

Who's Hurting Who? The Ethics of Engaging the Marked Body

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This paper outlines, and forms a part of, my journey through the issues, ethics and discomforts that are enmeshed in my relationship with my research. My work, which focuses on women's experiences of body marking and which began as a feminist project, has evolved into a complex and messy narrative from which I am unable to separate myself. My negotiation of the issues of ethics and representation ultimately dissolves the borders of fact and fiction, truth and representation, self and other. And while this confirms my initial premise that a separated and objective researcher is an impossibility, this increases rather than resolves the dilemmas that I face in seeking to engage the marked body.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores my journey through the issues that have been central to my research practices, the ways in which I am located within them, and how this relationship contextualizes both the research and the knowledges in this field. My work focuses on women's experiences of "self-injury" and "body modification",¹ which I locate within the negotiation of gendered, embodied subjectivity, and for which I use the generic term 'body marking'.

In its sequential narrative this paper traces the path through the ethical dilemmas which have shaped my empirical and theoretical processes and my critique of conventional applications of primary and secondary research material. I suggest that the issues of researcher location and the context-bound nature of knowledge impact upon representation whether this is intended and acknowledged or not. I reflect upon the possibilities of shifting these borders through the use of ethnographic fictions and

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poetry, and consider the implications of these forms in terms of ethics and representation.

My research began as a feminist project in which ethics – in particular where sensitivity around, and avoidance of harm to the participants – were primary concerns. This focus has transformed and evolved in conjunction with my research practices and this paper is offered as a reflection of this process. As such there are two possible readings. First, as a straight text, which *describes* the development of my research in a reflexive account of my practices. The second interpretation invites an ‘active reader’ (Sparkes, 2003: 71) to engage with some of the complexities, connections and discomforts of my relationship with the research and to consider, alongside the direct narrative, the clues, gaps and spaces which litter the text.

It was never my intention to work within the autoethnographic form. However, my contention that the author/researcher/theorists autobiography is intrinsic to and inseparable from the knowledge produced, is ultimately confirmed within my own research practice. Thus, my pursuit of ethics which led me through primary and secondary methodologies, and notions of reflexivity, ultimately results in a ‘messy text’ (Denzin, 1997; Smith, 2002) where the borders of truth and knowledge, fact and fiction, self and other are blurred.

METHODOLOGIES: PRIMARY

My current research is influenced by my life experiences and previous work (particularly residential social work, and conducting feminist research) as much as by sociological conventions. These experiences have shaped my subject interests and choices, the knowledge and ethical considerations I bring to them, and have also re-enforced my scepticism of concepts such as objectivity, rationality, and “the truth”. I am also particularly uncomfortable with the ways in which professionals and academics appropriate and interpret experiences of others in order to universalize “fact”, policy and “knowledge”, without reflecting on their own values and assumptions, or, the integrity of the individuals whom they discuss. For me, as someone who has always been implicated in multiple ways – both direct and indirect – with the work with which I am involved this not only questions the ethics but also the validity of the knowledge produced.

For these reasons, and as I was acutely aware during my research with women clients of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, primary “interview”-based research can be extremely problematic. Issues of power, safety and confidentiality, are huge concerns alongside the privileging of the researcher’s needs and interests over the needs and well being of the participant.

Roberts (1989), in her research with survivors of rape, described the problems of the research relationship in such a way that implications have never ceased to impact upon me. She said:

Rape is the turning of a woman into an object for the rapist's use only. There is no relationship, but an empty function between the rapist and the raped. It seemed untenable then to take on research methods which reflected such a process, for the process of objectification itself seemed as objectionable as victimisation.

(Roberts, 1989: 46)

And if, as feminist research (Inckle, 1997; Lees, 1996) has highlighted, the questioning of women throughout the legal system is experienced as equivalent to a repeat victimization then the research interaction may be potentially very damaging indeed.

In terms of the specific subject matter I am currently working with, the *mis*-use of "primary data" is a common occurrence especially within psychiatric theorisations of women's experience of "self-injury". Psychiatrists, both feminist (Miller, 1994; Babiker and Arnold, 1997) and otherwise (Favazza, 1996; Levenkron, 1998), unrepentantly use their interactions with their clients – which would be bound by agreements of confidentiality – to support their own theoretical constructions. There is no negotiation or reciprocity in this process. The women have no opportunity to control the use of their experiences, to explain or qualify the way they are being interpreted, or, to present their own understanding of them. Further, the knowledge which results can be so antithetical to the needs and interests of the women themselves, that, to modify Roberts' analogy, one could legitimately question who, in fact, is hurting who.

A number of studies ... portray the typical wrist slasher as 'an attractive, intelligent, unmarried young woman, who is either promiscuous or overtly afraid of sex, easily addicted and unable to relate to others. ... She slashes her wrists indiscriminately and repeatedly at the slightest provocation, but she does not commit suicide. She feels release with the commission of her act.' ... Most self-cutters [are considered] diagnostically to be schizophrenic or borderline.

(Favazza, 1996: 167)

Primary research interactions in which the purpose of the interaction is defined and constructed by the academic or professional are then fraught with issues. This is exacerbated when the subject matter is of a sensitive or personal nature, where there are negative connotations associated with the experience or behaviour, and where the power imbalance is such that the participant is at risk of experiencing damage as a result of the research interaction or the uses to which it is subsequently applied.

I adopted a range of practices in order to try and address these issues in my research. My participants are self-selecting, and enter the research through a negotiated process from which they may withdraw entirely, or revoke any of their “data” at any point. I use participant consent and researcher commitment forms² to ensure that the purposes, the degree of confidentiality, and each participant’s desired level of involvement are clear, and that I adhere to her wishes at all times. I also encourage as much participant control over the research as possible, in everything from enabling her to choose the time and location of the work to selecting the pseudonym by which she will be known.

I see my role in these interactions as to facilitate telling, rather than attempting to achieve “comparable data” through interview techniques. I believe in honouring the integrity of those who participate in my research, and acknowledging that such sharing of information is a special gift which must be treated with the utmost care, respect and responsibility.

METHODOLOGIES: SECONDARY

Issues of power, however, remain contentious especially in that the giving of personal information is guided by the researcher and tends not to be reciprocated. Some researchers have used secondary sources as a means of overcoming the issues of directly extracting personal narratives in an unequal setting and it was something I considered myself. This approach seems – and certainly as I considered it – to be based upon an assumption that once material is already in the public domain, the responsibilities and ethical issues surrounding the use of this material are abated.

The use of secondary sources has become increasingly popular with the availability of internet discussion sites on which researchers anonymously ‘lurk’ (see Denzin, 1998; Markham, 1998) to collect ‘insider’ information³ and is especially common in theorizations of “body modification” and “self-injury”. This kind of ‘insider’ information is also taken from interest group or ‘self-help’ publications to which the researcher may subscribe despite not identifying with that particular group. (See Huck, 1998; Jeffreys, 2000; Kilby, 2001, below.)

Thus, despite resolving some of the “direct contact” power issues, this kind of approach does not create any less researcher dominated knowledge. Rather, it closes down opportunities for reciprocation and active participation and results in increased appropriation and objectification of participants and their experiences. The following examples illustrate this point.

Sheila Jeffreys has written about sexuality, power (1990; 2002), and what she calls ‘self-mutilation’ (2000) from a radical feminist perspective. Making selective use of secondary sources Jeffreys argues that *all* bodily

interventions are a form of 'self-mutilation' that results from patriarchy.⁴ They are 'a savage embrace of the most grave attacks [women] can make on their bodies' (Jeffreys, 1994 in Sullivan, 2001: 80), and are 'practiced overwhelmingly by groups in society with unequal access to power or influence as a result of their sex, sexuality, or disability' (Jeffreys, 2000: 414).

When Jeffreys is confronted with a self-analysis of these practices that contradict her position, she uses the marginalized social categorization of the individual to explain their inability to know "the truth" of their actions as she is able to. Here, she uses the testimony of a young man (taken from an Internet site) who relates his engagement with "body modification" to his aesthetic sensibilities, his specific physicality, and to challenging the social constructions of disablement: 'I have pierced and tattooed myself, my body, to compliment my disability. ... With piercing and tattooing I make the choice of what happens to my body. This way I reclaim my body as my own' (in Jeffreys, 2000: 424–5). For Jeffreys this statement merely demonstrates how this man's oppression makes him unable to recognize the "reality" of his circumstances and practices.

Th[is] intellectualising post-modern determination to avoid the recognition of real pain and oppression enables [people] to celebrate even the mutilation of the disabled, [who] chose the path of self-mutilation to deal with the effects of chronic degenerative disease.

(Jeffreys, 2000: 424)

Thus, Jeffreys recognizes and then re-iterates the obliteration of the self-definition of those within marginalized social categories. Clearly then, secondary sources can be used in order to manipulate information to suit the author's political agenda, primarily because the research is used *exactly* for this purpose rather than to engage with the experiences of the particular individuals. These problems can also occur in the use of secondary sources even where the agenda is less pre-defined. Not only because the participants cannot speak on their own terms, and have no opportunity to respond to the author's analysis, but also because when the author fails to reflect upon her own relationship to the subject matter, she reconstructs – unintentionally, but nevertheless clearly (to an active/critical reader) – her own autobiography of values and judgements, motivations and influences within the text. Two examples illustrate this. They are both feminist accounts which intend to highlight the links between gender and firstly "body modification", and secondly "self-injury".

Verity Huck (1998) researched women's experiences of 'body modification' in order to challenge the radical feminist pathologization of women's bodily interventions. Huck argues that agency, empowerment,

and self-definition are at the heart of women's engagements with their bodies through tattooing and piercing which are at the same time inseparable from gendered power differentials. In this context 'body modification' can offer women a means of 'control, stability and empowerment' and allow women 'to overcome the oppressive potentialities that the female has through her own body' (Huck, 1998: 3).

However, Huck seems unable to avoid universalizing from her specific beliefs around which practices construe agency and empowerment, and which cannot. She asks: 'Can body modification be seen as a means of personal survival when it closely resembles (or even substitutes) acts of self-mutilation?' (Huck, 1998: 12).

The second example is Kilby (2001), who sets out to 'bear witness to self harm' and to de-stigmatize and empathize with those whom she writes about, again from secondary sources. However, she too is unable to avoid generalizing from her own view of, and responses to "self-injury". Perhaps this is precisely because she has never engaged in a direct discussion with the women she whom speaks of and for. Thus, and seemingly without reflection she projects her subjective responses as universal truths.

There is something particularly hard to witness here. ... The act of harming one's own skin by cutting it up and tearing it apart speaks with a 'voice' so sheer that it is virtually *impossible* for *anyone* to bear witness to it.

(Kilby, 2001: 124) [my emphasis]

In this statement she obliterates the vast range of contexts – published and otherwise – in which women 'witness' and support each other in their experiences alongside discussing the broader medical and social responses to them.⁵ At the same time Kilby believes that "self-injury" is a behaviour whose meaning and practice relies upon being witnessed and responded to by another (presumably who does not "self-injure"): 'The cut-skin testimony of self-harm is a bloody means of seeking the affirmation of an existence denied' (Kilby, 2001: 132).

Thus, despite intending to construct an empathetic analysis of women's bodily practices, the researcher's distance from the subject, which is re-enforced through the use of secondary sources, means that both Huck and Kilby ultimately simply reiterate their own preconceived position reformulated as empirically validated knowledge.

I made vigorous attempts to avoid these problems in my research and to include the participants at all stages of analysis and theoretical development.⁶ I also used a reflexive narrative to make my location within the research apparent. However, I continued to feel that on a deeper and more fundamental level there remained contentious and problematic issues with my authoring of this knowledge.

BORDERS OF "TRUTH" AND "KNOWLEDGE"

So far then it is apparent that the location and perspective of the researcher is both inseparable from, and integral to, the knowledge produced. Davis (1995) has argued that in order to research women's engagements with their embodied subjectivity (in her work through cosmetic surgery), a particular ethical and moral orientation is required to avoid the appropriation and objectification of individuals and their experiences. This includes an 'empathic understanding' and a 'conception of morality that is self-reflexive' in which 'learning to endure ambivalence, discomfort and doubt is a pre-requisite for understanding. ... [It also] prevents the premature theoretical closure which is antithetical to responsible scholarship' (Davis, 1995: 169–81).

In this way reflexivity operates as both an ethical and empirical tool. This dual notion of reflexivity impacts upon the process of knowledge construction within both my theoretical and methodological frameworks and recognizes the multiple ways in which I am implicated in my work. Reflexivity is crucial in terms of making these processes transparent and enabling a range of interpretations rather than attempting to provide a 'single objective truth ... [from] acts of observation and states of knowing' (Steedman, 1991: 55). Thus, I conceptualize my research as a reflexive process of knowledge production in which the empirical and theoretical dimensions evolve in a mutual and ongoing process, rather than as an attempt to produce "facts" or evidence for an already formulated argument. I invite the reader to engage with both the process and the individuals who have been integral to my understanding of and relationship to these issues.

The recognition of the centrality of the reflexive researcher/author in the construction of knowledge also begins to challenge some of the established boundaries between "science" and "art".

Much literary criticism explicitly encourages constitutive reflexivity, the fact that the author constitutes and forms part of the 'reality' she creates is axiomatic to the analytic style ... tension thus arises because social science is attracted by the constructivist undertones of constitutive reflexivity in its literary mood, but repelled by the implications for its own pretensions to produce 'scientific' social study.

(Woolgar, 1988: 23)

This tension has become increasingly apparent within my research, particularly as I negotiate issues of appropriation, representation, power, empathy and equality within primary research methods. Likewise, the recognition of the centrality of (my)self (as researcher and author) within this process, further questions the borders between social science and fiction. It is the interrogation of these boundaries and its relevance to issues

of ethics and representation which have been central to the development of “creative” sociological methods.

Angrosino⁷ (1998) who spent 10 years working as an ethnographer and a volunteer in a residential project for developmentally disabled men became increasingly frustrated with inability of conventional methods of social science writing to communicate the complex and multi-layered realities of the people and environment he experienced. In order to enable his audience to engage with his work on an experiential level, analytically *and* emotionally, he adopted a “creative” approach and wrote the key events and issues as ‘ethnographic fictions’. He suggests that ‘a story doesn’t have to be *factual* in order to be true’ (Angrosino, 1998: 34). “Fictionalising” his research enabled him to vividly recreate the context, key events, issues and characters, and at the same time avoid imposing a reading or interpretation upon the events.

The act of reading a fictionalised ethnography enables the reader to enter not only another community, but also the consciousness of the ethnographer ... you lose the authoritative voice of omniscient science. But you create a world in which the reader can interact people and come to his or her own conclusion about what’s going on. The reader can do what the ethnographer does, immerse him or herself in the particulars and try and figure out what it all means.

(Angrosino, 1998: 95)

These fictionalized accounts provided valuable resources in terms of policy development and at the same time addressed ethical issues around appropriation and confidentiality. Further, fictionalized accounts may also facilitate progressive knowledge and analysis. ‘Using stories to represent research can also resist premature closure on understanding, conveying complexity and ambiguity and making space for alternative interpretations’ (Gray, 2004: 45).

Fictionalizing ethnographic work is also advantageous in conveying subject matter which is unusual or contentious within academia, in that ‘the process allows the ... [reader] to think about data in new, unpredictable ways’ (Gray, 2004: 45). Gray’s (2004) fictionalized representation of his encounter with his research participant, a ‘eunuch’, enables the reader clear access to the agenda, motivations and experiences of the participant *and* the researcher, to reflect critically on their own position, and to self-consciously analyse the layers of meaning and relationships within the work, including their own. Finally, fictionalized or ‘messy texts’ can deepen levels of insight and communication through facilitating the sharing and experience of an ‘embodied tale’ (Smith, 2002: 114).

Developing ethnographic fiction as an empirical tool has enabled me to include in my research women’s experiences that had been crucial to the

development of my analysis but which were ethically contentious because they resulted from interactions and relationships that occurred outside of clearly defined research parameters.⁸ Thus, I have been able to incorporate material that would be impossible for me to re-access, and ethically problematic to refer to directly, in a way that honours the safety and confidentiality of the "sources" while allowing me to clearly describe the particulars of the women's lives that have been integral to my analysis. Finally, using fictions can also allow the author to write in, or make use of, her own experiences with a degree of anonymity and safety which are foregone within autoethnographic or highly reflexive texts.

The following piece is taken from a larger series of connected "ethnographies", and demonstrates how I have fictionalized characters and their experiences and relocated them in a "real" setting in which I was also present as both "participant" and "ethnographer". I use this particular extract here for three reasons. First, the story requires active readership; pertinent silences invite the reader to create meanings from, and enable multiple possible interpretations of the text. These readings are enmeshed in the reader's relationship with the issues themselves, and their responses to my formulation of them in the preceding sections of this paper. Secondly, each of the main characters is narrated through the position of her companion. This strategy is intended to highlight the ways in which the articulation of, and making of meaning from, what is both seen and unseen is contentious and context-dependent, enmeshed in subjectivity and projection and can never be ultimately validated as finite or objective knowledge forms.

Finally, my presence as the ethnographer is conspicuous and apparently disconnected, subject to the gaze of the reader and the characters around me. I reposition myself in this way in order to highlight and to some extent rework the traditional direction of the ethnographer's knowing gaze.

THE THIRD ANNUAL DUBLIN TATTOO CONVENTION

Leopardstown Racecourse, November 21st–23rd 2003

Siobhan & Niamh

Siobhan looks anxiously around her. This is not quite what she was expecting, and she scan's Niamh's face for equal signs of disappointment. Niamh is wriggling out of her coat despite the fact it is not very warm and that all she has on underneath is a sleeveless and backless halter neck dress. The dress of course was picked to display her tattoos to full advantage, which have progressed in the space of less than twelve months from a single emblem on the back of her neck to full sleeves down each arm, a full back piece and a design across the upper part of her chest. Siobhan always

experiences a mixture of jealousy and fear when she looks at what Niamh has had done to her body.

Her jealousy perhaps more to do with the fact that Niamh's boyfriend both adores and encourages her tattoos and treats her like she is some kind of ornate and exotic goddess. Although, Siobhan could see that same beauty clear as daylight when Niamh was still in her grungy purple sweaters and jeans. That jealousy is something that she finds her self throwing back at Niamh, in a small spiky ball of resentment, any time Niamh gently teases her about her reservation about getting any more than the two small tattoos she has hidden on her body.

Then there is the fear. When she looks at Niamh and how much she has changed in such a small space of time. It's only a year and a half since they left school where they had both been un-cool and unpopular, Niamh the more so, subject to constant teasing about her weight and the size of her breasts. And now, and especially since she had been going out with Tom – who claims to be ten but Siobhan often thinks probably closer to twenty years her senior – she has morphed into a tattooed and sparsely clad, often aggressively self-confident stereotype of 'girl power'. Siobhan can't help worrying about her. Nor is she entirely convinced that beneath the new tough exterior, and sexually confident and experienced persona that it is not just the old unconfident and self-hating Niamh more convincingly disguised under a thicker camouflage. The same Niamh who used to look at her curves and rolls and cry bitterly, spending hours fantasising about the surgical remedies she in which she would indulge if only she had the money, and lamenting the possibility of her ever being loved or desired.

Niamh has stuffed her coat into her bag, and is tugging her dress into place. She looks up at Siobhan, who is still a couple of inches taller than her despite the spike heels, and strides down the steps.

The setting is industrial. Concrete floors with some kind of rubber looking covering, and a low ceiling with pipes and girders exposed, from which the flaking paint reveals dents of rust and dirt. In places pairs of television sets cluster around the beams where anxious punters would normally watch their money trotting away upon badly chosen horses. To the left of a flight of open concrete steps that has been cordoned off with tape stands the bar: the only vaguely attractive and very out of place feature in the building. The bar is made of wood which has been painted a kind of night-sky turquoise and has a matching back drop to it which houses two large shiny mirrors. Above the glass the wood rises to pointed apex which houses a nautical style clock. The bar and the semi-circle it occupies looks like it would more rightly belong in a small rural hotel rather than in the cold harsh expanse of the racecourse. In front of the bar an open space has been filled with mis-matched tables and chairs, cluttered with empty bottles, pint glasses and over flowing ash-trays. It's only mid afternoon and so there are still plenty of vacant chairs, and

most of the tables have only pairs of people sat at them. At one table towards the far end of the room, where a security man stands guarding an exit to the track itself a woman sits alone. She (this is me) is bent over an A4 note pad writing intermittently but furiously, pausing every now and then to drink from a bottle of water or to spend a few minutes gazing around her surroundings. She is wearing a long black skirt, and a cropped fur lined nineteen-sixties style jacket. Her hair is put up in two knots like cat ears on her head, and even from a distance the glint of silver in her ears and nose is apparent. At her feet lies a small over stuffed black back-pack, and two discarded crutches decorated with purple fur.

At a table near-by a group of three women have spread themselves out, they are distinctive by their appearance and the confident way in which they occupy the space around them. They are chatting animatedly using broad gestures and laughing with open mouths and bodies rocking. Two of the women have long, wide hair extensions; one in a black leather mini skirt and 'cyber punk' boots has electric blue streaking the fine black dreadlocks which are lifted into a high pony tail sprouting from the top of her head. She has creases around her mouth and her eyes which remain even after her smile has disappeared, and in places her eye-liner has begun to seep into them. In contrast to her hair she wears a semi-transparent pink, mesh top which she has partially covered with a black cut down top not much bigger than a bra. Close up the tattoos on her arms and legs would be partially visible, but she wears them with an unselfconscious manner un-needful of showing them off. To her right is her companion who also has hair extensions, but this time in blond and red, and worn loosely down her back. The third woman at the table has short spiky hair streaked with bright pink. She wears a ring in her bottom lip and her nose, as well as a stud in her tongue. She has a tight faded black long sleeved t-shirt slashed in places and held together with safety pins. She has a thick metal belt around her waist over a fishtail skirt that rises at the front to reveal mesh tights and chunky boots.

Siobhan realises she has been staring at these women with a kind of awe, they look so confident so sophisticated in a 'fuck you' kind of way, she feels a longing to be part of that group. But there is also something else, she can't take her eyes of the woman with the short pink hair; her face, the curves of her body, the way that she moves, and how her nose crinkles when she laughs. Siobhan feels something knot in her stomach and a warmth spread on her skin. She pulls her attention away, shocked and ashamed. She presses fingernails of her left hand into the palm of her right almost puncturing the skin in four neat crescent moons, and looks quickly at Niamh to see if she has noticed. Niamh, however, has finished surveying the scene in front of them and is marching through the chairs and tables towards a booth selling body jewellery. Siobhan trots after her, and as she passes the table where the

women sit she can't help glancing back at them. Three men have arrived at the table and the women's attention is diverted to them. They seem bland in comparison, like a different species, or an ineffective prototype to their exotic looking companions. Like many of the other men in the arena they all have shaven heads, loose jeans and tight t-shirts revealing varying degrees of overweightness in the stomach, and tribal-style tattoos on their arms.

Niamh peers into the glass display cabinets and the treasures they hold. She is not actually that interested in belly button rings or tongue studs, since she has no particular desire to have anything more than her ears pierced and then only the twice that she has already. She does, however, need to ground herself. This place is not what she was expecting. She had imagined something glossy, all black and red with lots of outrageous looking people, and neatly separated shop-like booths, a bit like some of the alternative shopping malls in Madrid. Instead she finds herself in a dirty warehouse building, with rows of tattoo stalls built together out of blue plasterboard like a shanty town in a cold grey tundra. Everyone here apart from those women at the table – who on close inspection appeared to be quite old and who Niamh subsequently couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for – looks incredibly ordinary. In fact this could just be the kind of crowd you would find in a regular Dublin pub any night of the week. The only slight difference is in the number of tattooed arms, but if everyone put on their coats they would just be your ordinary, boring, everyday people.

Niamh can't help but be disappointed, and somewhere in the back of her mind she thinks again about moving to London. If only Tom would, but he has lived there before and has no intention of leaving Dublin again. She turns around and looks at Siobhan and can't help feeling a bit disappointed with her as well. She is dressed unexceptionally in grey combats, and a white short sleeved tight t-shirt worn over a long sleeved lilac one. She gets frustrated with her as well sometimes, the way that she remains so conservative despite everything, and especially since she, Niamh, has really found herself. Siobhan does have her tongue and eyebrow pierced and two tattoos but they are so rarely visible they are almost not worth having in Niamh's mind. And Siobhan has such a good body too, she is tall and thin and could look really amazing if she only put a bit of effort into it, and would have no trouble getting herself a boyfriend. Maybe even one of Tom's mates, although she has to agree some of them do seem a bit old. Siobhan continues however, to wear trousers and long sleeves all year round, day and night, and acts all weird around men when they are out. Then Niamh feels guilty, she does love Siobhan, she really is her best and truest friend, and really those irritations are nothing compared to the bond that there is between them. And Siobhan has always been there for her, however bad she felt or ugly she seemed to herself Siobhan never did anything but love and support her. It's not that she doesn't accept her, she just wants to *help* her, to make the best

of herself, just to wear something sleeveless and a bit low in the front once in a while wouldn't kill her for gods-sake!

Suitably rallied by her mental critique, Niamh turns to Siobhan 'c'mon lets go and have a look at some of the tattooists at work' she says 'I'm dying to see if any of them are any good!' As they swing around to walk back across the seating area, a man climbs onto the makeshift stage by the D.J. box, and announces an imminent performance by 'the most tattooed man in the world'. Niamh and Siobhan look at each other and without speaking agree to stay and watch. They pull up two chairs and sit together just to the left of the woman with the note pad, who rolls up the wad of paper and stuffs it into her bag, takes out a small digital camera and angles herself in the same direction as the two friends towards the stage.

Kiesinger (1998), in 'Portrait of an anorexic life', also experimented with creative methods of portraying the depth and complexity of women's experiences, as well as the relationships she developed with them during the course of her research. She abandoned conventional methods and used poetry to present evocative, in-depth accounts, rich with the emotion experienced.⁹ Poetry has similarly been used to convey the complexities of a range of experiences including; locations of 'race' and 'ethnicity' (Austin, 1996; Travisino, 1998), and unmarried motherhood (Richardson, 1992).

The use of this creative form resonates with me on many levels, and not without some ambiguity and discomforts. In positive terms, the poetic form recognises and incorporates the emotional and embodied interchanges that are present within a research interaction but which are lost within a transcribed text (however coded).¹⁰

Secondly, in my work outside academia, I noticed how poetry is often favoured both in the public domain, as well as in private/personal explorations, as a means of articulating the layers and complexities of traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse, homelessness and violence. Finally, I have had a longstanding interest in creative writing and have been writing (very bad) poetry for a number of years.

Overall, poetry emphasizes the implications of our own experience and subjectivity as individuals and researchers for the work we produce, and the fluidity of the boundaries of that role and the meanings we create. I believe that all knowledge is produced at the intersection of our subjectivity, our autobiography, repeatable "facts" and the fictions we make of them, and our own perceptual processes which are inseparable from emotion, projection and self. For me, poetry is the medium which captures these elements perfectly: it relies on interpretation, feeling and metaphor to convey "truth" and meaning. It also enables us to engage on an experiential level; emotional, intellectual, bodily, with a range of human experiences (our own and other's) and to explore and connect with them.

I have begun to explore the idea of using poetry within my research, and the following two poems represent intersections of many of the themes and ambiguities involved in my work to date. The first poem evolved from a piece I was writing about my scars, and my experiences of almost constant surveillance, questioning and scrutiny of my body as I become more visibly disabled, and which I am convinced is related to a broader objectification of non-normative corporeal forms and experiences. To me this is also intrinsically connected with the objectification of body marking and the kind of knowledge and research I wish to critique and avoid.

Carved in flesh

Even when the sun shines upon old scars
and they glisten
 like streams of perspiration on leather skin
 they do not become much sweeter.

A map of pain and longing
 that few can read or follow
 to the chest of buried memories

No rainbows,
treasure troves
or sweet surprises here
 to meet the crouching shadows
 and the triptychs that whisper fear

No simple retort or recompense
 Return these especially secret gifts.

Stranger's eyes carve distant tales
 that twist and turn hard ridges
 and cast a shadow that burns like ice
 into this fleshy landscape.

The next poem arose from a combination of influences and experiences and I wrote it while I was transcribing my conversation with 'Maeve'. I was incredibly moved when she described how she sometimes felt about her tattooed, non-normative body, she said, 'it's like painting on a dirty piece of paper'.

At this time I had also been feeling increasingly anxious about the viability of the theories of body marking in which corporeal intervention is seen as a response to, and a result of sexual abuse (such as the radical feminist or psychiatric positions described above). In conjunction with this, I had not forgotten how unsettling I found the experience of my most recent tattoo, and the disturbing emotions I experienced during and immediately after its inscription.¹¹

I originally entitled this poem 'nameless' in order to acknowledge the silences which I fear remain consistent throughout my work despite – and perhaps even because of – the presence of my reflexive voice. Not long after I wrote this poem and during a period of mal-ease with my work, but when I also began to comprehend the power of the speaking subject (for example through contact with autoethnographic works), I jokingly suggested to a friend that my PhD may well be rightly called 'Biography of denial'.¹² However, I have, instead renamed the nameless poem.

Biography of denial (Nameless)

There is a man on my back
and I am bleeding.
He carefully tears away the surface of my flesh
and impregnates me
with something I believe I have chosen.

My blood, and my sweat
coat his fingers
I am rigid with not showing the pain
not feeling the fear
and the humiliation:
He is behind me,
I bleed.

If only the channels of blood
would wash him away
erase my flesh
of his taint, forever.

But I only repeat, more intricately,
every scar he made upon me.
I weep alone
with my bandaged flesh and shame,
building a barrier of scars and patterns
so intricate
he can no longer pass through:
From the outside in
Or the inside out.

There is a man on my back
and I bleed,
in the colours of my own making:
Blood Red,
and Purple Yellow bruises,
Pink keloid scars.

Ripe broken skin seeping puce green bile,
 a rainbow of a battered heart;
 shrivelled to a sour brown fruit.

There is a man on my back
 and I am weeping,
 tears of blood and ink.

Where broken flesh and ruined bones
 scab into an armour

That will never wash away.

These poems, in different ways, begin to dissolve the border between self and other, researcher and participants, and, perhaps, reader and text. These resultant ‘messy texts’ ‘... can help us to hold onto the fundamental embodiment of problems and keep us connected to the needs, pains, joys and desires of socially constructed and socially constructing bodies’ (Smith, 2002: 114).

However, I experience each piece quite differently. I feel mostly at ease with *Carved in flesh*. I feel distinct, unambiguous and separate from what takes form on the page. This poem speaks from a dualistically located mind, with a clear agenda, and I recognize myself within this piece either in ways with which I feel comfortable, or in meanings which I do not think would be apparent to the reader. *Nameless*, however, bothers me. It is a much more organic piece, and I am not comfortable with what I have written, its implications, or how it could be read. I am no longer separate from the participants, or from the scrutiny of their lives from which I have tried to protect them. In this messy text I am once again confronted with the dilemmas of my research. Is it that the inseparability of self and knowledge, and my desire to protect my participants, is leading me rather alarmingly to an ethics that require me not to hurt others but to possibly/potentially hurt myself? Can I be present in my work to the degree that my (self-imposed) ethics require without cornering myself into some kind of auto-ethnographic exposure which I did not choose or intend at the outset? And if this is the unintended outcome, what are the consequences for myself and my work?

Overall then, “creative” sociological methods and the issues they raise around knowledge, communication, and experience have a unique and inescapable impact, particularly in terms of how vivid, poignant and memorable they are. And, if as feminists have argued (Fine, 1992a; Harding, 1987; Kennedy Bergen, 1993; Mies, 1983; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1983; 1990), the purpose of research is to achieve social change through increased awareness, empathy and interconnectedness then these methods are perfectly suited to this end.

Further, the borders of representation and researcher location are shifted so that the appropriation of experience and objectification of participants is at least problematized if not wholly avoided. However, these shifting borders are not without cost and the consequences for the researcher and her career may be significant. To write in this way may be risking exposure and vulnerability in an academic context which may be hostile to both the content and form of this genre (Sparkes, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Overall then, I believe that researching human experience in its embodied, emotional and experiential make-up is a complex and contentious matter. These are issues for which simple guidelines surrounding procedure, representation and technique are inadequate. Rather, they require conscious and conscientious ethical awareness on the part of the researcher.

It also seems to me that it is inevitably and inescapably apparent that knowledge and subjectivity are mutually reflective and constitutive whether or not this is directly acknowledged and/or intended. In this way, highlighting the dilemmas of representation and researcher location problematizes separated and disembodied knowledge within a framework of ethics that also interrogates the binaries of fact and fiction, art and science, truth and knowledge. I suggest that it is the very disruption of these borders that opens up possibilities for research methodologies, which can incorporate the tensions of subjectivity, ethics and representation within a framework that can engage with, rather than objectify or appropriate, the complexities of lived, embodied subjectivity.

However, once these borders are shifted, so too is the protection that is afforded to the author within the norms of academic representation and distance. To undertake such projects involves taking exactly the kind of personal risks and exposure from which feminist ethics seek to protect research participants. Many authors have written autoethnographically about very difficult and sometimes taboo experiences, including Ellis and Bochner (1992) on abortion; Ronai (1996) and Fox (1996) on sexual abuse; Ronai (1992) on working in the sex industry; Sparkes (1997; 2003) on the difficulties of negotiating disablement and masculinity; and Tilman-Healy (1996) on living with bulimia. While I have nothing but respect for them, and nor do I have any doubts about the validity of this format, it is not necessarily the resolution I was hoping my journey through issues of ethics and representation would lead me to.

Ultimately then, in attempting to theoretically and empirically engage "the" marked body, my question remains: who *is* hurting who?

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NOTES

1 Both of these terms are contentious in definition, and value laden in application, and while within my analysis I use the term 'body marking' to describe the whole range of such bodily interventions. When I use conventional terminology, in order to clarify the perspectives I am discussing, I place the terms in quotation marks ("") in order to highlight my discomfort with their definition and application.

2 I developed the use of these forms following Anne Byrne's (2000) work. The *Research Participant Consent Form* is signed by the participant after we have discussed issues of confidentiality and her desired levels of participation to her satisfaction. The *Researcher Commitment Form* includes all my contact details is addressed to each participant and is signed by me.

3 There is, however a crucial difference here in that while Markham recognized the ethical and representational problems of such practices and amended her approach accordingly Denzin did not.

4 Jeffreys (2000) defines two distinct but related forms of 'self-mutilation'. First, 'self-mutilation by proxy': that is where the 'mutilating' act is performed by another person (and in her definition includes female-to-male transgender surgery, body modification, cosmetic surgery and sado-masochism). Secondly, 'self-mutilation' in 'private' (behaviours which are conventionally understood as "self-injury", and also "mainstream" bodily practices including leg shaving and eyebrow plucking). For Jeffreys all of these acts constitute equivalent bodily mutilations.

5 There a number of publications (including Strong, 2000; Harrison, 1994; 1995; Pembroke, 1994), websites (such as *woundedwings*), and newsletters (*SASH*, for example), which are written by and for women who have been, and are, involved in "self-injury" in which they openly share and discuss their experiences with none of the difficulties Kilby (2001) experiences and expects. Further, and personally speaking, nor do I share Kilby's difficulties, and I hope that my work demonstrates and offers an alternative view of, and response to these practices.

6 To avoid imposing my perspective on the narrative I openly explain the interpretations and connections that occur to me during the research interaction. This enables the participants to respond "on the record", and to challenge, concur with, or develop my analysis. Further, all participants receive a copy of the transcript of our conversation upon which they may comment, clarify, add or remove information. I offer the participants access to my work, and invite them to discuss my ideas and analysis.

Overall, the development of my theoretical position is influenced, and often led, by my discussions with the participants.

7 Angrosino (1998) notes that fiction has historically provided a rich source of analysis for social science since it is seen to be indicative of many aspects of the social world from which it originated. Further, recent political theorizations, such as Queer Theory, also maintain a strong relationship with fiction. Butler (1993), for example, argues that interrogation and re-readings of literary and cultural texts are essential acts in the subversion of binaries of sex, gender and sexuality.

8 Fine (1992b) also encountered the dilemmas of using material which she felt was crucial in terms of policy development and awareness raising, but which was problematic because she gained it in the course of her role as a counsellor in a sexual assault unit rather than as a researcher.

9 Kiesinger (1998), however, wrote these poetic narratives about her participants using the first-person voice which for me raises concerns around appropriation and representation.

10 In order to attempt to convey something of the experience of the research interaction especially the emotion and the unspoken and embodied meanings that are central to these conversations I developed a system of transcribing the spoken words. My system was influenced by Bradby (2001), Kelly (1988), Standing (1998), Silverman (1997).

11 None of my other tattoos affected me in this way, or at least as far as I can (or choose to?) recall.

12 This is also a play on the title of a novel by Mary Dorsey (1997) *Biography of desire*. (There is nothing of particular significance to this poem, or my work, in the content of the novel – I did not even particularly enjoy it – rather, it is the rhythm of the title that has stayed with me.)

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