Body as A Picture Book:

A tool for narrative conversations inspired by tattoos

by Paul Graham

Paul Graham is a therapeutic family practitioner for the Reconnect program on Awabakal and Worimi lands. As early intervention to prevent youth homelessness, he works with young people and their families to help them devise solutions to the issues they are facing. Paul holds a master's degree in family studies from The University of Newcastle and a master's degree in narrative therapy and community work from The University of Melbourne. He is interested in the ways alternative subcultures interact with therapy models. He can be contacted at paul.graham1991@gmail.com.

Abstract

This article introduces a tool for narrative therapy conversations with young people using tattoos as a point of entry. It is inspired by trauma-informed tattooing and discusses how elements of narrative practice can be adjusted to use in conversations about tattoos, whether real or imagined. Narrative practices of externalising, re-authoring, re-membering, the absent but implicit and outsider witnessing are demonstrated. By using a template that invites the person to imagine tattoos or body paint, conversations about tattoos are made available to people who have not been tattooed themselves, including young people.

Key words: tattoos; externalising; re-authoring; outsider witnessing; documentation; narrative practice

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Having spent most of my professional life working with young people, I have found that the key factor to successful outcomes is my ability to build rapport with the young people and their families. This can often be a balancing act, with the conversations and language I use with young people not resonating with their parents, or even appearing to position me against them, and vice versa.

In my current work in early intervention to prevent youth homelessness, it is common for young people to talk to me about tattoos. If "cool", as defined by Pountain and Robins (2013, p. 19), is the "permanent state of private rebellion", tattoos can embody this by nature of their permanency and their use as statements against the status quo. One can see how this act of visibly decorating a body might hold allure for young people who are still forming their identities (Bell, 1999). Young people talk to me about the tattoos that family members or celebrities have, along with what they would like to get when they're older. Through these conversations, which often seem to happen as I am driving a young person somewhere, I began to think about other ways in which talking about tattoos could be used to build rapport and about whether tattoos might provide entry points to therapeutic conversations.

When I started working with young people and their families, tattoos didn't seem to be an acceptable topic of conversation in this context, particularly with parents. Perhaps this was due to tattoos being associated with high-risk behaviour and delinquency (Peterson, 1997). In my experience, this has begun to change as more people in Australia (where I live and work) are getting tattooed (Fell, 2020).[1] In recent years, it's been increasingly recognised that people sometimes use tattoos as a response to trauma. For Santibañez (2020), tattooing is social work. The process of permanently marking the skin can draw comparisons to self-harm. However, as Claes et al. (2005) note, self-harm and tattooing are separate phenomena, and tattoos can represent a form of self-care and even a means to prevent further self-harm. Tattoo artists regularly conceal scars, create markers for survivors of cancer and apply memorial tattoos. Tattoos can be powerful statements declaring the person's ownership of their own body, reclaiming their body from trauma, recording history, defying expectations, expressing pride in culture, resisting assimilation, and more broadly, allowing the person to look how they want to look (Santibañez, 2020).

There is a growing body of work that explores how tattoos can help turn stories of suffering into stories of survival (Crompton et al., 2021). I thought that adapting these ideas into a narrative therapy framework might open up additional ways of enabling these kinds of transformation through conversations about both real and hypothetical tattoos.

Cultural considerations

As I started thinking about how I might use tattoos as entry points to therapeutic conversations, it felt important to consider how tattoos might be understood differently by people coming from cultural contexts different to my own. Having been part of punk and hardcore music scenes, I had often thought about tattoos as expressions of subculture or rebellion (Jeffreys, 2000). Despite their increasing acceptance, they're still often associated with the "other" in dominant Western cultures (Bell, 1999). This is clearly not how tattoos are understood in other contexts. As I read more about this, I found that tattoos are dense with meaning across the different cultures in which tattooing is practiced, carrying traditional rituals, historical resonances and evolving ideas (Ankirskiy, 2014; Bell, 1999; Cairns, 2003; Cole & Haebich, 2007; MacFarlane, 2019; Oches, 2015). Their meaning can change over time and between generations (Bell, 1999; MacFarlane, 2019). In the West, modern forms of tattooing were heavily influenced by Islander nations (Ankirskiy, 2014; Oches, 2015). Western culture's suppression of tattoos has therefore been connected with colonialism (Cole & Haebich, 2007).

The practices described in this paper might not be appropriate for use with people connected with religious groups with prohibitions against tattooing (Rohith et al., 2020), or cultural groups for whom tattooing has been used against people's will as a way to deny their humanity (Bloch, 2022). Particular care would be needed in using these practices with people from cultural contexts in which tattoos have great significance, for example with Māori persons who have or are interested in tā moko (Cairns, 2003), and it may be relevant to engage with cultural advisers.

The Body as a Picture Book

As I primarily work with young people, who rarely have tattoos, I wanted to develop a practice that was relevant to people who had not been tattooed and were not necessarily planning to get a tattoo.

I looked to what other narrative therapists had written about engaging with tattoos. Temporary tattoos have been used in Singapore in group work with families with young children (Mui, 2017). The act of marking the skin (albeit in a temporary way) was joyous for the children, and this account made me think that, as narrative practitioners, we should seek to undo dominant ideologies that view tattooing as negative. Mui (2017) noted that the children engaged in this work with laughter and enthusiasm, and the process of having temporary tattoos applied led to a positive therapeutic space.

Johnston (2018) described work with a man named Peter who had made a personal vow that he wanted to get tattooed on himself. Rather than move straight to getting the tattoo, Peter was encouraged to draw the proposed tattoo as part of a collage to act as a placeholder until he was able to afford to have the tattoo inked on his skin. This act of creating a hypothetical tattoo allowed for many of the positive elements that come from obtaining a tattoo without going through the process itself.

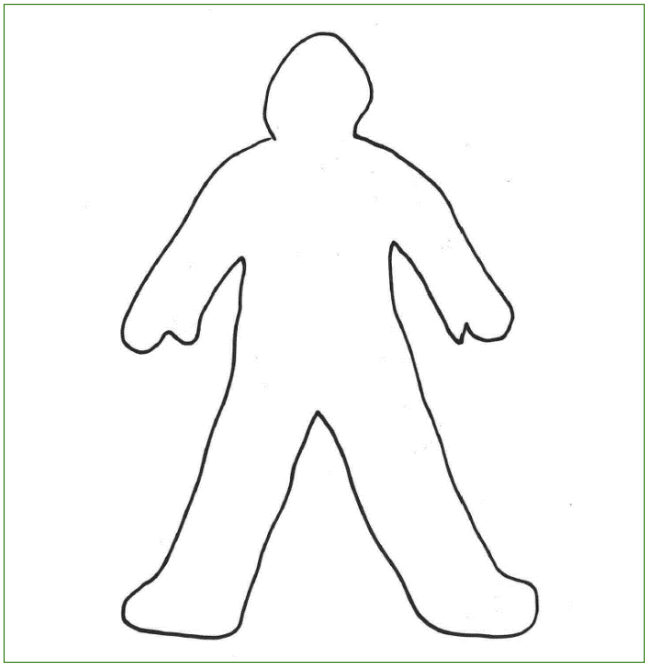

Figure 1. Body as a Picture Book template

I decided to try using an outline of a human figure as a template that young people could use to explore hypothetical tattoos (see Figure 1). Using pens or paint, they could apply designs to the figure, allowing us to use the prompts outlined below to begin a narrative conversation. If their family had expressed reservations about tattoos, we could refer to the designs as "body paint" instead. I began to introduce this as an activity that I like to use because "it reminds me of tattoos".

In order to remain decentred and collaborative (White, 1997, pp. 192–214), this approach is best offered when the person we are working with has mentioned tattoos in some way.

The advantage of using this template is that it invites playful consideration of hypothetical tattoos: I can ask about whether the designs might "move" to different places, change size or become bolder. This template can be used to represent the front or back of a person, and due to the simplified design, other features like hair or glasses can be added if the person wishes. It is important to note that the human figure is intentionally left abstract so as not to further discourses on body image or invoke feelings of body dysmorphia.

I'll share some of the kinds of therapeutic conversations that have taken place around this "Body as a Picture Book" template, using narrative therapy practices.

Externalising

This Body as a Picture Book template is best introduced after externalising conversations have taken place, and experience-near namings of problems and preferred qualities have been established. This enables us to consider tattoos as representations of externalised qualities that we wish to hold close to us. In this context, the placement of an imagined tattoo on the body becomes an important consideration: a tattoo applied to the back would be less accessible to the person than one on the arms, legs or hands. Placement is also significant to how we wish to express ourselves to others, with tattoos in visible places suggesting what we would most like others to see in us.

To draw on Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Lizardo, 2004), the way a person presents themselves to the world may imply not only the values and ideas that the person holds close but also the culture and history of their communities. If our appearance asks the question of what communities and values we choose to display on ourselves, then tattoos can become one of the most powerful visual expressions of our habitus when it comes to defining our identity. Beyond this, tattoos can become visible learnings that stand in opposition to ideas such as "depression" or "anxiety" (Boucher, 2003).

When I invite young people to consider hypothetical tattoos through drawing on the template, I can begin

to ask questions about their design choices. These can work to further embed externalised qualities into storylines:

- When did this design first show up in your life?
- How has it changed since it appeared?
- What has been added or covered over?
- What has made the design fade or blur?
- What influenced the design?
- Can you tell me about why you chose that size or colour for the design?

Tattoos can also be used as tools against problems once they have been externalised. For example, Sostar (2020) described how a tattoo that reminded the wearer that they only need to "outlast" anger allowed the wearer to access the skills and strategies they had used in the past to deal with the negative effects that showed up when anger was around. Sostar (2020) noted that the person had the tattoo inked across their knuckles, and such a placement could suggest openings for interesting questions that could be explored. The wearer explained that anger caused them to get violent. By placing the tattoo across their knuckles, the lesson was made immediately available when anger suggested lashing out with a fist.

Re-authoring

Tattoos have great potential for use in re-authoring questions, particularly when it comes to tracing values. They can offer potential to examine stories of resistance in a person's life and assist people with tracing a preferred storyline in their lives: "Hey, I'm Indigenous. I have Indigenous tattoos. They tell a story. We're still here. We survived. Our story survived" (Isaac Murdoch, as interviewed in Ore, 2022).

Boucher (2003) shared some questions that are helpful in constructing re-authoring conversations about tattoos. For example, Boucher asked of a tattoo, "does it symbolize or stand for anything in particular?" (2003, p. 58). This provides a way into discussion of values that a person holds close. If we ask, "what led to your decision to get that tattoo?" (Boucher, 2003, p. 58), we may hear stories about taking a stand against dominant narratives in society (views of tattoos as influenced by religion or conservative culture). This can be explored further by asking what having tattoos in general (or living as a tattooed person) means in terms of actions they have taken to resist dominant ideologies.

Moving to a landscape of identity question (White, 2004), it can then be helpful to ask what a tattoo says about who a person is and what they consider important, or ask how the tattoo has helped redefine their relationship with a particular skill or problem (Boucher, 2003, p. 58).

Yuen (2019) shared the story of Sidney who explored how her tattoos re-affirmed her values of love and connection to her siblings as opposed to hate and oppression. Her tattoos became sites of resistance to the idea that she was a bad sister, and she was able to identify her refusal to question the love of her siblings.

Story of practice: Jake

Jake was a 15-year-old boy who was referred to our program after repeated bouts of homelessness with his family. Despite the continual difficulties associated with his housing situation (including missing school and struggling to maintain friendships), he came across as a friendly and polite young man. Jake was concerned about his "anger" and "anxiety" and how he responded to them. Jake and I completed some externalising work around these themes, noting that he knew when anger and anxiety were close when he would feel his heart begin to race and his fists clench. Jake noted he would often begin to yell and struggle to express himself. We explored strategies he had already used to help him with his anger and anxiety, and Jake recognised that he generally went for walks or listened to music to help him calm down and reduce the influence of anger and anxiety. Together we agreed that Jake had already developed some great strategies for helping him deal with these emotions.

Jake was moving with his family between short-term houses and motels but remained committed to attending school and completing his homework. After I had been meeting with Jake for two months, he and his family were able to secure rental accommodation. Jake talked about how he wanted to set up his room and began expressing more hope about the future.

Jake had asked me about my tattoos, so I asked if he would be interested in doing the Body as a Picture Book activity. He agreed. Jake said he would like to one day have tattoos on his arms, and drew these in (see Figure 2 on following page).

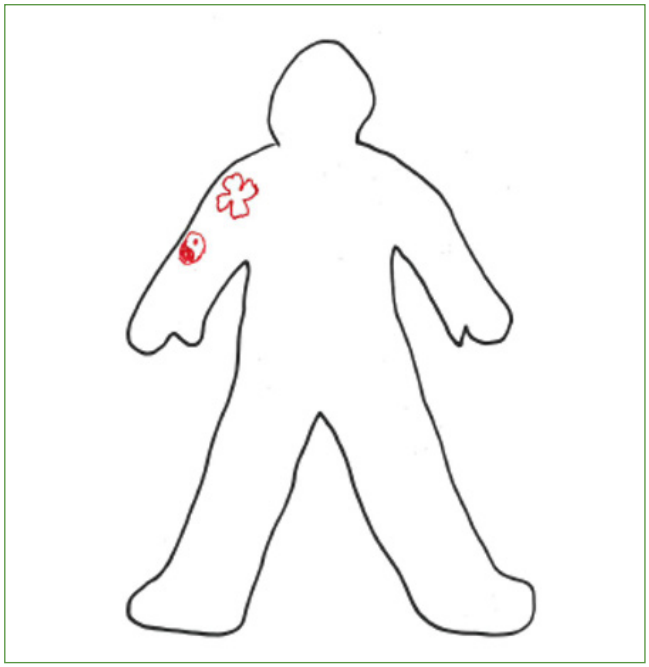

Figure 2. Jake's hypothetical tattoos

Jake drew a yin-yang symbol and a four-leaf clover.

I asked Jake to tell me about the yin-yang symbol, and he told me he had been introduced to the symbol a few years earlier in a mindfulness course he'd done at school. Jake said he liked the symbol because it reminded him to practice mindfulness, and it also spoke to him about the flow of life: that there are good times in the bad and bad times in the good with neither state being permanent.

I asked Jake if this was an idea he held on to – that when going through bad times, they weren't permanent. Jake said, "yeah, definitely" and spoke about how when his family didn't have a place to stay, he would remember having been in that situation before and how they had got through it. I noted that it sounded like this idea had been something that had sustained Jake through these difficult times and asked if there was anything else the symbol brought to mind. Jake said that while it wasn't exactly what the symbol was about, he also associated it with the idea of balance. Jake noted that he found balance to be important and spoke about how he felt he had always been "quite physically fit" and so wanted to ensure he also worked on his brain. Jake said seeking this balance made him work "really hard" on maths and English. I asked Jake how he felt balance had contributed to his life. Jake noted that when he was working on trying to maintain that balance, he would be focusing on "a lot of different things", which meant that he would worry less about not having somewhere to stay. Jake explained that when he was seeking this balance, he would go for lots of walks and do lots of homework, and these practices helped to keep him hopeful.

I asked Jake if by standing for balance in his life, that said anything about what he stood against. Jake said he wasn't sure but then spoke about how important he felt learning was, and his hopes that he would do well at school, get a good job and then be able to help his family. We discussed the values associated with looking after his family before moving on to discussing the four-leaf clover.

When I asked Jake what the four-leaf clover meant to him, he answered quite bluntly: "Well, luck obviously!" I asked Jake what engaging with the idea of luck had been like for him. Jake said that alongside balance, he felt that luck was the "other thing that has really helped me". Jake spoke about how when his family found a new home, there had been a lot of other people applying but his family managed to be successful in their application. Jake then spoke about how he doesn't believe in "a god or anything like that", so he didn't pray, but he would "reach out to luck".

I asked Jake if there were times in the past when he had been able to "bring luck closer to him" or "make it more active in his life". Referring to the template, I asked if he had ever been able to make the four-leaf clover bigger or smaller.

Jake spoke about how he tried not to think about luck too much; instead, he had a "bit of a process". This involved hoping for luck but trying not to focus on it. If he began thinking "too much" about how luck would get him through difficult times, then he could start getting anxious or angry. Jake said that he "hopes for a bit of luck" but then just moves on to "focus on other things".

Through the activity of imagining possible tattoos, I found openings for re-authoring conversations with Jake, with a particular focus on values across Jake's lifetime, including balance and caring for his family. This also allowed us to work on externalisations of "luck" and "balance", which Jake had drawn on during the more difficult periods of his life.

Creating chapters

Tattoos are frequently used to mark "chapters" or transitions in people's lives (Boucher, 2003; Ferreira, 2014). Ceremonial tattooing has been a way of marking entry into adulthood (Cote, 1997). Tattoos can enable a

person to ascribe value to their ways of living while also giving space for a person to move their body into an ongoing project that invites agency (Ferreira, 2014).

Practitioners can help to thicken preferred storylines around these chapters and transitions. They might draw on definitional ceremony (White, 2007), or the migration of identity map (White, 1995). Enquiry about what occurred during a particular chapter can move between landscapes of identity and action (White, 2004). This can be accomplished by asking what the person is working towards in their new chapter, while also choosing what previous lessons they would like to take into each new chapter. This can support people to effectively move through the process of separation, liminality and re-incorporation that may accompany the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another. We can ask of these transitions, "what makes this chapter unique or separates it from the last chapter?"

Re-membering

Re-membering can be particularly relevant in relation to memorial tattoos. Sather and Newman (2015) and Tilsen and Nylund (2009) have explored the different ways memorial tattoos can be expressed, including as portraits, metaphorical representations (a dove escaping a cage) and replicas of a loved one's tattoos, including a tattoo that covered a Holocaust camp tattoo.

Memorial tattoos allow a person to visually document the membership of their "club of life" on their body, according certain people special honorary life membership (Russell & Carey, 2002). Ore (2022) shares the story of Aeden Corey, who had tattoos on her face that mirrored those of her great-great-grandma, after whom Aeden was named. Of note about the use of prominently visible tattoos is that these lessons and learnings become readily accessible every time the person looks in the mirror.

When people are interested in memorial tattoos, we can ask:

- How did this person contribute to your life that made you choose to honour them in this way?
- What would it mean to that person to know you have honoured them in this way?

Narrative practitioners have documented re-membering conversations about tattoos. Wever (2009) alluded to a re-membering conversation about a tattoo that was related to a client's grandmother, though the details of the conversation were not recorded. Denborough (2006) discussed a man who lost his twin brother to violence at a young age. The man used a tattoo to enlist his deceased brother in his efforts to free himself from violence, pulling his brother as close as possible into his club of life by wearing his image over his heart. Millham and Banks (2006) described the memorial tattoo that Natalie had done of her grandmother. This was placed on her back. Re-membering questions were used to explore what Nan would think about the tattoo as well as how Nan might be more active in Natalie's life moving forward. A common thread across these descriptions of re-membering practice in relation to tattoos is wearers saying "I carry them with me wherever I go".

Story of practice: Victoria

Victoria, a 14-year-old girl, was referred to our service with "anger issues" that were causing trouble both at school and at home. Victoria was an insightful young person with many hopes and dreams for the future. By our third meeting, Victoria had determined that anger showed up when she felt powerless in making decisions about her own life. Anger was present at school because she wanted to pursue education through a different institute, and it also showed up at home when Victoria felt she was being unfairly denied reasonable requests.

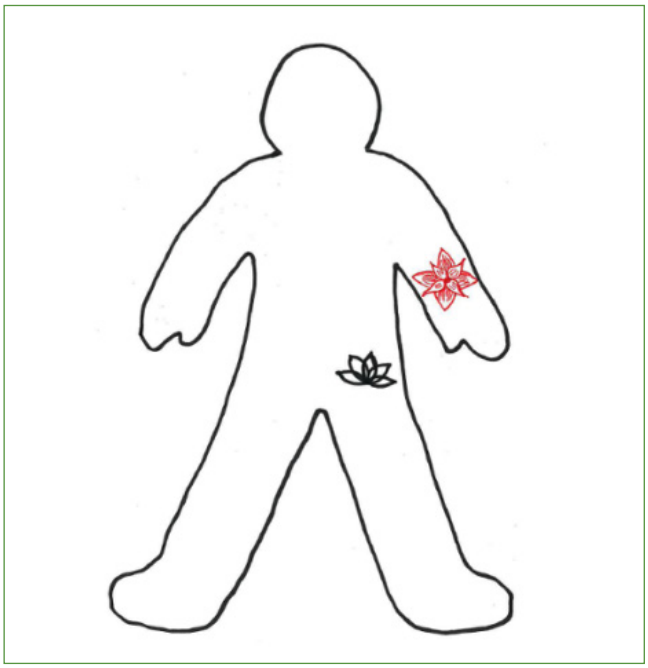

Figure 3. Victoria's imagined tattoos

I worked with the family for six weeks, attempting to create an environment that enabled Victoria to take more control of her life, alongside building up an externalisation of anger, which appeared to her as a red mist in the shape of a person. At this point, I introduced the Body as a Picture Book activity. Victoria drew two designs on the template: a flower on the wrist and a lotus on the hip (see Figure 3 on previous page).

I asked Victoria which design she would like to tell me about first. Victoria began by telling me about the flower. Victoria said that she had been taught how to draw the design by her friend. Victoria had begun to use this flower as a tool for resisting anger. When anger was present, she would draw this design on to her wrist. She would tell herself that she could only "act" on what her anger wanted once the design had faded. Victoria explained that by the time the design had faded, she was usually able to ignore what anger wanted from her more easily. I asked about what effect this design had on anger, and she said it would make it "freeze in place". By freezing the anger in place, she was also more easily able to move away from it.

I asked Victoria about the placement on the wrist. Victoria said she had two reasons for this placement. One was that it was easily accessible for her to see. If she began to feel anger getting closer, she could easily look to her wrist to stop anger where it was. The other was that she was right-handed, so she could only draw it on her left arm.

I then asked Victoria about the lotus design she had drawn near the hip. Victoria told me that she had learnt how to draw this from her great-grandmother. When she was younger, she had spent most weekends at her great-grandmother's house but now only saw her once every few months. Victoria said that her great-grandmother "always" drew the lotus, describing a notebook near the phone that her great-grandmother had filled with doodles of the flower. Victoria said her older sister and she had each agreed to get the design tattooed on them in the next few years, as their great-grandmother had "gotten sick" and wasn't expected to be alive for much longer.

I asked Victoria what she thought it would mean to her great-grandmother to be honoured in such a way, to know that this drawing of hers was something that had become so meaningful. Victoria laughed and said, "well, she would probably say you are stupid for getting that done, but I love you very much".

Victoria laughed about this, saying her great-grandmother often spoke this way. She had responded similarly when Victoria's dad (her grandson) had Victoria's name tattooed on his knee.

I said it sounded like her great-grandmother had a funny way of letting people know what she was thinking. Victoria agreed saying that she loved the way her great-grandmother was always "really honest". I asked Victoria if that was a value she held on to as well and she agreed. Victoria said that like her great-grandmother, she would tell people what she thought but remained able to "have a laugh about it" and accept people who thought differently to her. I asked Victoria if her own valuing of this honesty helped reenforce those values for her great-grandmother as well. Victoria was silent for a second but then said "yeah, I guess I did", and spoke about how they would always have a big laugh together when she said something "brutally honest". I noted that it seemed like Victoria had brought her great-grandmother a lot of joy in these moments.

So, from the two drawings Victoria had placed on the template in a single session, we were able to thicken a strategy Victoria had developed for resisting anger and engage in a re-membering practice around Victoria's great-grandma. Victoria's practice of not acting immediately on anger bears striking similarity to the strategy Nathan (in Sostar, 2020) had developed for their own anger. While Nathan had used the concept of "outlasting" anger, Victoria's strategy involved waiting an indeterminate period of time before acting on anger's demands.

The absent but implicit and outsider witnessing

Absent but implicit questions can be brought into conversations about tattoos and in relation to choices to appear a certain way within communities. For example, someone may see their tattoos as expressing a rejection of mainstream society (Jeffreys, 2000). This can be explored through questions about what the person choses to value over the expectations of mainstream society. For tattoos that commemorate a memory or a particular time, we can ask about whether there is something from that time that the person misses (Freedman, 2012). Through "double listening", tattoos can suggest openings to identify and contrast values. In this vein, further questions we can ask include:

- Why is it important that you express this on your body?
- Does expressing yourself in this way say something about what you stand for or against?

The therapist can also adopt an outsider-witnessing position in conversations about the meanings of a real or hypothetical tattoo, engaging in retellings and inviting a "retelling of the retelling" (White, 2007). The tattoo can be reimagined as a form of documentation of this process. Despite being thought of as permanent, tattoos may change or fade over time, offering an evolving and ever-changing story for us to reflect on.

Story of practice: Jenny

Jenny was referred to my service by her school. Jenny had been the victim of an assault on the schoolgrounds the year before and said she was struggling with her "anxiety". I found Jenny to be an incredibly dedicated young person who was completing an apprenticeship alongside finishing school. Jenny had been steadfast in seeking justice in relation to what had occurred and had engaged lawyers by herself to hold the school to account. Jenny completed the Body as A Picture Book activity in a unique way (see Figure 4). Jenny decided to use writing rather than imagery. She also decided to split the template in half, with the section on the right detailing what she felt was making the anxiety worse, and the left side recording what was helping to ease the anxiety.

Figure 4. Jenny's Body as a Picture Book image

We began by exploring what she had written on the right side, starting at the top. Jenny spoke about how the colour pink could be triggering for her because her assault occurred on pink day (the school's anti-bullying day). I said to Jenny, "I notice you are wearing a pink shirt at the moment?" Jenny said she had been making conscious efforts to take control back from her triggers. This included walking past the area where the assault occurred.

As Jenny moved on to discussing the left side, I noted that it included a lot of people. Jenny described the people she had reached out to after the incident and the different ways they had helped her. I asked whether the colours she had chosen represented anything and she said, "mmm, I just wanted it to look a bit better".

After discussing the different elements Jenny had placed on the template, I described outsider-witnessing practices to her and asked if she would like to use the process. Jenny agreed. To offer a retelling of the story she had shared, I drew on White's (2007) categories of inquiry: expression, image and values, resonance and transport. I described being struck by the ways Jenny expressed her efforts to overcome her triggers and her ability to reach out to others to assist with this. I shared that this invoked an image of Jenny as someone who was not going to let this injustice impact her life and her commitment to improving her life. To explain why these elements of her story resonated with me, I spoke about how I had needed to rely on friends when I was in difficult situations and how I had pulled in a team around me. To address transport, I spoke about how Jenny's story had reminded me of the importance of remaining defiant in the face of injustice and the importance of reaching out to people when going through difficult periods.

When Jenny was invited to engage in a retelling of this retelling, she noted she had never thought to view herself and her actions as inspiring. Jenny was glad to hear that other people shared her view of injustice as people had mostly ignored the assault. Jenny said she often felt that because she made so much effort to overcome her issues, people would assume she was "fine" and not offer help. Jenny responded to a question about resonance by re-membering the people who had helped her so far (the names on the left-hand side), and affirming that she knew she had these skills. When asked about how this conversation had transported her, Jenny said she felt more confident going forward knowing she did have skills that she hadn't thought about before.

I asked Jenny how she found the process of using the Body as a Picture Book template and outsider witnessing. She said she had enjoyed the process and felt "lighter" having spoken about her experiences in this way. This practice allowed us to thicken alternative storylines from Jenny's experience and bring to the fore the skills and values she had used to survive to this point.

Limitations, alterations and considerations

I have used this tool exclusively with young people aged between 15 and 17 years, and only during a single session. Further insights may have been achieved had the tool been used across multiple sessions. Different possibilities could emerge when working with people who already have tattoos, including the potential for exploration about how the hypothetical tattoos play-off their existing tattoo work.

Despite drawing from a trauma-informed approach to tattoos, my work with the Body as a Picture Book template does omit some key elements of the process of tattooing: particularly the difficult process of acquiring them. Drawing tattoos on a template cannot replicate the powerful healing effects that can accompany the painful tattooing process, nor does it invoke the care that is required for weeks after to ensure a piece heals correctly.

I had imagined that the Body as a Picture Book exercise would focus on the recording of preferred qualities that had been externalised. I didn't think people would want to imagine marking themselves with problems or "negative" qualities that we had externalised. However, Jenny's approach showed that this is not always the case.

Conclusion

I am increasingly interested in the ways narrative practice can inform a wide range of activities. I hope that the work described in this paper might assist tattoo artists and therapists alike to embrace the therapeutic qualities that are possible within tattooing practice and empower people to bring to the forefront the rich meanings their tattoos (or hypothetical tattoos) are imbued with. Through undertaking this work, I have seen that tattoos can offer an exciting form of narrative documentation that will grow and change with a person, while helping to provide a visual representation of unique learnt skills, acts of resistance, as well as deep personal and cultural histories. I hope these stories and artworks will be documented and shared, providing a way for people to discuss their personal and collective identities, while acting to reduce the stigma around a practice that has been prevalent within many cultures.

Note

[1] 25% of Australians now have at least one tattoo (Fell, 2020).

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