

'INDIVIDUALS' EXPERIENCE OF MEDICAL TATTOOING FOLLOWING A BURN INJURY – AN IPA STUDY

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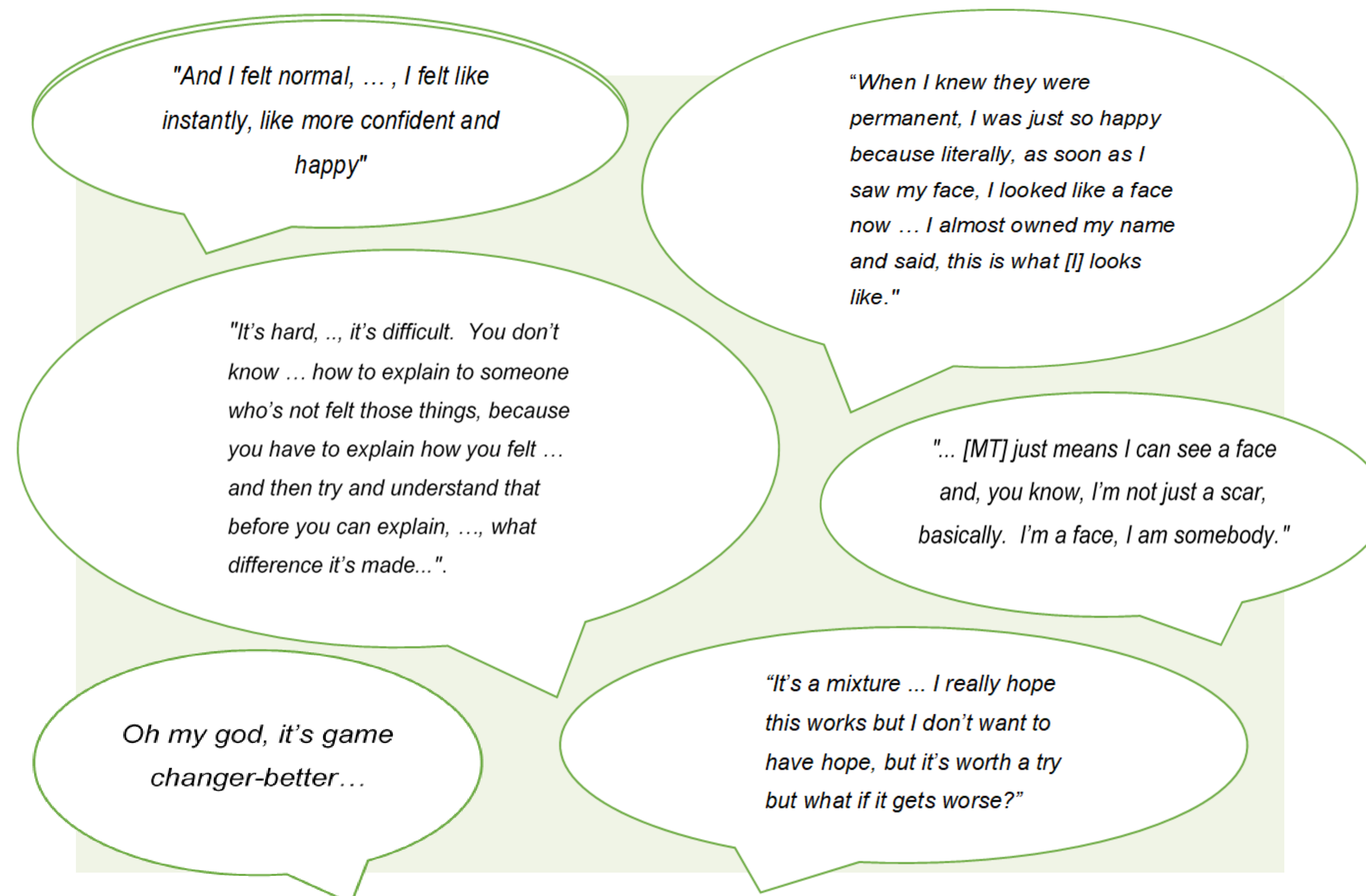
BACKGROUND

- In the UK, approximately 250,000 people per year suffer a burn injury. Many burn survivors are left with scarring or a 'visible difference'. This can lead to behavioural, emotional and cognitive impacts.^[9–11]
- 'Visible differences' can hinder an individual's capacity to lead a 'normal' life.^[12,13] Burn scars are associated with poorer social adjustment and increased psychological distress.^[14,15]
- Medical Tattooing (MT) is an intervention to reduce the impacts of scarring and improve appearance, by implantation of pigments to enhance, for example, eyebrows, lips, eyelashes, and skin pigment.^[37]
- Limited completed research has highlighted some psychological and psychosocial impacts of MT for individuals with burn injuries^[38], but the detailed nature of these are not well understood.
- A qualitative methodology was employed to provide insights into the psychosocial impacts of MT, including how individuals understand and make sense of their experiences.

RESEARCH AIMS

This study aimed to explore burn survivors' psychosocial experiences of MT to answer the following questions:

- What expectations did patients have of their MT and did these relate to the experience of undergoing MT?;
- What psychological processes do patients go through in relation to their MT experience?



METHODS

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to guide the methodology. In-line with an IPA approach, a critical realist framework was adopted.

A purposive sample of adults who had received a MT was accessed via The Katie Piper Foundation (KPF).

Exclusion criteria were applied: if the injury resulted from self-harm; if cognitive impairment was present that may impact upon engagement in interviews; and non-fluency in spoken English.

From the 11 participants who responded to the research advertisement, eight participants were contacted by telephone. A pilot interview was completed and included within the analysis. Three individuals were contacted and thanked for their interest. No individuals dropped out of the research.

Each participant completed one telephone interview (range: 49 to 104 minutes in duration [mean=77 min]). The interview included: demographic questioning, Derriford Appearance Scale-24^[48], and a semi-structured interview.

All participants were debriefed at the end of the interview.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Emerging Themes

Participants experienced MT within a broader context of conflict around its perceived legitimacy as an appropriate treatment option. Within this context, the following themes were extracted:

- One major theme -
 - Impacts of medical tattooing
- Two minor themes -
 - Management of hope
 - The medical tattooing process

Main Findings

Impacts of MT

The overwhelmingly positive impact of MT was the quintessential experience for participants regardless of the location and severity of the injury.

Improved appearance largely accounted for the sense of MT as "life-changing" and appeared pivotal in facilitating a shift towards a more integrated sense of self.

Improved confidence comprised a combination of regaining normalcy, increasing acceptance of 'new' appearance, and a reduction in inter-relational barriers.

Conflicting Narratives around Appearance

A contradictory narrative also emerged - the perception that it was not legitimate to consider and undergo a treatment to improve appearance.

A sense of pressure to simultaneously accept and adjust to their altered appearance was also identified.

Clinical Implications:

MT may help to contribute to the recovery pathway of burn survivors.

Burns Services may benefit from reviewing the support offer in relation to MT.

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