

*Researcher: That dangerous element?*

*Patrick: I carried a gun on me all the time...*

Patrick presented himself in a very grandiose manner. I initially felt overwhelmed by his need for me to feel his presence and dominance. This seemed to be more emphasised in his narrative where themes of masculinity, dominance and invincibility became very difficult to ignore.

In his narratives, it appeared that most of the objects were outsmarted or outwitted by his strategic pre-planned moves. It appeared that he achieved a sense of satisfaction every time he mentioned a scene where he would outsmart the police or other drug dealers in order to avoid being caught out.

*Patrick: I went to the rave on Saturday night and they were waiting for me....*

*Researcher: Ok*

*Patrick: And I was waiting for someone to give me something and I turned around to look at something and they put their hands on me so I threw the stuff into the crowd. Then they walked to my car, searched my car and they found nothing. Cos you've always gotta think one step ahead of them.*

*Researcher: And what did it feel like when they actually caught you?*

*Patrick: You stand there with a big smirk in your face. They had a reporter with them, writing everything I said and the next day it was on the second page Sunday Tribune: 'Drugdealer caught again had R5000 on him'. That's a lot of money to have back then for one night.*

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*Researcher: Mmm, what was it like seeing yourself in the paper? Reading about yourself in the paper?*

*Patrick: Geez, name in the paper again....*

*Researcher: Was it a good feeling?*

*Patrick: You laugh, I got off because they haven't achieved anything, it just makes you more popular. But that's not what you want in that game, you wanna be low key.*

Although his narrative was informed by predominantly 'being strong' and outsmarting others, two of his tattoos appeared particularly captivating. These tattoos seemed to capture narratives tied to his need to be seen and to be present. The one tattoo was designed in a way that it looked as if the flesh on his arm had been scratched open with a dragon's eye appearing through the ripped skin. It appeared as if the dragon was coming through his skin. Patrick had this tattoo done shortly after he had made a reputation for himself. When inviting him to reflect on the tattoo and its meaning, he responded by comparing it to the birthing process of the dragon. It appeared to be a symbolic representation of the birth of the 'destructive self' that became dominant in the kind of lifestyle he was living.

*Patrick: It's oriental... It's a dragon... Ok so it's coming through the skin. The skin is cut open. Those are dragon scales can you see that?*

*Researcher: Oh ok, I see, how did that happen?*

*Patrick: I thought of it and just .... It was something coming through you know. The dragon in me coming through you know. Always watching. Back then it was me you know, coming through, making my way in life.*

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Another tattoo that was associated with this theme of being seen/ watched was that of an angel. Patrick had this tattoo done after his accident when he lost his legs. For him, he felt like something must be watching and protecting him because he could have lost his life.

*Patrick: When I came out of the hospital I got that. There must be someone watching over me and it's like a guardian angel.*

It appeared that Patrick's need to be seen was informed by his phantasy of being all powerful in reaction to his perceived status as a child whilst growing up not being wealthy. The need for him to make a name for himself was very dominant in his narratives. Towards the end of our interview, he concluded by saying that he was aware that his fantasy world could not last forever. It appeared that he could no longer be a character in his own movie.

### **4.3.SEEKING THE DIVINE SELF**

Spirituality and serenity was a main theme evident in the narratives of some participants. Again, this theme appeared to be different from one narrative to another. For example, one subject desired serenity because she felt her thoughts were like 'a bad neighbourhood'. Another subject was very spiritual and religious and seemed to identify himself as being one with God, living a life that does not require much human interaction but is rather focused on the desire for eternal liberation. Both these narratives sought to be represented and 'relocated' in the subject's internal world through the use of tattoos. These two narratives will be explored below.

#### *a) Serenity prayer tattoo as an anchor for the self*

Serene thoughts were important to Louise. She had the serenity prayer tattooed on her lower arm as a reminder to keep calm when life was chaotic. As mentioned before, Louise



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was raised in a catholic family. She said that the serenity prayer had always been on the wall as a child growing up but it wasn't meaningful at that point in time.

*Louise: The word serene, the word courage and the word wisdom have a deep meaning and for me I thought I was serene, and I thought I was growing with wisdom and I thought I had courage but I had none. But now I am serene, you know, I am calm, people see me as calm, the thoughts in my head have become calmer. Uhm whereas you know (before), like it was a bad neighbourhood.*

In the last interview with Louise, we reflected on her inherent and embodied need to be calm and serene. She had the following association:

*Researcher: What was interesting was that in both interviews you were very concerned about being serene and calm. What are your thoughts about that?*

*Louise: So, at this particular stage, I feel neither of those words. Today's just been a very awkward day. Uhm, otherwise I strive to be serene and calm. Because I know that there is a percentage of me that can let go.*

*Researcher: Okay*

*Louise: And I think I'm scared of that. I'd rather suppress that part of that, which I think is a part of my father and rather be the part that everyone likes and I like rather than be this angry person.*

Louise adopted the serenity prayer in various areas of her life to overcome difficult times. It seemed like the serenity tattoo was a symbol of an attempt to self-transform, a search for the 'divine-self' to rise above the part of herself identified with the 'bad neighbourhood'. Further, it appeared to serve as an anchor that she could return to during tough times.

### *b) The modern monk*

Peter was one of the two males I interviewed. It appeared that he had a difficult childhood. His father and mother were divorced when he was 6 years old. He never appeared

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to have respect for his father as he felt that his father made many bad choices. His mother raised three children, paying for his and her eldest son's tertiary education.

It appeared that Peter yearned for an ideal object to replace a father who had never been able to care for him. His 'ideal object' was associated with him never being hurt or let down.

The role of spirituality seemed to be central to Peter's life. What also appeared to be interesting was his need to be saved and eternally liberated. His demeanour in the interview was that of a victim seeking to be free.

Peter had a tattoo of the wheel of reincarnation on his lower back. The tattoo was written in Sanskrit (old Indian dialect). The translation read: 'With the word of God there is eternal liberation'. Here, he also seemed to express his need to be freed, to be saved. The design of this tattoo was suggested by Peter's partner at the time.

In the second interview with Peter, his desire to be 'saved' remained dominant. When exploring this theme with him, he linked it to his feelings that people were just there to disappoint.

*Peter: You know what, I am so happy, you know, that's actually about one of the things I did think about. I'm happy with my life as it is and not having people around me because they just brought me down.*

It appeared that Peter had created a life with few human connections as deep feelings of disappointment had caused him to shut off from others. For him, he felt like people were born alone and died alone and therefore did not see the need for people to be close. It appears that Peter sought a relationship with a higher being in order to search for a relationship beyond the self as object. Further, it could be possible that Peter was seeking 'eternal liberation' and connection on a spiritual level. The meaning and importance he attributed to his spiritual life further grounded who he was in order to develop a secure sense of self.

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*Peter: You know, I'm happy with what I have. I'm thankful for what I have and I don't need much more.*

*Peter: I also believe that when the times are tough, God can only deal you a hand that you can handle, He will never give you something that you cannot handle....*

He finds security in his religious fantasy with his God. This does however not correspond to the relatedness of his early attachment figures (associated with disappointment). Rather, it appeared to serve as a compensatory object, as his desire for eternal liberation was something that he longed for, desired, but never experienced. It appeared to be evident that Peter felt he could not draw on early identifications with his father in times of distress or anxiety. Rather, he turned to an idealised god conceptualised as a caretaker and nurturing other. In other words, Peter's apparent need to be religious may, in part, stem from the desire for an ideal substitute object to serve a compensatory role.

The compensatory 'religious' object that appeared to be central in Peter's life was made permanent and concrete in his tattoo. In this way, it served as a secure physical reminder of his attempts to maintain an attachment relationship with the other. The belief in the divine serves as a stable compensatory object that is felt to be unchanging and consistent met Peter's needs for relatedness.

### 5. Discussion

Various reasons for acquiring body art were presented in the review of literature. Contemporary literature indicates that tattoos serve as a means of self-expression. Research documents that tattoos are also used in postmodern youth as a fashion accessory (Sweetman, 1999; De Mello, 1995). Other studies found that tattoos were perceived as sexually attractive and a way of owning one's individuality, signifying freedom and autonomy (Antoszewski et al., 2010; Irwin, 2001). These studies appeared to provide a superficial understanding of motivation.

A study conducted by Sweetman (1999) suggested that people not only acquire tattoos for explicit motivations as mentioned above, but also use tattoos to express unconscious fragments or parts of the self. Similar arguments were proposed in studies conducted by Johnson (2006) and Alcina (2009). A study conducted by Irwin (2001) found that people who have tattoos generally fall within two groups. According to her study, the 'negative deviance practice' group is characterised by rebellion; whereas positive deviance practices remain acceptable in mainstream societal norms.

The aim of this study was to explore, using qualitative data, how tattoos express and symbolise the participant's internal world and life narratives. In this study, it was assumed that tattoos provide insight into the dynamic qualities of the person's internal relationships with significant others. This study made use of a psychoanalytic framework (drawing on attachment, unconscious desires, phantasies and object-relations) to understand the intricate interplay between intra-psychic and interpersonal processes through the use of tattoos. Of central importance to understanding the formation of the self was the establishment of early significant relationships.

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Further, this study aimed to assess whether people with tattoos had personality structures that suggest underlying pathology as previously outlined by some early writings (Pitts, 1999). The concept of unconscious symbolism was used to ground the understanding of tattooed narratives in a specific context. This concept was evident in both Melanie Klein and Jones's writings (Klein, 1971; Jones 1948). Here, the understanding and use of symbolism appeared to be an adaptive response to 'unsymbolised,' concrete and distressing aspects of the self.

A qualitative study conducted by Alcina (2009) suggested that there were three main themes of narratives associated with tattoos (remembrance, anchors for the self, metaphorical representations). Firstly, the theme of remembrance was viewed as being like 'notes to self,' where tattoos served as a reminder of how the individual should live their life (Alcina, 2009). She suggested that these tattoos served as reminders to implement a certain philosophy in life situations. Her results suggested that tattoos served as a method for remembering important people in the participants' lives. These were usually individuals who played a very important role in the life of the participant. It served as a remembrance and a honorary symbolic representation of the significant object.

Similar to the abovementioned study, some of the themes in the present study suggest the need for tattoos to serve as 'remembrances'. More generally, tattoos appeared to serve as representations of projected states of the individual's internal world. Similar to Lemma's understanding of tattoos, the body appeared to become a space where phantasies were embodied and enacted. Further, tattoos also served as representations of ongoing dialectical object relationships.

An overarching theme in this study suggests that tattoos are used to 'mark' transitional life phases. Literature, examining both explicit and underlying reasons for acquiring tattoos,

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has found that people acquire tattoos during times of transition (Irwin, 2001). The nature of these transitions appeared to be that of loss of a significant other. Tattoos were also used to mark transitions in terms of reminding the participants about their past or parts of their past that they did not want to repeat or return to. An example of the latter was where Louise talked about her mind as a 'bad neighbourhood' and how the serenity prayer was a 'reminder' to surround herself with calm and serene thoughts during difficult times. This marked a transition from the experiences of 'badness' to something good. Patrick's tattoo of the angel was also acquired after he had survived a car accident where he had lost his leg. To him, the tattoo symbolised that someone must be watching over him. This also served as a means to live 'a straight and narrow' life.

### **Relocating narratives in time and space**

In object-relations theory, the notion of a constant and permanent other in the internal world to ensure a sense of safety is highlighted (Gurney & Rogers, 2007). It was evident that the tattoos in this study shared similar characteristics; that of permanence and constancy. The results indicated that participants found a way to seize time and locate an aspect of their internal world using their tattoos. They served as reminders that were now located in 'fixed time' on the skin. The fixed location allowed for a continuity or constancy to be represented on the skin. According to Kernberg (2008), time differs across contexts. This is based on whether time is perceived subjectively or objectively. According to Kernberg "integrated whole object relations permit the build up of a lived past, the sense of duration of time lived expands, and a desired, imagined future extends it further" (Kernberg, 2008, p. 301). With this in mind, it appeared that the participants used tattoos to relocate the experiences they had with love objects or objects of loss and in turn, created a sense of timelessness and remembrance in their inner world. Referring to Kernberg (2008), it may suggest an unconscious motivation to restore past objects to maintain relatedness.

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The most significant transition evident in the results was that of loss and mourning of a significant other and the perceived loss of a significant object. The results indicated themes of reclaiming and embodying phantasies as well as seeking compensatory (or transformational) objects. At a broader level of understanding, the participants' use of tattoos appeared to serve a transitional object function. It appeared that life transitions were characterised by the realisation of the separateness of others. Ogden (1985) argued that the transitional object is critical in "maintaining a psychological dialectical process" (p. 132). Relating this concept to tattoos, it appeared that tattoos served to maintain this dialectical process between self and the other (the lost object) so that the participant could continue thinking about it, in turn, keeping it 'alive.' Further, it appears that the concreteness and permanency of the tattoo assisted participants in reducing anxiety related to the transitional experience. In this way, it could be argued that the permanent tattoo on the skin served as a mode of containment that assisted in holding the self together during times of anxiety or ambivalence (Lemma, 2010). A similar understanding was used in the study conducted by Karacaoglan (2011).

What appeared to be interesting was that all the participants in the present study had a minimum of three tattoos. It appeared that the tattoos were not just once off expressions, but rather represented an on-going journey about their past, characterised by transitions and objects of remembrance. Jones (1948) argued that symbol formation was a prerequisite for representing and adapting to reality. Similarly, Segal argued that art expression, in the form of symbols, may be a means of rediscovering or 'concretising' one's past. Sometimes this takes on a compulsive quality.

### **Mourning (and melancholia) as a non-pathological process**

It became evident from the results of the study that mourning and the loss of a significant other was a common theme that many of the participants experienced and

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captured in their tattoos. It is therefore essential to discuss and understand the relationship between loss and tattoos. Contrary to how Freud defined mourning as “detachment of libidinal ties with the deceased love object” (Baker, 2001, p. 55), Segal’s psychoanalytic interpretation of Proust’s work suggested that in his art, “all his lost, destroyed or loved objects are brought back to life” (Segal, as cited in Klein, 1971, p. 389). Proust’s compulsion was to re-capture the objects of his world that had ‘passed away’ through his art. He integrated this process of mourning with visual imagery to re-create a permanence of these significant objects in his life. Similarly, when applying this logic to the current study, it appeared that the participants who had lost significant others attempted to re-create and relocate their lost world. As cited in the review of literature, Klein argued that “it is then that we must re-create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life” (as cited in Klein et al., 1971, p. 390). Similarly, Bowlby (1980) argued that there exists “a continuing sense of the deceased individual’s presence after death that can be found in many healthy individuals” (cited in Baker, 2001, p. 56). Baker’s (2001) conceptualisation of this process was similar to what was found in the current study. Thus, a continuing sense of the deceased, captured through tattoos, appeared to be an adaptive process where the participant attempted to hold on to the lost object in order to represent it in their internal world and maintain object constancy. Furthermore, it allowed the participants to foster an ongoing internal attachment with the other.

The ongoing internal relationship however appeared to be somewhat different to external reality as it suggests that mourning is a process of “inner transformation of both self and object images” (Baker, 2001, p. 56). In external reality, the participant is faced with obvious loss of the other. However, an internal relationship may still be



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ongoing. Many writers have challenged Freud's notion of the finality of the deceased object (Kernberg, 2008; Baker, 2001; Bowlby, 1980). These writers have argued that this transformative process allows for nonpathological re-creation of the lost object. Bowlby argued that the desire for the continuation of a relationship with the deceased should not be viewed as pathological. Further, Bowlby argued that "a continuing sense of the dead person's presence, either as a constant companion or in some specific or appropriate location, is a common feature of healthy mourning" (Bowlby, 1980, p. 100). Similarly, Horowitz (1990) described the dilemma that the person is faced with after the death of a significant other. He argued that the person is faced with an inner conflict of wanting to hold onto old reminders (schemas) of the person when they were still living "but is confronted with reality and its indications that the beloved one has gone" (Baker, 2001, p. 59). In order to manage the pain and discomfort caused by this conflict, the person has to re-create an "enduring relationship where the self is related to the person in the past" (Horowitz, 1990, p. 317).

An alternative understanding of mourning and loss also exists. Melanie Klein argued that the love object in the inner world is felt to be destroyed when loss occurs. In order to move past mourning, the person has to rebuild his/her inner world to "recover what he had already had in childhood" (Klein, 1940, p. 362). Consequentially, this enables the person to "appreciate other people and experiences in their life" (Baker, 2001, p. 60). It also allows for "a deepening in the individual's relation to his [her] inner objects which includes both an increased trust in those objects and a greater love for them because they survived and "proved to be good and helpful after all" (Klein, 1940/1975b, p. 360). In other words, rather than letting the internal object go, successful

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mourning allows for preservation and restoration of the internal object relationship (Baker, 2001).

The use of tattoos as transitional objects after the loss of a significant object in the participants' lives became evident in the results of this study. After the death of a loved one, the participants created a reminder of the deceased in order to foster a continuous internal tie with the object. This in turn appeared to create an internal dialogue with the object. The use of a transitional object in the process of mourning is viewed as "the establishment of a form of continuing relationship that both satisfied the emotional need of the bereaved to maintain their ties and allows for grieving and living to proceed" (Gurney et al., 2007, p. 319).

With the realisation of loss in reality, it appeared that the participants had to process the mourning on a different level in order to keep the object 'alive' in their inner world. It therefore required a relocation of the significant object. It appeared that the participants had to re-create and re-construct their inner representation of the object rather than simply remember it by holding it in their minds. Tattoos served a dynamic, transformative and interactive function in the participants' inner worlds and therefore appeared to play a continuing role in the participants' lives. Therefore it appears that tattoos became an adaptive strategy in dealing with the process of loss.

It is therefore suggested that tattoos form part of a process of inner transformation where they function as transitional objects. It must be noted however that tattoos appeared to be an attempt to create a transitional object that is more 'permanent'. Tattoos may be viewed as transitional because they act as 'markers' that can be returned to and used as transitional

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objects. This finding is similar to the results of Karacaoglan's study (2011) which argued that the "internal object becomes unreliable and provides no security" (p. 94). The collapse or failed integration of a transitional object in earlier life may lead to a desire for permanent tattooing as a replacement transitional object.

This has implications for both the self as well as the other in the participant's inner world" (Baker, 2001). It allowed the self to create an inner representation and 'relocate' a relational tie with the deceased love object. According to Baker (2001), this involves a process where "the psychic relationship with a living person must be transformed into an ongoing, internal relationship to the memory or representation of the love object" (Baker, 2001, p. 68). It may be possible that participants in this current study used tattoos as a means to undergo this process. Although it could be argued that tattoos are one of many ways to move through this process, tattooing appears to represent greater need for permanency, as was evident in the histories of subjects in this research.

### **Symbols of transformative relationships:**

In Object-Relations Theory, "permanence involves the conviction that the parent [object] continues to exist across differing states of space, time and emotion, and constancy refers to the unchanging nature of the parent across differing states of time (Gurney et al., 2007, p. 967). Underlying the notion of object permanence is the understanding that even when parents (or significant others) are gone, they may still continue to exist internally.

Transformative relationships of this nature were evident in some of the subjects' narratives. In the most clearly evident cases these transformative relationships were represented by evoking spiritual objects. As Gurney et al. (2007) put it, this I/Thou spiritual relationship suggests that "one's image of the sacred, of the divine, helps

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ground the sense of who he is” (Gurney et al., 2007, p. 965). This appears to replicate similar needs originally found in attachment relationships with significant others.

The narratives in this area appeared to suggest that spirituality served as an anchor for the self, a point of returning to calm and serene thoughts during times of distress. Literature suggests that people “who have [had] poor object-relations in the past turn to religion in times of distress, conceptualising the sacred as an idealised, caretaking and nurturing other” (Gurney et al., 2007, p. 967). In this way it appears to serve as a point of anchoring the self, a substitute for the original attachment object, in order to create inner peace and serenity.

Both the participants who vividly used spirituality as an anchor for the self appeared to fit this profile. Spirituality appeared to additionally assist in inner transformation and transcendence. Their relationship with the divine formed part of their inner world as a transformative object, at least in their fantasies. For example, Louise’s serenity tattoo was a symbol of an attempt to self-transform, a search for the divine self to rise above the part of the self identifying with ‘the bad neighbourhood’. Similarly, Peter’s tattoo of ‘eternal liberation’ was an attempt to seek the divine self, to create a transformative relationship through spirituality and meditation. It served as an attempt to calm his thoughts and seek inner peace (eternal liberation) in relationship with his God.

According to Ogden (2011), transformation is a process “that alters self-experience” (p. 14). He continues, “the object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self, where the subject-as-suppliant now feels himself to be the

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recipient of enviro-somatic caring, identified with metamorphoses of the self” (p. 14).

Ogden argued that during times of distress, the transformative object is sought and fused with to create hope. This appears to resonate with why tattoos were used to ‘make present’ and ‘make real’ a transformative object to deal with past losses and distress found in human relationships. Again, this appears to link to the idea that the tattoo served to symbolise and make permanent a needed object or object relationship that otherwise existed only precariously in the mind. The tattoos, ‘the reminders’, appear to further signify a means of calling up soothing objects, their solution to transforming and healing difficult experiences.

### **Destructive phantasies**

Bowlby’s (1980) work suggests that the role of the caregiver in regulating the infant’s emotions is internalised to provide a form of self-regulation. From Bion’s (1962) perspective, feelings that are projected into the caregiver are states that the infant cannot yet contain or tolerate. Klein argued that these are typically destructive feelings originating from the paranoid-schizoid position. As a way to reduce the anxiety, the child splits the caregiver (or part of an object) into good and bad (Elliot, 2002). This enables the child to keep the idealised object separate from the destructive or persecutory object (Elliot, 2002). Elliot (2002) argues that this (paranoid splitting) is mainly accomplished through projection and introjection: “in projection, the infant projects both positive and negative feelings outwards; in introjection, the infant takes into itself what it imaginatively perceives of others and the outside world” (Elliot, 2002, p. 84). These processes facilitate the development of the self and the way the world is viewed. As the infant develops, they have the capacity to internalise containment and have the capacity to regulate their own thoughts and feelings based on the modelling

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and mirroring of the caregiver. It is through the modification and containment of these projected states that the infant is able to successfully integrate good and bad parts of the self through introjection (Frosh, 2002).

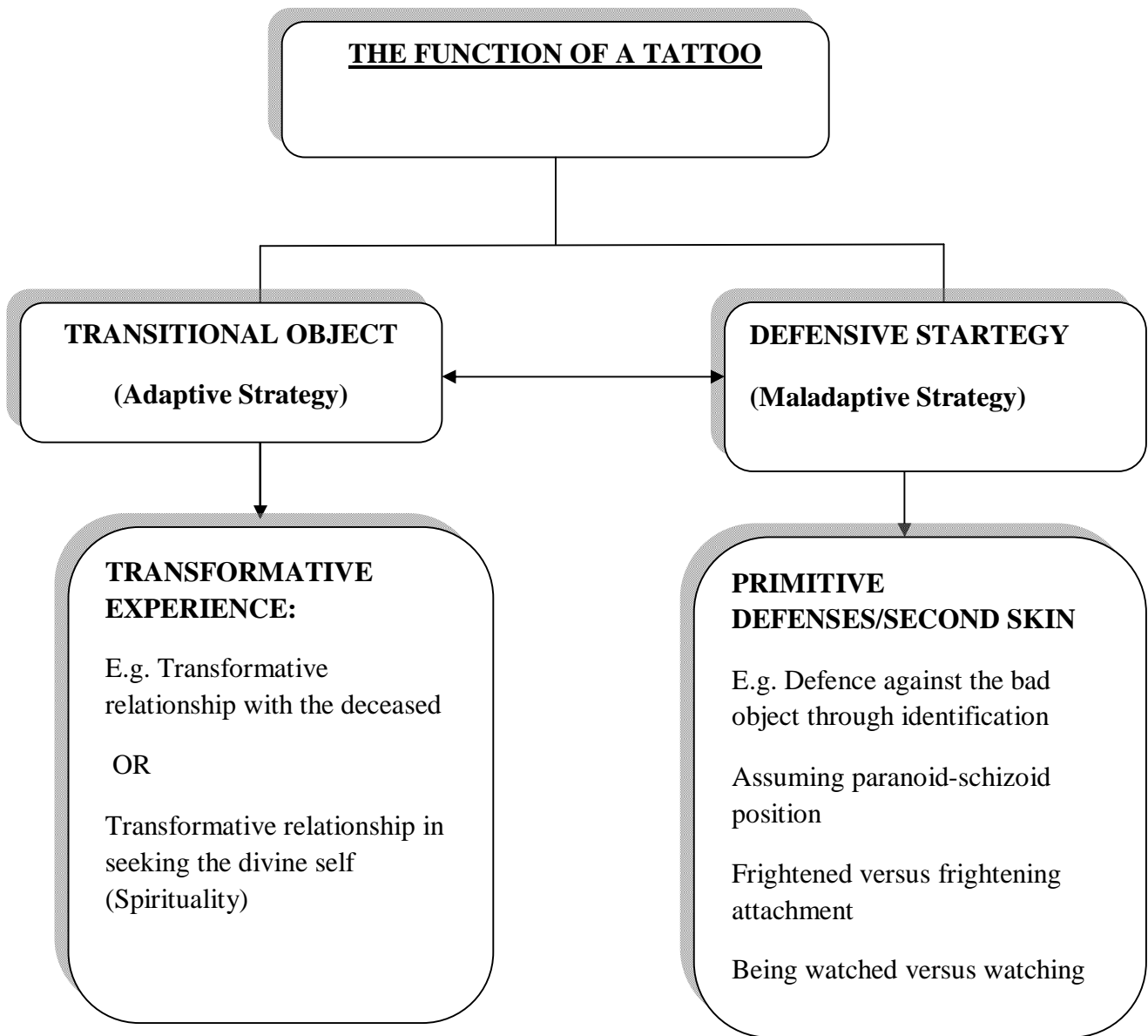
Kelly's descriptions were captivating in the sense that her narratives moved from one extreme to the other. It appeared that she identified with objects (or parts of objects) that were frightened or frightening, innocent or destructive, in her inner world. As evident in the results, I was left with feelings of paranoia and fear in the interview. It appeared that Kelly still saw people as either good or bad (or perceived good objects turning bad). It could be argued that Kelly was never able to successfully integrate good and bad objects as her caregiver may not have provided a secure and nurturing environment for her to develop a healthy representation of herself and others. It appeared that she introjected and identified with the destructive or negative feelings that her caregiver possibly could not contain. In Kelly's internal working model, she has internalised and identified with the destructive object. It appeared that she replayed and re-created "dysfunctional relational drama, using the same unhealthy script and simply casting different individuals [partners] to play the same character roles" (Gurney et al., 2007, p. 963).

Patrick's tattoo appeared to function as the creation of an idealised, admired masculine self, as evident in the theme of 'being watched.' Here the participant felt the need to idealise aggression. The tattoo of the dragon coming through his flesh aptly symbolised the process of strength, invincibility and destruction. His tattoo symbolised a primitive kind of destructiveness associated with underlying paranoia. It appears that Patrick's tattoos were also used to idealise aggression and masculinity.

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For both these participants, it appeared that they had to create their own ‘holding environment.’ More importantly, it appeared that their tattoos served to frighten their object by wearing it on the skin. Furthermore, both appeared to make use of infantile defences to dramatise conflict between good and bad. They also both identified with destructiveness and destructive objects. This suggests that they both made use of paranoid-schizoid defences, particularly splitting and projective identification with a bad object. This appeared to emerge in the transference-countertransference with me where feelings of fear dominated the interview. Both the participants desired others to be frightened and/or intimidated by them. In these cases, the skin appears to represent something similar to Bick’s second skin phenomenon, where destruction marked on skin acts as a defensive barrier.

On reviewing the results of the current study, it appears that tattoos are used for adaptive as well as maladaptive purposes. This is similar to Irwin’s (2001) findings that suggested tattoos may be viewed as following negative- or positive deviant practices. The current study, however, suggests that both have in common the use of the tattoo to relocate and ‘concretise’ psychic experience that feel precarious or uncontainable. A diagram will be used to illustrate this point:





### **From transition to transformation**

What remains central in Object Relations Theory is the “idea of relationship as the primary motivation force in infant development” (Jacques, 2000., p. 68). Winnicott argued that if this relationship is considered ‘good-enough’ and responsive, then the infant will successfully move through separation and individuation towards healthy integration of the self (Jacques, 2000). As a means to down regulate anxiety and distress in the process the infant makes use of a transitional space, where “mirroring, constancy and support” is sought (Jacques, 2000, p. 68). Jacques (2000) argued that “this transitional space is the domain of culture, whether in art, religion, imaginative living or scientific work” (p.68). Similarly, this study indicated that transitional objects are required during times of transition and distress in adult life. Here, tattoos served as constant and permanent representations of an object to regulate the participant’s journey. Literature suggests that in times of distress or transition, the need for transitional objects is triggered and returned to if it was experienced as ‘good enough’ in infancy. It is a return to or a reminder of a good enough ‘holding environment’ where the transitional object can be found or re-created. Karacaoglan (2011) suggests that separation-individuation as proposed by Winnicott may be limited in individuals who have tattoos. Instead of assuming a successful transitional object position, the “internal object becomes unreliable and provides no security” (Karacaoglan, 2011, p. 94). Therefore, the collapse or failed integration of the original transitional experience and the desire for permanent tattooing can be interpreted as a way of creating or re-creating a more permanent transitional object on the skin.

From this point of view, anxiety and unbearable experience pose a threat to the self, creating a need for a permanent symbolic representation of an aspect of the self. For this reason, Karacaoglan (2011) points out that the act of tattooing occurs at two phases. The first

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phase begins with a vague desire of being tattooed. He suggests that these desires are due to feelings of unease and anxiety. The second phase occurs when the individual concretises the design of the tattoo. After the individual has been tattooed, a period of relaxation sets in. The individual then feels more calm and secure in his or her own skin. When examining the act of tattooing as a two-phase model, the first phase may be related to the paranoid position that Klein discusses where anxiety poses a threat to the self. The second phase, appears linked to a move towards the depressive position where some integration of negative experience can occur (Karacaoglan, 2011). Here, the externalization of an aspect of the self onto the skin serves a transitional function where difficult experiences can be more easily thought about. In short, it enables some form of integration or cohesion. As discussed earlier, this form of cohesion may be viewed as both adaptive or defensive.

### **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study aimed to understand and indentify the presence of psychodynamic motivations for acquiring tattoos. Attachment Theory and Object Relations Theory were the proposed theoretical frameworks to understand the underlying narratives of tattoos. Results of this study suggest that tattoos served as both adaptive and maladaptive strategies. Tattoos appeared to be an attempt to create a transitional object acquired during times of anxiety and distress following a life transition. Here, the tattoo (an attempt to create a transitional object) is made 'real and present' on the skin. Simultaneously, the permanence of the ink on the skin was viewed as serving a transitional role because they were regarded as 'markers' that could be returned to. Of primary importance, the results of this study highlighted the adaptive process of mourning and loss that, through the use of tattoos, lead to a transformative relationship with the lost object. Similarly, tattoos with a spiritual connotation served as anchors for the self that enabled the participants to seek 'the divine self' during times of distress. This further captured the transformational element that tattoos carried. Tattoos however also captured maladaptive patterns of relatedness with others. Results suggest that these maladaptive strategies were linked to infantile defences, identification with destructive drives and splitting of the object.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that Psychoanalysis as a research method has been questioned in relation to its validity. According to Rapaport, (1959) "the techniques of psychoanalysis have been studied, but its methods have hardly been given systematic thought"(p.151). Psychoanalysis as a research method has thus been criticised for various reasons. Further, Kvale (1999) points out that the psychoanalytical interview may be limited as a source for data collection if data is subject to overgeneralisation and overinterpretation (Kvale, 1999).

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Kvale, however, also emphasises the role of the psychoanalytic interview in the history of psychological knowledge production and how this method has been greatly neglected. He points out that psychoanalytic interviewing allows for interpretation of meaning. It is through the interpretation of meaning that the emergence of ambiguity is greatly valued. Given the complexity and ambiguity of object-relations theory, this method appeared to appreciate what other methods criticise.

This study aimed to gather as much detail as possible from the narratives of the subjects. Further, this study was not intended for the purpose of generalising the findings, but rather for appreciating the specific meaning tattoos provide for specific people in a detailed context. Therefore, this study aimed to focus specifically on the context as described by the subject in order to uncover conflicts, needs or desires in an attempt to understand and appreciate the unconscious meanings and motivations behind tattoos.

Further limitations evident in the current study may relate to the limitations of the sample itself. For instance, tattoos may well serve other functions that were not captured by this study's sample. Further, motivations may differ in other populations (e.g. persons who only seek one discreet tattoo) not captured by this study.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that a larger sample size be used to conduct a large-scale cross-analysis to generate common symbolic representations of object relations for significant life-transitions. Furthermore, studies that consider gender differences and the use of tattoos may be fruitful.

7. References

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

**Jonelle du Plessis**

**207516721**

**Date/time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Setting:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Respondent no:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduce self**

**Permission to record**

**Purpose of the study**

**The interview guide will be based on follow-up questions based on the first interview with participants.**

**The interview guide will focus mainly on the story and symbolic representation behind the tattoo.**

**Follow up questions will thus be asked around the narrative generated by the tattoo and further explored to attain a more in-depth understanding of associations, desires and needs of the participants.**

**Appendix 2: Informed Consent**

**Jonelle du Plessis**

**207516721**

**Tattooed narratives: A psychoanalytic perspective**

**INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM**

My name is Jonelle du Plessis. I am a Masters student in Clinical Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus. I am conducting research on the meaning tattoos have for the individual with the tattoo. We are conducting a preliminary study using individuals with any form of body art (tattooing).

We are asking you whether you will allow us to conduct a minimum of 2 - 3 interviews with you about the meaning that your tattoo/s has/have. If you agree, we will ask you to participate in 2 - 3 interviews for approximately one hour (face-to-face). We are also asking you to give us permission to tape record the interview. We tape record interviews so that we can accurately record what was said. I may ask to photograph your tattoo but you are free to refuse but still participate in the study.

Please understand that **your participation is voluntary** and you are not being forced to take part in this study. The choice of whether to participate or not, is yours alone. If you choose not to take part, you will not be affected in any way whatsoever. If you agree to participate, you may stop participating in the research at any time and tell me that you don't want to go continue. If you do this there will also be no penalties and you will not be prejudiced in any way.

**Confidentiality**

Any records that identify you will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. All identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will not be available to others. We will refer to you by a code number or pseudonym (another name) in any publication. If however, you feel that you would like to reveal your identity, you may do so.

## TATTOOED NARRATIVES

At the present time, we do not see any risks in your participation. The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life. Should any psychological discomfort be caused during the interview or interview questions, referrals may be made for counselling at the Centre for Applied Psychology, UKZN.

### **Benefits**

There are no immediate benefits to you from participating in this study. However, this study will be extremely helpful to us in developing a research proposal on this topic that we hope will promote further understanding and implied significance of tattoos as symbols.

If you would like to receive feedback on our study, we will record your phone number on a separate sheet of paper and can send you the results of the study when it is completed sometime after October 2012.

### **Who to contact if you have been harmed or have any concerns**

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee. If you have any questions or complaints about ethical aspects of the research or feel that you have been harmed in any way by participating in this study, please contact Professor D. Cartwright on (031) 260 2507.

If you have concerns or questions about the research, you may contact the researcher of this project on 073 897 4815 or email: 207516721@ukzn.ac.za



**CONSENT**

I hereby agree to participate in research on ‘Tattooed narratives.’ I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I also understand that I can stop participating at any point should I not want to continue and that this decision will not in any way affect me negatively.

I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not necessarily to benefit me personally in the immediate or short term.

I understand that my participation (and digital pictures taken) will remain confidential.

.....

**Signature of participant**

I hereby agree to the tape-recording of my participation in the study.

.....

**Signature of participant**

I hereby agree to the pictures taken of the tattoo in digital format

.....

**Signature of participant**

**Date:**.....



# TATTOOED NARRATIVES

## Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance



20 August 2012

**Ms Jonelle du Plessis**  
School of Applied Human Sciences

Dear Ms du Plessis

**Protocol reference number: HSS/0739/012M**  
**Project title: Tattooed narratives: A psychoanalytic perspective**

### **EXPEDITED APPROVAL**

I wish to inform you that your application has been granted Full Approval through an expedited review process.

**Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.**

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

.....  
**Professor Steven Collings (Chair)**

/pm

cc Supervisor: Prof D Cartwright  
cc Academic leader: Professor Johanna Hendrina Bultendach  
cc School Admin: Ms Doreen Hettingh

.....  
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