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Self-harm as an attempt at self-care

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Abstract: This reflective and layered, interdisciplinary paper makes a space to think of self-harming as an attempt at self-care. Specifically, we acknowledge the self-care in turning to one's own body to provide for oneself. Reviewing accounts in published memoirs and young people's own personal accounts of self-harm taken from thematic analysis of a qualitative survey, we began to attune to echoes of such attempts at self-care. The wording, the images, and/or the ambience conveyed in some of the accounts, suggested to us traces of a kind of movement. Repetitive, permanent, deep, superficial, pleasing, ongoing, returning; it is an attempt at keeping oneself going even if it is by harming oneself. Sustaining self-harm, sustains one's sense of self. Self-harming becomes a personally meaningful experience – a provision of, or an attempt at, a meaning. This imagining provides an alternative vision of how self-harm might be thought as an act of care towards the self. Self-harm seen in this way, makes attempts at healing by making attempts at meaning through a relationship with one's body. Drawing on the significance of the early relationship with one's own body as both a point of contact and differentiation between the self and world, we consider how the turn to the body in self-harming can be seen as a turn to a refuge through an act of self-care. We look at how qualitative details of pleasurable pain, repetition and permanence are traced in young people's accounts of self-harm, conveying a self-caring quality by providing a feeling of aliveness, an experience of reliability and a sense of self, troubling dominant narratives of self-harming as a practice of habit, addiction and coping.

Keywords: Self-harm, body, relational, experiential meaning, interdisciplinary, narratives, phenomenology

In this paper we make space to reflect deeply on the notion of self-harm as a form of self-care. A number of writers (Babiker & Arnold, 1997; Hewitt, 1997; Contario & Lader, 1998; Milia 1996) have explored the self-caring qualities embedded in self-harming, paying specific attention to the role of wound care in accounts of self-harm. We suggest that there is more to reflect on here, as the practice of self-harm encompasses far more than 'the wound', engaging meanings and relationships – with the self, and with others. Going beyond the imaginary binary of carer and cared for, wounder and wounded, and the neat understanding that there is badness in the harming and goodness in the caring for the wound alone, we seek to unearth a messier, and richer, interpretive world residing in

the same body. This approach puts into question the current fixity of dominant narratives of self-harming as an act of habit, coping or addiction. In doing so we speak to the Cartesian body/mind, self/other interpretative cut that self-harming is often subject to. This cut can be seen as an act of violence (Whynacht, 2018) to the personal experience of a more fluid and layered, ambivalent and incoherent, ambiguous emotional world that resides inside as well as in relation. To do so, we break open the notion of care to consider interpretations that are not confined to caring for the wound alone. Specifically, we think of self-harm as an attempt at providing meaning in the face of incoherence, emptiness, or torment, seeing 'providing meaning' as (part of) an attempt at self-care.

The search for meaning and recognition can be thought as a search - a call - for a relationship; it is an attempt to find meaning in one's own being, that is, in being in the world and in relation with it (Heidegger, 1962), and to be seen and validated in one's own individuality. Straker (2006, p. 94) describes self-harming as a kind of signing: "At one level, signing pertains to signature, making a mark, saying who I am. At another, it pertains to signalling, a wish to tell something to the other". Self-harm can be thought of as both a relational endeavour and an attempt at making meaning with and through the body/self. This thinking provides an alternative vision of how self-harm might be thought as an act of care towards the self: it makes attempts at healing by making attempts at meaning and at relating.

We draw on a secondary analysis of accounts of young people generated by an earlier research project (Chandler, 2014, 2018), which we read alongside published personal memoirs of self-harm (e.g. Caplin, 1994; Chaney, 2015). We explore how these personal accounts on the experience of self-harming point to a felt sense of being responded to - a kind of a relationship - manifested in the elicited sensations of pleasurable pain, repetition, and permanence which, in turn, afforded them with feelings of aliveness, reliability and historicity, and solid self-sense.

Before discussing the above qualitative details, we present the process of our research and analytic theorising work to set the context. We then review how the body, as central in the practice of self-harming, has been discussed in literature as a site and a means to relating, drawing especially on work from phenomenological, sociological, and psychoanalytic perspectives. Following this we present our analysis and discuss how self-harm as an act of self-care with agency and purpose attached to it speaks to and challenges more detached narratives. Specifically, narratives of habit, addiction and coping that prevail foreclosing a deeper understanding of a more complex personal relationship with self-harming.

Dwelling with Accounts of Self-harming

In this paper we critically explore different ways in which self-care is enacted in accounts of self-harm drawing on a) existing literature, including published personal memoirs of self-harming, and b) a thematic analysis of qualitative survey data of young people's accounts of self-harm.

The literature we draw on was generated in part through an exploratory review of literature addressing the notion of 'creativity' in relation to self-harm, conducted by Simopoulou

(first author) as part of preparatory work for a broader programme of work on this topic. The review identified a number of published personal narratives and memoirs on the experience of self-harming. Additional literature builds on Chandler's (second author) long-term engagement in a sociological study of meanings of self-harm. Our analysis and writings are further informed by a secondary qualitative thematic analysis engaged by Simopoulou on data generated during a qualitative survey with 88 young people addressing accounts of self-harm, conducted by Chandler (2014, 2018). The survey study recruited young people via online discussion forums catering to those who self-harmed, and invited them to respond to questions, largely open-ended. Questions included prompts which invited reflection from participants on the meaning of self-harm - not restricted solely to self-cutting - for themselves and others. More detail on the study methods can be found elsewhere (Chandler, 2014, 2016, 2018). Drawing on the authors' different disciplinary perspectives (counselling and psychotherapy; and sociology), our approach to the literature and analysis presented here is cross-disciplinary, involving careful and reflective consideration of the sometimes competing ways in which self-harm, bodies, and self-care are articulated in different literatures, produced in different times, and for different purposes.

The question of self-care emerged gradually from a parallel engagement with the accounts of 88 young people aged 13 – 26 years old and with existing literature on self-harm. Engaging simultaneously - sensitively, openly yet tentatively - with the different texts, we sought understanding by means of relating – what Gadamer (1975) calls a relationship with what is meant more than with the authors themselves, that is, "having a present involvement in what is said...sharing in what the text shares with you" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 393).

The secondary analysis of young people's survey accounts resulted in the identification of four main themes: self-harming as an act of agency; as an attempt at a sense of self; as a relational practice; and as a search for meaning. Reading these themes alongside existing literature on self-harm in a state of sustained curiosity, we began to find ourselves on the receiving end (Gadamer, 1975) of what felt like an overarching self-caring quality that underpinned these four themes. Traces of self-care that were not restricted to wound care also emerged in the review of the literature. Traces of self-care in the very act of self-harming rather than in the caring for the wound alone were found in published memoirs as a nuanced quality that was implicitly conveyed rather than explicitly stated. Responding to this iteratively, we focused more closely on aspects of self-care within the data generated with young people, reading these with, against, and from different perspectives informed by our backgrounds (counselling and psychotherapy; sociology) as well as alongside some of the published personal memoirs. Our analytic process has iteratively encompassed not only our interdisciplinary work

but also our ongoing engagement and movement between multiple materials and texts. The process of our engagement with the materials was messy and involved itself a web of practices (Polio et al., 1997) that were inbuilt to the development of the theme of self-care such as writing, reflecting, presenting to wider audiences, testing our orientations to the accounts, grappling with our different positions in relation to self-harm, the accounts, and the literature.

Moving between (to and from and back again) our different materials and texts we dwelled with them. Dwelling is a phenomenological stance, a receptive state that is, yet, far from static; in it we slowed down, paused, remained with the texts, re-thought what we thought we 'know' already and returned -re-attuned- to them to think of them again (Finlay, 2014). Wertz (1985) speaks of this stance in terms of it being:

an extreme form of care that savors the situations described in a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies, all the details ... when we stop and linger with something, it secretes its sense and its full significance becomes amplified. (pp. 172, 174)

Moving between young people's accounts, the emerging themes and some of the existing literature we began to trace some specific qualitative details conveyed in the wording and the descriptive images that spoke to self-care as met in self-harm *on the whole* and not in the caring for the wound alone. For instance, our readings raised the possibility that the very surviving of the self-harming practice could be considered *part* of self-harming rather than additional or separate to it. Specifically, we trace self-care in the qualitative details (Wertz, 1985) of *pleasurable pain*, *repetition* and *permanence* as met in young people's accounts of self-harming and discuss how these render their practice personally meaningful.

The Body as a Site and a Means of Relating

The body has received significant attention in relational - existential, social, interpersonal - discourses that inquire into the establishment of a sense of self in relation with the other. Theories informed by existentialism, sociology, and psychoanalysis, have explored the body as a point of contact as well as difference or separateness from the other. Heidegger (1927/1962) spoke of the inherent relationality in being as we meet and - from then on - constantly find ourselves in the world, hence in ongoing relationship with it. The body is at the centre of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology

of perception, a theory with existential underpinnings that has sociological relevance (Crossley, 1996, 2001).

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) speaks of the body-subject (i.e. subjective body as lived) to suggest our inevitable intersubjectivity in our very being in the world. It is through our bodies that we exist in the world and it is in being a body that being with an other, as well as being aware of an other is made possible (Macquarrie, 1973). Bodily senses participate in, making possible and colouring, the perception of the other in their separateness, echoing back a sense of self, that is, a sense of being. The body becomes that which makes possible a differentiation between the inside and the outside, the self and the other, the personal and the social, rendering them to their blurred boundaries and their interwoven threads. Douglas (1966, 1973) speaks of the body as a kind of psycho-social terrain, an enacting symbol, an image for society to the point that it cannot be considered alone without a social dimension inbuilt in it. Lupton (2012, p. 39) writes of bodies experienced and conceptualised in relation to "discourses, practices, spaces, ideas and non-human objects and other living things", including other bodies. Introducing the concept of inter-embodiment or else inter-corporeality in place of the self-other binary, she suggests that bodies are experienced as more intertwined than autonomous, "lived alongside and in response to others' bodies".

As with Merleau-Ponty, Lupton (2012, p. 40) reviews the inter-corporeal - "touching-being touched, moving-being moved, feeling-being felt" - foetus/infant-mother relationship as a primary example of the bodies' co-giveness, challenging the idea of the infant body as a body that lacks, seeing it instead as an agent of meaning as it actively seeks to relate and to elicit a response. For Merleau-Ponty the body in all its forms enacts, both carries and drives, meaning. In his corporeal ontology Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) speaks of the flesh as an expressive - connecting and diverging - element between the body and the world.

Psychoanalysis, Skin, and Self-harming

Some psychoanalytically informed writings on self-harm argue about the significant role of the body in the early infant-carer relationship to discuss the relationship with one's own body in later years. A number of writers (Babiker & Arnold, 1997; Hewitt, 1997; Milia, 1996, 2000; Motz, 2010) have drawn on a specific psychoanalytic theorising of the *skin* as that first

boundary between the self and the other in order to understand self-harming. The skin of the body is meaningfully

seen in the light of early interpersonal experiences and embodied memories of touch. LeBreton (2018) argues on its richly symbolic character:

As the emotionally invested envelope of our being, the skin encloses the body, delimiting the self. But because it is also our point of entry into the world, it is a site of living memory: it serves as a boundary between inside and outside, self and other, bodily self and psychic self that is at once alive and porous (...) As the site of interface with the other, the skin is a metaphor for our relation to this other and a barometer of the quality of our contact with him or her. (2018, p. 34)

Psychoanalytic theory posits that one of the earliest psychological needs of the infant is to be held together physically which in turn allows inside the growing sensation of having a skin (Bick, 1968) and through this, a sense of self (Babiker & Arnold 1997; Motz 2010). Physical handling, that is, skin to skin contact (in being held against the carer's body, handled, caressed and stimulated) provides the infant with a profound enveloping experience of intimacy and bonding, a psychic kind of holding that in turn allows the growing development of a 'narcissistic matrix', a sense of self-confidence that allows to relate with the world (Babiker & Arnold, 1997; Motz, 2010). Hewitt (1997) has argued for the importance of this perspective when considering self-harm. Building on the centrality of the skin in allowing recognition of boundaries between self and world, she suggests that the retreat to one's own body in self-harm can be discussed in the light of our earliest interpersonal experiences and the role of skin as transitional object:

An individual may learn to use his/her body and its physical sensations as a solacing, a transitional object, an object that replaces the childhood caretaker's task of confirming a bounded self apart from an external world (Hewitt, 1997, p. 24)

This analysis resonates with Bick's (1968) use of the term 'second skin' to speak of the infant's use of her body in moments of separation from her carers which he sees as an intrinsic part of the infant's everyday development, denoting the intimate nature of one's relationship with the body. Moments of separation from carers - which can be experienced fleetingly in ordinary circumstances or for longer in more adverse situations - are essentially a movement from a prior known state of being. These transitions - from something more or less familiar to something both unknown in quality and duration - acquaint us with the phantasy or the fear of non-being; one's sense of self is shattered as the relational meaningful constellations of self-other that

provided a self-referential structure collapse. In the face of the - temporary, ordinary, fleeting or more long term - absence of

an other to feel or see oneself against, the infant is said to relate *with* her body which becomes an object of fixation that helps to manage the threat of disintegration. The relationship with one's body grows deeply embedded in its individual context, fluidly and qualitatively nuanced.

Rocking, humming, and scratching or tearing at the skin may be attempts to form a 'second skin' to help contain the self, and to patch over the abyss that occurs during periods of separation. (Milia, 1996, p. 98)

Looking for a sense of self-containment, the infant holds on to her body to hold herself together, forming a relationship that counteracts her experience of separateness by means of its adhesive quality, as if repetitive movements could create an unbroken chain between the self and the separate other (Milia, 2000).

Revisiting the question of self-care in light of psychoanalytic theories addressing early relationships with one's body allows space to consider self-caring qualities in self-harming more broadly than the caring for the wound alone. Through this perspective, we can see that the relationship with one's skin is multi-layered, reaching beyond the static binary of harming and caring, instead surfacing as a demarcating boundary between the self and the other, far and close, inside and outside, and as such something to turn to so as to elicit some kind of meaning through a sense of self, of otherness, of closeness and of comfort when this is not present. The skin, and what it represents, is that layer that is harmed, marked, looked after, healed and that survives - albeit in changed (perhaps scarred, marked) form.

Drawing on the above discussion, we think how the relationship with one's own skin, in the practice of self-harming, provides refuge later in life in the face of the need for a self-affirming net. Like the mother/infant co-givenness, the reciprocal relationship with one's body in self-harming provides back what is needed. Reading young people's accounts, we traced qualitative details that point to how the practice of self-harming is also an act of self-care as it provides for them what they need, and in some cases what they need to keep going.

In the next section, we look at how self-harming, by means of the concreteness of the pain, the repetitive movement and the sense of permanence elicited: the pleasure of feeling alive and real; a sense of reliability and continuity; and a sense of self. Young people's accounts suggest they resort to and rely on their bodies, and through their relationship with their bodies, they looked to provide a sense of meaning to themselves.

Tracing Self-caring in the Qualitative Details of Self-harming

In what follows we trace qualitative details in accounts of self-harming that convey a sense of self-care as met in some of the young people's accounts. These are organised around three themes: pleasurable pain; repetition; and permanence. We consider how young people share accounts of self-care against more neat and dominant narratives often associated with self-harming, such as habit, addiction, and coping. Noticing their ritualistic character, we argue that a sense of pleasurable pain, repetition, and permanence point to self-harming acts as attempts at marking - feeling and sustaining - oneself alive through (an intimate and meaningful relationship with) one's own body.

Pleasurable Pain

The idea of self-harming as an enactment of a violent attack, and of the body as the site in which it takes place, has received considerable attention. In its aftermath, the body is portrayed as vandalised and almost deserted. For instance, Motz (2010) suggests:

When someone penetrates their skin, defaces it, marks or bruises it, there is a violent intrusion from the external world onto the point of contact with the internal world and the harmed person is left damaged, momentarily disfigured and filled with impinging sensations. (p. 82)

These negative portrayals of self-harm contrast starkly with the way in which some of the young people narrated their practice of self-harm, noting comfort, beauty, perhaps pleasure in the act and the aftermath:

The scars, blood, and cuts are a part of the reason. They look pretty to me. (Jonathan, 16 years old)

Some people like the look - the blood calms them, the scars comfort them. (Hermione, 15)

The above excerpts trouble (i.e. mess up) a neat understanding of self-harming where there is badness in the harming, and goodness in the caring for the wounds alone. Instead, both the act of harming *and* the harmed skin are framed as sensorially or aesthetically pleasing. Self-harming can be thought as something dynamically alive in reciprocity. Unlike descriptions of the body as something that self-harming happens to, in the above accounts, we suggest, the body emerges equally dynamic: it gives and is given something back.

Laura, 16, writes: "The blood reminded me I was still alive", invoking self-harming as a *means to* recognition. In the excerpt from Hermione blood suggests calmness and comfort, for Laura aliveness and perhaps a sense of continuity in being.

Ursula, 15, writes that self-harming is "a way to FEEL something". We might read these expressions as ways of generating some kind of felt meaning, as if feeling something could allow back a sense of being. Such a reading reflects Hewitt's (1997) analysis, where she argues that self-harming acts are "painful methods of creating or re-establishing a sense of self" (1997, p. 25).

Pain could be experienced as pleasure when it confirms the capacity to feel something, or to continue feeling something in the face of change or transition. Pleasure, in Hewitt's account, can be thought as imbued with a self-affirming sense. The pain introduces one to one's body and back to oneself validating a sense of realness and for that it is invited. The raw experience of a strong feeling or a sensation on the skin counteracts a sense of emptiness that can be tormenting:

I have depression, usually feel numb, empty, dead inside. Cutting makes me feel alive. (Leanne, 16)

Leanne, in the above account, communicates a pressing need to do something with - or to - the impending feeling of deadness residing inside that she is acutely in touch with. The counteracting of feelings of emptiness or numbness leading to a sense of being "alive again" (Zoe, 16) were found across several accounts.

In her personal narrative, Caplin (1994) writes:

And each scraping of physical flesh, the pain, the blood, the mortal sacrifice was as much an acknowledgement of survival - of Life - as it was a ritualistic act of revenge. Except it was directed against myself. (1994, p. 26)

In some accounts, this strong physicality is infused with a sense of pleasure in manipulating the body based on the recognition of the pained body as "something that is theirs only" (Rachel, 16) such that self-harming comes to resemble a kind of self-loving. Rao (2006, p. 45) speaks of a sense of "bodily mineness" to denote the deeply immersive relationship with one's own body in self-cutting. Similarly, some authors (Kominsky, 2006; Hewitt, 1996; Podvoll, 1969) trace self-referential and self-erotic nuances in pleasure in self-harming. Referring to her scars, Marissa writes:

Because I like having scars and I think they are the best thing about me. Because I like seeing it, I like seeing blood trickling out when I cut. Because it feels like the only thing I am good for and that I will ever be good at or know how to do. (Marissa, 16)

Marissa denotes a very close relationship with her body, one that affords her with a sense of competence as she exercises some kind of virtuosity over it. In its masterful handling, the body becomes both the locus of, and the means to, being good at something - even if this is in harming oneself.

For Matt, self-harming is “a nice escape. I like bleeding. I like looking at and drinking the blood. I like causing pain, even if it is to myself. I like cutting skin open and seeing the damage I can cause” (Matt, 16). Matt’s words above reveal an interplay - a subtle and ambiguous movement - between submitting and being submitted, subsuming and being subsumed, pleasure and pain (Hewitt, 1997). Matt speaks of how he experiences self-harming as a meaningful activity that allows him to escape. An act of agency, escaping can be thought as a resistance to submit to something. Yet, causing pain to oneself is also an act of submission (submitting to pain or to one’s own self). Keeping with his account, Matt’s description of “looking at and drinking the blood” might be read as carrying a relentless, subsuming, perhaps devouring, quality. Alternatively, in speaking to “drinking the blood” we might read a more subtle action, such as licking and soothing. Brossard (2014) speaks of emotional liminality as something that is not strange to subjective experience, but which is far from neat, orderly, or fixed. There is a need to both recognise this deeply ambiguous movement inside as real and to be read and recognised beyond it. The multiple meanings that might be read into strong statements around blood drinking, might cause the reader to lose sight of the need to escape something that is perhaps experienced as equally devouring.

Benjamin (1998) discusses self-paining as a means to both escaping and meeting the self. Hewitt (1997, p.31) speaks of the role of pain in self-inflicted pain as that which lends this process meaning: through the experience of pain “one becomes acutely aware of physical existence” feeling oneself robust or solid when emotional pain is so much that it needs to be escaped. To experience, withstand and survive pain, that is to submit to pain but also to submit it, is also to further one’s own self-boundaries. Drawing on its potential transcendental properties, Huxley (1963) discusses how self-paining can be considered as a mystical route towards attainment of a sense of “self-conscious selfhood”, a place of unity (Hewitt, 1997, p. 91). For Jamelia, 15, self-harming is a way “to remind myself I am alive when I feel empty; to have a sense of “self””. In that sense, pain can be experienced with the pleasure of being met or responded to in that it allows back a self-affirming sense of being when this is absent, blurry, or more elusive as in states of numbness or emptiness. Self-harming can then be felt as a meaningful experience of provision - what Jamelia calls a “reminder” of aliveness and self-sense; that is, a relational act of care from the body-self to the self and for that sought after. Thinking of pain in this light might help to understand how Michelle does not experience self-harming as something that she simply shouldn’t do:

It's extremely hard for those who haven't done it to understand but self-harm doesn't feel bad to people who do it, we don't see a reason to stop. (Michelle, 15)

Repetition

I drink and cut until I wake up and can't remember how I got to bed. My bed is stained all over because drunk me doesn't do a great job of clean up. Who else is there: my cat. I drink and cut alone every night. (Susie, 23)

In her response regarding the frequency of her self-harming, Susie, gives a descriptive account of a process; her practice resembles a ritual. It is carried through in a ritualistic manner, as a focused, planned activity that is repeated with some kind of fixity in a steady time and space. It carries a sense of familiarity as it is privately owned and purposefully carried out by her alone. The feeling tone of the narrated moment is almost relaxed with a sensation of permeating ease. Yet, more than an act of habit, Susie, in the passage above, speaks of her cutting as a ritual she ensures she does every night before she goes to sleep. The instance is constituted on some kind of ambiguity as she moves between a messy losing or forgetting herself and a more meaning-making activity. A ceremonial quality is instilled in Susie’s narration of her private moment: the mute remoteness of her practice that is witnessed only by her cat, the stains of blood on the bed as an artefact - memoir - of the night’s practice stand out. Commitment is present in ensuring this space every day.

Self-harming is often found in narratives of addiction and habit (Potter, 2011). Examined in the light of trauma, repetition is often associated with compulsion and dissociation, seen as a way of not remembering or moving. Yet what also of the *effort* placed in repetition, that is, in sustaining it alive and ongoing? Is every act of repetition an act of habit, or an addiction (Fraser et al., 2014)? Do those latter terms take us away from the personal in its diverse detail that is alive, breathing, straining, and insisting, possibly resisting? What would shift if we see *desire* in place of withdrawal and dissociation in more detached narratives of self-harming? What does the repetitive movement, by means of its ongoing rhythm, resist? What kind of closeness does it keep at a distance, and what does it give to oneself? Repetition is a kind of taking in again and again. Emily, 23, writes of “enjoying knowing that she is still able to feel pain”. It is the continuity of the practice that confirms in return the continuous acknowledgment of her capacity to feel pain: that she can return to - resume - aliveness even if numbed. Winning the dread of annihilation each time one repeats surviving self-harming, does one emerge as a subject through an ongoing consistent competent practice?

Drawing on Susie's account and considering the ritualistic repetition with which self-harming is presented and practised, one can think of self-harming as an active means to sustain something, rather than as becoming habituated. Attending to the qualitative details of the narrated moment above, one can move from a first reading of the practice as habitual or addictive to one which centres the attention and caring: the thinking that is put into it, the care for privacy and for selective company. Such a reading shifts the idea of self-harming as something solely addictive or dissociative to tracing something agentic and intentional that is conveyed by means of the ongoing attention to detail, the steadiness of the practice and the ritualistic precision. A safe and private space is sustained where one can give to oneself what she needs. Kominsky (2006) writes:

The secret place one creates to perform with high degree of ritualistic precision these enactments on the body, as well as the view prevalently maintained by its practitioners that this self-abuse is a form of self-care, point to the idea that this is a space and activity in which lies desire, agency and hope for transformation and healing. (pp. 17-18)

Traces of an attentive practice can be met also in the repetitive effort to make the 'right' scar or to regulate the self-harming which reveals a kind of purposeful engagement with the body rather than a more dissociative mechanism that is outside the person's agency.

If you're angry you tend to be more reckless about how deep you cut. When I'm angry I never cut myself and usually scratch myself with a blunt object. (Lou, 13)

There is tenacity and precision in the will to make an impact on oneself that is manifested in decisions about pressure, place or extent in self-harming: not cutting too much to die, to need help or to be found out, but not cutting too little to feel nothing, reveals an ongoing orchestration of the practice that is alive and purposeful.

Yes. I am trying to stop cutting. I know I will relapse sometimes. Relapses are part of recovery. Sometimes to prevent myself from cutting I burn, punch, bite, scratch myself, or dig my nails into my skin. Sometimes I starve myself for a couple of hours. (Kelly, 14)

Milia (1996, 2000) speaks of the infant's humming, rocking, or scratching as repetitive, ritualised behaviours that may help to bridge the abyss of separation by ensuring some kind of continuity. These movements have the quality of repetition instilled in them and as such can be thought as meaningful autonomous purposeful practices that are yet set to produce a response almost automatically. The infant finds solace in it; she is carried by it. Repetition allows a sense of predictability in its rhythmical movement: "Even if numbed or dissociated

the body is reliable unlike the other person" (Kominsky, 2006, p. 15).

The relationship with the body is trustful and consistent (Farber, 2000). The person returns to it each time to find it there. She relates with her body depending on its constancy, which is anticipated and confirmed every time it survives the pain or the marking. Kevin, 15, describes this thus: "I've scratched myself copiously since I was 4 or 5". It is this specific ongoing-ness of the practice as emerging from the accounts of the participants that gives the act of self-harming the quality of a need, the returning need to self-harm that gives to it the quality of a practice. Need and practice move in a cyclical movement feeding each other. In this movement the person relates with her body depending on its constancy, which is anticipated and confirmed every time it survives the pain or the marking. The relationship is intimate, predictable, and reliable. It is felt as good.

Permanence

Responding to an invitation to recall the first time they self-harmed, some of the young people spoke with precision about that time or season in their life, attributing to it a sense of almost poetic initiation: "First cut in childhood, 8 years old." Omar, 15. "Age 14." Susie, 23. "December 2013." Zoe, 16. "March 28 2014." Brandon, 15. "In a hotel on a family vacation to the beach when I was about 12." Oona, 16. "The summer after my fifteenth birthday." Gavin, 17. "A little over a month after my dad died." Jody, 16.

Gathering those dates - 'lifeworld fragments' (Ashworth, 2003) - together in an assemblage-like pattern resembles a kind of memoir, a historic field (LeBreton, 2018) where specific moments or times in life are marked and as such, made available to being returned to, acting also as reminders of how they have been survived; Sidney, 15, writes: "Self-harm allows you to see the lasting image of your efforts". Similarly, Ellen, 18, wrote of self-harming as a way of showing hurt and validating pain.

Thinking of self-harming in the light of the accounts above, one can trace a practice of marking a poignant time or a breaking moment in one's life, a kind of rupture that needs to be remembered; or else a negation to give something up. Questioning narratives of self-harming as an act of passive habituation, dissociation or addiction alone, self-harm can then be thought as a means to resisting forgetting, that is, making something more present, marked, and in a way, more permanent than passing, unseen, dismissed or forgotten altogether. There are traces of self-care to be found in self-harming as an act of resistance that has ethical, social, and political implications:

Self-injury can often have a function for the individual of recording history: 'This is what happened to me, this is how much I hurt'. In our view, self-injury may also serve a similar function for society. It marks a collective (as well as an individual) experience in a way that draws in those that come across it, and may bridge the empathic gap between knowing and not knowing about what happens to people and how it affects them. In effect, the self-injury 'speaks' about a social experience of which the society would otherwise remain unaware. (Babiker & Arnold, 1997, pp. 35-36)

Thinking of self-harming as an act of self-care through a resistance to forgetting or being forgotten allows for it to be acknowledged in its agentic qualities (i.e. the person is able to assert their agency). Such a view seems to entail something generative, perhaps revolutionary, or transformative as opposed to more pathological narratives of habit or addiction. The wound can be imagined as sustaining real both the poignant feeling, as well as the surviving of it, as it is followed by the healing process. The developing scar tissue might be understood as becoming another skin, a protective shield (Motz, 2010; Dargan, 2015), a body on the body that lingers, a memory, a record or a marking of surviving an experience even if temporarily. The scar, by means of its indelibility, marks the personal experience rendering it valid, real, concrete, seen. The self emerges in its historicity, sustained, and narrated by the lingering marks. Even if often temporary, the scarring allows a sense of self against annihilation. Its permanence consists in outliving the angst of the invisibility as experienced momentarily; it is permanent enough to survive the poignant feelings. It endures and, with it, life does too.

The indelibility of the scars, even when experienced temporarily, seems to be on the other side of something that is missing; the concreteness of the mark becomes that 'something' - a boundary - to feel oneself against, real, strong and permanent enough to stop an insisting, overwhelming feeling of emptiness or numbness often expressed in narratives of self-harming. Writers who have tried to capture it speak of a sensation of falling into an abyss (Milia, 2000), a state of nothingness (Hewitt, 1997), a void (Kominsky, 2006), a beast (Farber, 2000). In search for words to communicate her experience, Chaney (2015) writes a poignant memoir of her search for meaning:

But did I really feel or believe that the first time I did it? Or did I discover this explanation subsequently? I was certainly a teenager before I began to relate all my problems back to the death of my friend, although in all probability I was withdrawn before this even occurred. I was certainly introspective. I remember very clearly as a small child, perhaps four or five, freezing in the middle of doing things because I was suddenly struck by an uncertain horror as to who I was. Did I really exist? How could one

prove that it was real? Sometimes the world appeared so overwhelming that it seemed it would swallow me up, and I would never know where I ended, and it began. (2015, p.105)

When I was 11, I was just...sad all the time. It was pretty serious, I mean, I thought about suicide a lot. Instead of actually doing that, I chose another option which was to harm myself...considering I was at a young age I didn't know what else to do. (Beatrix, 15)

Put in dialogue with each other, the accounts of Chaney and Beatrix, illustrate a poignant picture of an ongoing attempt - and capacity - to stay with a lingering tormenting internal state of aloneness, uncertainty, and sadness by means of their self-harming. Self-harming emerges as a kind of aid towards the self in the absence of outside provision in the case of Beatrix, or an attempt at some meaning in the presence of an existential angst that Chaney resists to pin down. If we attend closely to the ongoing and insisting effort to stay with what is tormenting, we begin to find traces of agency in their coping which becomes then something more active than passive.

Much like 'attention seeking', the discourse around 'coping' carries considerable weight, either by being pathologized as something inappropriate or patronised as something insignificant. But in the light of the above narratives, coping can be seen as the active, ongoing, lifelong attempt at staying with, making valid and making meaning of what torments whilst living in and encountering the world. Such a task is made more difficult if such active ongoing attempt is not validated as real but labelled and overlooked. Resisting definition or structural fixity, we constantly recreate ourselves finding ourselves in a continuous state of becoming and redefinition. Seen in this way, self-harming could then be thought as an attempt at self-creation while the body is seen as a means of that self-creation rather than an object to be destroyed (Hewitt, 1997). Oona writes:

Every time I look down at my scars, I just want to tear them open again. Scars tell a story words never could. (Oona, 16)

As an alternative to a self/body alienation and thus dichotomy, we can then consider how in the very crafting of the body a crafting of a narrative is taking place agentially and simultaneously, and through this also the crafting/narrating/envisioning of a self-caring authorial self. The presence of the scars survives the invisibility and the person attempts to claim control over - to resist - an emotional experience of invalidation and dismissal, as well as to reclaim ownership and recognition of the personal experience. It is about being seen as a person in angst and in pain on behalf of an other, private, social, present, absent or internalised.

Concluding Discussion

There is much scope for further qualitative analysis of the meanings that self-harm can hold. In this paper we have sketched several alternative readings of self-harm, drawing on data and existing literature to propose different, perhaps more subversive, understandings of what self-harm may mean. Our analysis reflects an interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing on insights from theoretically informed readings of young people's accounts and of existing literature on self-harming as well as on conceptualisations of the body based on our backgrounds in sociology and in psychotherapy. Working together with different theoretical approaches and materials, we looked to foster a collaboration. We believe the use of different lenses has allowed us to delve deeper and reveal deeper layers in the practice of self-harming.

We suggest that in some cases the meanings of self-harm are *more than* what is initially assumed in superficial readings of accounts from those who self-harm. Drawing on theoretical framings of the body as a relational field (that is, a point of meeting and differentiation with the other), we discussed self-harm as a relational endeavour where the person relates with their body and this becomes itself a personally meaningful relationship. Self-harming becomes an act of provision, a subtle form of self-care. Specifically, we think of self-harm as an attempt at providing meaning, while simultaneously the attempt at providing meaning is an attempt at self-care.

Drawing on the imaginary binary of carer and cared for, or wounder and wounded, we looked to make space for ambiguity, incoherence and liminality residing in the same body. In other words, we made space for a plurality of meaning not only among different experiences of self-harming but also within the same. We traced in the wording and the images conveyed by the accounts of young people some qualitative details that point to a self-caring quality in their practices. Drawing on the ritualistic precision with which self-harming is described to be practiced, we explored how the felt experience of pleasurable pain, of permanence and of repetition might elicit a sought sense of aliveness, of historicity, of reliability and predictability troubling more dominant narratives of habit, addiction and coping.

Our approach differs from previous readings of self-harm in that it is grounded in: i. empirical data generated with people who have self-harmed; ii. interdisciplinary perspectives; and iii. the attending to and centring the body in accounts of self-harming. The data informing our study were collected through a qualitative online survey with young people. Alternative forms of data collection – in particular narrative, arts-based methods – with different groups of people who have

experienced self-harm may generate different or competing insights. However, by embedding our analysis in previous literature we are confident that our insights may hold wide relevance for the consideration of self-harm – especially as enacted by young people in minority ('Western') world contexts.

We suggest that our paper provides an innovative reading of self-harm, which can be of use to psychotherapists working with those who self-harm in that it may help them think more deeply and in a more nuanced way about the practice, and what it means. Specifically, the paper 'troubles' the concept of self-harm and seeks to understand the notion of self-care in accounts of self-harm more deeply. We suggest that this notion can be expanded to consider self-harm in a more comprehensive way, rather than focusing narrowly on wound care. Our paper engages with the role of the body in the light of a meaningful complex relationship that goes beyond the dominant binary of the badness in harming and the goodness in caring for the wound alone acknowledging agency and care in the very act of self-harming. We believe that such acknowledgment allows for a more encompassing understanding of self-harming in the fullness of its lived emotional complexity as also a bodily-caring, meaning-making and memory-making practice on behalf of professionals who work with people who self-harm. We would argue for professionals to engage with self-harming on the basis of the personal meaning that it holds for the individual concerned rather than be focused solely on 'stopping' it.

Our paper contributes to an emerging literature which seeks to demonstrate the complex meanings that self-harm can have (Whynacht, 2018). For us, self-harm is a deeply relational act, informed by both the social and (inter)personal context in entangling ways. The interdisciplinary nature of our analysis suggests a fruitful space for further collaborative cross/interdisciplinary work on self-harm. The usefulness of such work lies in making the space to think experiences of self-harming with different theories which in turn allows them the space to move in their ambiguity and their complexity. In doing so, we look to resist and problematize simplistic and dualistic clinical readings of self-harm and to provide or enable more nuanced readings of a practice that is not simple.

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