


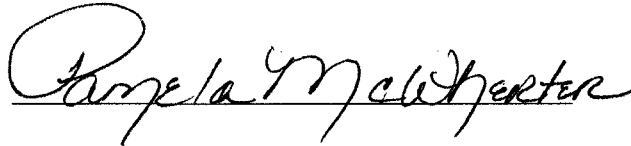
LIVING A TATTOOED LIFE:
THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

By

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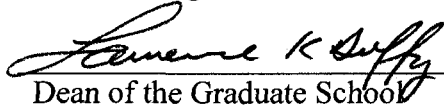


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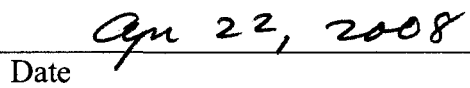
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LIVING A TATTOOED LIFE:
THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

A
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By
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Fairbanks, Alaska

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Abstract

The present research is rooted in Human Science, and employed the epistemology of Constructionism, as well as the theoretical perspective of Social Construction of Reality. I used Narrative Inquiry as methodology and conversational interviewing as my method of collecting data. I interviewed six women who provided narratives of their lived experience of constructing their identities through tattoos. Three emergent themes, along with three sub-themes, are discussed in regards to the lived experiences of tattooed women: (1) becoming tattooed constructs who you are; (2) becoming tattooed develops relational identity with (a) friends, (b) the tattoo community, (c) family; and (3) the communication of “tattoo remorse” is differentiated from an earlier recognition of tattoo regret. This research provides insight into the lived human experience of tattooed women through their own natural language.

Table of Contents

	Page
Signature Page	i
Title Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Review of Related Literature	5
Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods of Research	16
Procedures	18
Method of Analysis	19
Chapter 3: The Interview Experience	21
3.1 Elizabeth's Conversational Interview	22
3.2 Autumn's Conversational Interview	35
3.3 Heather's Conversational Interview	45
3.4 Teal's Conversational Interview	55
3.5 Rotten and Militia's Conversational Interview	66
Interview Summary	80
Chapter 4: Human Science Research Analysis	82
4.1 Emergent Theme One	83
4.2 Emergent Theme Two	87

4.2.1 Sub-theme One..... 88

4.2.2 Sub-theme Two..... 89

4.2.3 Sub-theme Three..... 90

4.3 Emergent Theme Three..... 92

4.4 Implications for Future Research..... 96

References.....97

Appendix.....101

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Ink to paper is thoughtful

Ink to flesh, hard-core.

If Shakespeare were a tattooist

We'd appreciate body art more.

~Carrie Latet

Introduction

“The Indian on her back was poised for an attack. She said a tattoo is a badge of validation. But the truth of the matter was far more revealing; It’s a permanent reminder of a temporary feeling.”

—Artist Jimmy Buffett, 1999

People with tattoos in contemporary American society have become much more commonplace than in earlier eras. While many people, particularly younger adults, either have a tattoo or know someone with a tattoo, very few actually know the history of tattoos and how that history has evolved over time. Tattoos evolving as social perceptions no longer elicit a simple identification with bikers, outlaws, and criminals; they are symbols of identification with contemporary creativity, individualism, and relationships.

It is important to identify types of tattoos as well as their origin. The word itself is fabled to have come from Captain James Cook, a British explorer, during a voyage to the South Pacific in 1769. After viewing natives with markings on their skin, Captain Cook coined the term “tattoo,” from the Tahitian word “ta-tu” which means to mark (Bell, 1999). This is not to say that Captain Cook was the first to come into contact with cultures practicing tattooing. It is well documented that numerous ancient cultures such as the Celts, the Coptics, and the Maoris, as well as many others, practiced tattooing, which consisted of primarily abstract markings and geometric shapes. John Rush (2005), an anthropologist researching the spirituality of tattooing, explains that all cultures at one time have practiced some type of body modification (p. 18).

The Japanese culture has practiced tattooing for hundreds of years and is considered one of the origins of artistic tattooing. That is, Japanese tattoo markings are more than just geometric shapes and designs. Traditional Japanese tattoos depict scenes which derive from Japanese mythology and usually cover the entire body. This type of tattooing is known as Japanese body suits.

Contemporary American tattoos are considered image-oriented, and are a representation of our consumer and individualistic society. Mainstream tattoos tend not to cover the entire body, and for persons having more than one tattoo, the tattoos typically do not have a connecting theme, as do those found in the Japanese traditions. Previously, a variety of techniques have been used to create tattoos; however, since the late 19th century, electric tattoo machines have become the most common method of tattooing in mainstream America. The electric tattoo machine inserts ink through the epidermis into the second layer of skin, the dermis (Schildkrout, 2001). This is typically a two handed procedure since the tattooist must stretch the skin with one hand while controlling the tattoo gun with the other hand. The process of becoming tattooed has changed over time along with the reasons for becoming tattooed.

Historically, in U.S. American culture, tattoos have been a way for people to separate themselves from mainstream society, and to achieve an individual identity. Since identity is fixed on what we are, as well as what we are becoming, Millner and Eichold (2001) explains that the human skin can “designate one’s social status, ideas of

beauty, and at times, psychic conflict” (p. 429). While tattoos may appear to be a representation of self, they are located in time and place, and provide messages that can be read only within the social system of their creation.

The co-culture of tattooing has always been, and continues to be, a patriarchally dominated culture. While women have participated in tattooing throughout history, the participation has been strictly regulated by men. For example, tattooed women who traveled with carnivals in the 1920’s were often used as free advertising for male tattoo artists (Mifflin, 1997). By the 1950’s, Steward (1990), a university professor who became a tattooist, established a policy for only tattooing women who were at least twenty one, married, and in the presence of their husbands who were required to show documented proof of their marriage. The only exception Steward ever made for women was if the woman was a lesbian, however, she still had to be at least twenty one years old; as compared to men who only had to be eighteen (p. 127).

As a tattooed woman in today’s society, I continue to feel the constraints placed upon women who participate in this patriarchal co-culture. Admittedly, tattooed women in the 21st Century are not faced with the same constraints, however, constraints still exist in regards to the size of the tattoo, placement of the tattoo on the body, and the image depicted. The existence of constraints, as well as my experience in the tattoo co-culture, has prompted my research on tattooed women and how tattoo-bearing women construct and communicate identity through their tattoos.

In that U.S. America is an extremely image conscious society, the tendency to judge a person based on appearance is high. In mainstream culture, people with tattoos

have generally been considered to be deviant, however, when a woman is tattooed, she is often faced with the social stigma of being seen as a freak or merely a sexual object. Refusing to conform to the gender expectations established by a patriarchal society has placed tattooed women under constant scrutiny. Results of such scrutiny are typically the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, much the same as when men cross into female gendered roles.

Refusing to conform to patriarchally perpetuated gender roles leaves tattooed women to create new identity roles for ourselves in this culture. The creation of new role expectations encourages women to no longer view ourselves and our bodies as the property of men. Taking control of our bodies promotes empowerment and allows us the freedom to construct our own identities against the background of a hegemonic male society. This researcher's intent is to understand how tattooed women create, maintain, and communicate private and public identities through tattoos.

Chapter 1

Review of Related Literature

A tattoo in and of itself is a symbol of multiple meanings. Tattoos in the past have been a way of proclaiming anti-mainstream ideologies, and people who had tattoos were often attempting thereby to separate themselves from society at large by claiming association with a sub-culture. Although having an anti-mainstream ideology, tattoos have not always had a negative stigma. This negative stigma gained momentum during the depression when numerous people became tattooed and attempted to gain employment with sideshow exhibits. As more tattoo practitioners emerged with no sanitary regulations, outbreaks of hepatitis and other transmittable diseases occurred which eventually lead to the banning of tattooing in some states (Mifflin, 1997). As an official form of illegal activity, tattoos became a representation of outlaw affiliation and are only recently beginning to shed this negative stigma for a more contemporary trend.

For example, during the late 1800's tattooing became voguish among royalty and upper class European women (Mifflin, 1997). By the 1920's some women adorned themselves with tattoos to gain lucrative positions in traveling carnivals, and according to Hardin (1999), prostitutes in the 1950's who worked in Las Vegas were tattooed with their pimp's name as a display of ownership. Jon Gray, author of the tattoo book *I Love Mom: An irreverent history of the tattoo*, describes this dichotomy as the upper-class giving tattooing its high end glamour and outlaws providing tattoos with its industrial base (p. 47).

Sociologist Clinton Sanders (1989) posits that, in the past, little research regarding tattooing outside prisons and mental institutions has existed. Therefore, relationships between mental illness and criminal activity are continually associated with tattooed people. Such prevalent associations inhibit any cultural conceptualization of tattooing as a healthy, pro-social choice.

DeMello (1995) believes that tattooing is continuously represented in the same manner: who *was* getting what kind of tattoo, and who *is* getting what kind of tattoo. The emphasis on the type of person with tattoos was intended to break down stereotypes by explaining that tattoos are no longer just for low class deviants, but are now spanning all socio-economic classes in America. This framing of tattooing at once sensationalizes the seedy past of tattooing and yet alludes that those considered lower class are no longer alone in becoming tattooed. DeMello, (1995) explains that more recent research has focused on middle-class people with tattoos who share the same values as the anthropologist/sociologist conducting the research. She criticizes such research in that it has not attempted to analyze the interviews or data and has merely re-stated what the participants said. At the same time, the media have continually represented tattoos in the same historical perspective, either as an identifier of lower social class or as a freedom of upper social class celebrities who are attempting to identify with the “wild side” of their culture. The media therefore only examines the new tattoo generation and, in effect, silences those considered to be lower class (p. 40). There has been very little research conducted that investigates tattoos as essentially communicative, particularly in their

contemporary American use, i.e., what the wearer of the tattoo is attempting to communicate.

Research considering motivation for becoming tattooed, however, is much easier to locate. One such investigation conducted by Millner and Eichold (2001) revealed that individual expression was the most reported motivation followed by art collecting, group membership, mystical/religious experience, celebration, perceptions of sexiness, friend influence, romantic symbolism, control, beauty, and as fashion statements (p. 433). Condensing motivation for tattoos into categories, Fisher (2002) highlights four primary overlapping reasons for becoming tattooed. These are: physical markings of a life event, identification or affiliation tattoos, protective tattoos, and decorative tattoos (p. 101).

In America, men have predominately been the main participants in the tattoo culture. Atkinson's (2004) research highlighted the perception that tattoos were sought in order to form identity, as expression, and as reinforcing one's membership in a group. As one co-researcher expressed, he had never thought about tattoos until he started hanging out with others who had tattoos. This social interdependence was a new emerging theme found mainly among men (p. 128). Atkinson (2004) attributed this new theme to the "I-WE" relationships found within social circles.

Sanders (1989), on the other hand, explains differences in the identity forming process of tattoos. For example, prison tattoos are not used exclusively for claiming identity among prison gangs, but as a response to identity stripping, which occurs when incarcerated individuals are depersonalized by the institution. These new forms of

identity can not be taken away by those in power (correctional officers) and the tattoos symbolize defiance and strength (p. 40).

Angus Vail (1999), however, takes a different approach to tattooing. Vail explains that recently tattoos have been seen as a sign of extroversion. He maintains that tattoo collectors not only experience a physical change due to permanent body modification, but a psychological change occurs as well. Vail uses symbolic interaction to explain how tattoo collectors “learn to build their collections from other people” (p. 259). His research contends that collectors must desire to become collectors, which he describes as an “affinity” (p. 259); implying that a person “must desire to become a deviant” (p. 259). Vail concludes that “collecting tattoos is both an individual and a collective journey” and that social interaction amongst tattoo collectors creates and maintains the growing co-culture (p. 269).

Being tattooed has generally been described as a masculine presentation, however, women are changing this social perception one tattoo at a time. A recent survey conducted by Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn (2004) at a Canadian University found that more women claimed to be tattooed than men even though the sample population was evenly split between the sexes. Given this tattoo explosion, Bell (1999) still distinguishes a recognizable difference in this social circumstance between a person who has a tattoo and a tattooed person. She explains that people who have tattoos usually have one or two and place them in private places that can easily be covered with traditional clothing, while tattooed people “have many bright or bold tattoos in obvious places” (p. 4). Bell is not the only person to distinguish a difference within the culture of

tattoos. Logically, if the public at large can not see the tattoo then the wearer is safe from being criticized, judged, or stereotyped.

Scholarly information pertaining to the new generation of tattoos is growing; however, only a smaller part of that information addresses women and their perceptions of tattoos. The most in-depth information appears to be from Atkinson (2002), whose participant observation of tattooing in Canada for three years produced 40 interviews with women. Atkinson (2002) sought women with assorted levels of involvement in the tattooing process to determine a more in-depth understanding of how women's perception changes as they become tattooed. Atkinson's (2002) research demonstrates that the women he interviewed believe women's bodies are being represented in the media as passive and as if women must conform to gender codes. His co-researchers also explained daily rituals, such as applying make-up, dying hair, and dieting which are clearly integrated into the hegemonic social gender expectation. After analyzing the interviews, Atkinson (2002) presents emerging themes that suggest his co-researchers are "sensitive about jeopardizing their established femininity through the tattooing process" (p. 226). Therefore, tattoo imagery, placement of the tattoo, and the size of the tattoo played a major role in their decision making. More emerging themes posit a cultural rebellion, individuality, and a defiance of men, as ways of expanding cultural boundaries, or as one woman explained, tattoos communicate "that a strong and independent woman lives here.....forever." (p. 228).

Women involved in tattooing not only have to resist the anti-societal stigma; they must also confront genderized stereotypes that classify tattooed women as lesbians,

whores, and trash. Body modification of which tattooing is an example, however, is not a new topic for women. For example, breast augmentation, extreme dieting, piercing, and cosmetic surgery have all become commonplace in social perception and in some women's lives. The female body is now routinely painted, wrapped, oiled, cut, stretched, implanted, excavated, and measured as well as undergoing other transformations. Thus it is clear that patriarchal images of women still prevail. The social construction of women's bodies has represented the female as weak and subservient to men. Women with tattoos challenge this patriarchal conception of women; however, the perceptual dichotomy still exists between the wholesome, unmarked virgin, and the marked whore. According to Atkinson (2002) some studies reveal that women are getting tattooed specifically to break the norms of femininity, and/or to re-claim their bodies.

Although discourse exists regarding the "re-claiming" of the body, some radical feminists argue that body modification subverts the feminist cause and is actually linked to victimization and objectification (Pitts, 2003). Radical feminists criticize body modifications such as female bodybuilding and feminist punk, claiming that female strength and muscularity are not evidence of power with total freedom. Instead these are examples of women who are still within the boundaries of masculine norms, in other words, women playing a man's game instead of women playing a woman's game.

Braunberger (2000) believes that the female body is perceived as a sex symbol, or a spectacle, and when tattoos are added, the sex symbol becomes a sex object and the spectacle becomes a show (p. 2). She adds that no matter the motivation for getting a tattoo or whatever its intended meaning, patriarchal cultural definitions override the

tattooed woman's individual meaning for the tattoo. Braunberger relates women's inability to shed the patriarchal stigmatizing of tattooed women who were shown as circus freaks in the late 1800's. These women underwent many hours of being stuck painfully with a needle so they could be gawked at. Such women were forced to tell tattoo "rape" stories which entailed the women having been "kidnapped and forcibly tattooed by savages, often cast as American Indians" (p. 9). Braunberger continues with another story of a blue collar class woman in the late 1920's who was the victim of a brutal rape. During the trial of her attacker it was revealed she had a small butterfly tattoo on her leg. The judge summarily threw out the case saying she had perhaps invited the rape because of the tattoo (p. 4). In the late 1960's, after Janis Joplin's death, many women duplicated her tattoo, which led to articles written and published by men who claimed that tattoos were a threat to American womanhood and should be controlled (p. 15). Announcing that women should be controlled only reinforces the perception that women's bodies belong to men and not ourselves.

Socially constructed gender norms extend into the tattoo co-culture which can restrict if or how a woman chooses to become tattooed. Sociologist Sharyn Anleu (2006) believes that "social norms and cultural values governing women's bodies, behaviour [sic], and appearance generally are far more restrictive and repressive than those regulating men's bodies" (p. 359). Men are bound to socially constructed gender norms as well; however, masculinity is perceived to be strong whereas femininity is perceived to be weak. The acceptance of the socially constructed female body portrayed by the mass media can both constrain and provide empowerment to individual women. This paradox

highlights that women feel the pressure of fulfilling socially constructed gender norms and therefore may feel constrained to maintain Western cultural femininity. Maintaining this femininity is done through conscious or subconscious routines, such as the removal of hair from the body, application of make-up, cosmetic surgery, and extreme dieting and/or fitness to name a few.

While radical feminists claim any body modification is mutilation, some women become empowered by turning against the socially constructed gender norms and taking ownership of their bodies. A tattooed woman violates socially constructed beauty norms by promoting symbolic rebellion, and self transformation. Victoria Pitts's (2003) research on body modification highlights "the power relations that surround the body, and undergoing painful, often emotional ritual to transform the self-body relationship" (p. 57). Many women Pitts interviewed used "reclaiming" discourse as a way of expressing their new feeling of ownership of their bodies (p. 58).

It is not solely men who impose the good girl/bad girl image, but women ourselves. By saying "I'm a good girl so I won't get tattooed" enforces the archaic idea that only bad girls get tattooed. Critical theorist bell hooks (2000) refers to this conformity as internalized sexism. hooks (2000) explains that "we see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred" (p. 14). It becomes clear that women should neither judge or be judged by standards institutionalized by the hegemonic patriarchal society we share. By encouraging women to break free of patriarchal thinking, we are

forcing ourselves to create new identities and manage these identities for ourselves in a society that will endure beyond the patriarchy.

Erving Goffman's (1959) work established our concepts of self presentation in everyday life along with the associated concept of impression management. Goffman (1959) created the metaphor of dramatism, an actor and stage presence, which can be used to explain how people in mundane reality present themselves to others. As the actors construct performances to control how they are perceived by the audience, humans socially construct their mundane performance so they can have some degree of control in how they believe they are perceived by others. Proposing that humans are always actors performing on the stage of life frames everyday life in a way that makes mundane motivations clear to most cultural observers. Self presentation and impression management then allow the performer to create and share meaning with others through performing communication. According to Goffman, (1959) changing one's communication to fit the situation involves two different types of activity, "the expression that he [sic] *gives*, and the expression that he [sic] *gives off*" (p. 2). Examining communication in this way highlights the importance of both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as showing how the two forms of communication meaningfully are intertwined.

The mundane impressions others have of us are constructed symbolically. We do this with communication style, clothing, adornment, hairstyles, and, in this case, even tattoos. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) refers to clothing as a universal symbol. She states that "there are few interactions where clothing (or its noticeable lack) does not play a

role,” and that clothing “often provides the first information we are presented about another person” (p. 104). While most people change clothing daily, they usually maintain a style of clothing they believe supports perceptions they wish to cultivate in others. Tattoos adorn the body just as clothing, however, tattoos are a permanent body modification whereas clothes are temporary. Tattooed women communicate their identities through tattoos semiotically. That is not to say tattoos cannot be removed. The removal of tattoos is a long and painful process that is even now, much less common and can leave scars in the shape of the removed tattoo. Palermo (2004) emphasizes the fact that tattoos are “a permanent statement of facts or feelings, conscious or unconscious, and should be viewed as intrinsic to the personality of the bearer” (p. 9).

Naively applying Goffman’s concept of identity management, human beings project our preferred identities through our appearance. When in social situations with unknown individuals we, in turn, use their appearance to interpret their identities. Information about an individual helps people contextualize in order to gain some measure of predictability of the unknown individual. Initially, interpersonal interpretation is typically done through stereotypes, which in and of itself is not inherently negative; however, stereotypes are rarely perceived as positive. By managing a person’s perception of our identity through adjusting our outward appearance, we are in effect communicating ourselves non-verbally through symbols. My interest in the semiotic communication of tattoos has prompted this research. As a tattooed woman who creates,

maintains, and communicates much of my public identity through tattoos, I have developed an interest in how other tattooed women understand their lived human experience.

Chapter 2

Methodology and Methods of Research

The goal of this research is to understand the lived experiences of tattooed women, and the way they socially construct and communicate their identities through tattoos. My own decision to live as a tattooed woman allows for particular insight into this co-culture. Because the researcher is the research instrument, the measure of analysis needs to be re-conceptualized, meaning that the evaluation of human science needs to be an evaluation of interview techniques and an evaluation of the humans involved. Due to this I must acknowledge my biases and my association with the target experience and use it to further my researched understanding of the experience of women who choose to live a tattooed life. Kvale (1996) posits that in human science we are moving away from a universal truth to truth of the particular. When researching human affairs, we focus on the lived experience; therefore a human science approach is necessary.

In seeking an understanding of this human experience, I am following a constructionist epistemology. Constructionism (Crotty, 1998) provides insight into the here and now with a view of the particular. Crotty (1998) describes Constructionism as an epistemological view that refutes the Objectivist concept that there is an objective truth with a capital "T." He asserts that constructionists believe "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (p. 9). Crotty (1998) further explains that constructionism is the "view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality, as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings

and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42). As a result, through interaction with others, humans socially construct their meanings and their realities.

Communication viewed through a theoretical perspective of social constructionism is developed in social interaction and insists the interpretations of the interactions are left to the participants and communicated in their natural language; thus, social reality is constructed through dialogue. Gergen (1994) posits that "words take on their meaning only within the context of ongoing relationships" (p. 49). Social constructionism is always an ongoing dynamic process and as a result, all interactions with my co-researchers re-shape our future interactions and interpretations.

Communicating through narratives allows the co-researchers to give detailed information about their experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out that human experience should be studied narratively because "narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking" about experiences (p. 18). Polkinghorne (1988) explains that "narratives are a form of meaning making" and that narratives allow for the "meaningfulness of individual experiences" (p. 36). Gergen (1994) asserts that humans use "the story form to identify ourselves to others and to ourselves" and that "our relationships with others are lived out in narrative form" (p. 186). Gergen (1994) further explains that "self narrative is not simply a derivative of past encounters" but that "it establishes reputation" and the "performance of self-narrative secures a relational future" (p. 207).

To capture narrative information, conversational interviewing was my method. Kvale (1996) acknowledges that “conversation is the basic mode of human interaction” and “through conversations we get to know other people, get to learn their experience, feelings, hopes and the world they live in” (p. 5). Polkinghorne (1988) further indicates that meanings for experience are not static, but that through “reflection and recollection” humans continue the refiguring process (p. 15). The interview process was conducted through narrative conversations with co-researchers. Through these conversations thick description was obtained about each co-researcher’s experience of living as a tattooed woman. Flexibility within the conversations allowed for unexpected areas of investigation and emerging concepts and themes to be probed.

Procedures

A letter introducing this researcher was given to an owner of a tattoo studio in Alaska, eliciting support in identifying possible co-researchers. Designated staff were instructed to give possible co-researchers the researcher’s contact information. Six female co-researchers were sought within the Alaska community. Kvale (1996) asserts that the “number of subjects necessary depends on the study’s purpose” however in “current interview studies, the number of interviews tend to be around 15 ± 10 (p. 102). Co-researchers were required to be at least eighteen years old, and have mundanely visible tattoos. Co-researchers were informed that their participation was voluntary and they had the power to terminate the interview at any time without repercussions. All co-researchers provided verbal consent to participate and choose their own pseudonyms.

Data was digitally audio recorded in narrative conversational interviews, then immediately transformed into transcriptions. I transcribed all interviews personally, noting from recall the points of significant non-verbal interaction. Although the interviews were constructed as conversations, I attempted to guide the interview in order to solicit specific information. The specific information sought was a descriptive personal history of the co-researcher, along with history of her tattoos; information such as how long she had had them, when and where she had acquired them, if each has a personally assigned meaning and what that meanings is, as well as, what kinds of interaction the tattoo has elicited with others or the public in general. Perceptions pertaining to the personal views of other women and their tattoos, along with opinions about tattoos in general were discussed.

Interviews took place in a variety of private and semi-private settings at the discretion of the co-researchers and took as much time as the co-researchers needed. Most interviews lasted approximately 35 to 75 minutes. I preferred the interviews to be completed in one setting; nevertheless, all co-researchers were prepared for the possibility of a second interview. I asked each participant is if I might contact them again for clarification if needed.

Methods of Analysis

Careful thematic analysis of the interviews searched for common themes of the lived human experience. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). These emerging themes allowed me to gain a more thorough understanding of the

experience of tattooed women. Utilizing thematic analysis allowed for inductive or “bottom up” analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that “an inductive approach means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves” (p. 83), meaning the data sought was specific. Kvale (1996) asserts that “the researcher has a perspective on what is investigated and interprets the interview from this perspective” (p. 201). He further explains that validity has moved from the end of the research, as found in social science, to validity being sought throughout the entire research process. In order for this to occur the researcher must have craft in interviewing techniques and must have expertise in the area of research. The interviewer must also be dependable, accountable, and morally astute. Along with the interviewer, the interviewee must share these qualifications to ensure sound research. Together, the interviewer and interviewee co-author and co-produce the interview. Interpretations of the interviews, however, were completed with high integrity within the goal of presenting a gendered understanding of tattooed women’s lived experience in my co-researcher’s own terms.

Chapter 3

The Interview Experience

Human beings relate to one another through stories, which are forms of conversation. In order to capture the lived world of another person, we must converse; therefore it is through the act of conversation that we gain shared knowledge. Kvale (1996) posits that conversations with structure and purpose are considered interviews because they go “beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation” (p. 6). Using conversational interviewing directed the co-researchers to present their lived experience in their natural language. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) recognize that in language, narrations serve a social purpose such as “marking in-groups membership, asserting expertise, and controlling emotional expression” (p. 174). The use of natural language in conversational interviews provides me as researcher the ability to understand the co-researcher’s experiences of living tattooed lives.

Kvale (1996) asserts that interviews are “suited for studying people’s understanding of meaning in their lived world, describing their experience and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world” (p.105). Since “interviews allow us to hear people’s stories of their experiences,” sensitive information is communicated (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Rubin and Rubin (2005) explain that co-researchers “deposit a part of themselves, an image of who they are” to the interviewer and trust that the interviewer will not “violate their

confidence, or criticize them” (p. 83). Therefore, I have made every attempt to uphold the integrity of the co-researchers and their stories as well as the integrity of the research process at all times.

Each interview offered a unique perspective on the experiences of women becoming tattooed. I attempted to provide a range of tattoo expertise, meaning the co-researcher’s involvement in the tattooing process spanned from a co-researcher having only 6 tattoos to a co-researcher who is almost completely covered. During each interview process it became clear that co-researchers sought personal information from me. Ellis and Berger (2003) describe the sharing of information between researcher and co-researcher as a “sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up conversations about how we live and cope” (p. 161). The reciprocal sharing of information during the interviews provided a personal investment that I believe was felt by the co-researchers and enhanced the interview process for me as researcher. The tattoo narratives provided by the co-researchers are presented here in the order in which they were conducted.

3.1 Elizabeth’s Conversational Interview

Elizabeth is the most heavily tattooed woman I interviewed and displays perhaps the most self-awareness. She is 41 years old, and has 4 children, 3 girls and 1 boy, between the ages of 18 and 6. Elizabeth is married to a tattoo artist and works as a professional piercer in the tattoo shop, which they own together. I know her to be an articulate, intelligent woman who is insightful and is genuinely helpful. She is thought of as outspoken, with a loud voice that carries, and at times her candor can seem almost

confrontational. I have known her socially for a few years through becoming tattooed and pierced at their shop. Throughout the two years that I have been frequenting their business, Elizabeth and I have exchanged many stories which have established an existing level of trust that clearly permeated the interview.

When I first discussed the possibility of an interview with Elizabeth she was willing and eager to participate. She requested that the interview be conducted at the shop since they were short-staffed in the piercing department, and she offered the back office as a convenient place to conduct the interview. Knowing that their place is a very busy shop with not much privacy I prepared myself mentally to work quickly and efficiently. Upon arrival I heard a mixture of tattoo guns tating, phones ringing, idle chatter, and heavy metal music blaring through the speaker system. Elizabeth was busy with piercings so I socialized with some of the artists working that day. Approximately 15 minutes later, Elizabeth instructed the front staff to not schedule any piercings for the next 45 minutes so we could talk undisturbed. The interview lasted about 75 minutes. Once settled in the back office with her coffee in hand, Elizabeth gave me her full attention. I began the interview by providing a copy of my informed consent document and read it to her. She agreed verbally to participate which I digitally audio-recorded.

Since there is no way to count how many tattoos Elizabeth has, we have approximated together that at least two thirds of her body is covered with tattoos. I began the interview wanting to understand how Elizabeth began her journey of becoming tattooed. Elizabeth related that she was 23 years old when she got her first tattoo. She wrinkled up her face and looked at the ceiling in disbelief: "That was, Jesus Christ, 18

years ago. Yeah. Eighteen years ago. Holy moly!” Her surprise made me giggle and I asked her jokingly if she was feeling old. Elizabeth explained that she “was raised upper middle class, you know, white bread, all the way across the board.” With a slight smile on her face she whispered, “They didn’t do those things [tattooing].” She quickly added that her dad had a tattoo and at the time she was dating a guy with tattoos which “might have been a motivation” for wanting a tattoo, but that overall she “just wanted a tattoo.” Laughing, she exclaimed, “So I got one, and that hurt like hell!” Elizabeth jets out her fully tattooed arm and points to a spot near her wrist and described her first tattoo which consisted of a butterfly that was covered by a different butterfly and is now a rock. We were chuckling together about the butterfly’s transformation into a rock when we were briefly interrupted by her husband.

Elizabeth resumed the interview by shaking her head side to side and stating, “I cannot tell you any one reason why I started getting tattoos. I don’t know, I don’t.”

Without prompting Elizabeth tells the story of her second tattoo:

My brother got sick and my youngest brother and I went down to see him to say goodbye, because that was why we were there ’cause he was dying. And we got tattoos. My brother got his very first tattoo and I got my second one and that was to basically – neither one of our tattoos were memorial pieces, but we got a tattoo together while we were down there saying goodbye to our brother. So it was kind of a bonding thing.

According to Elizabeth she has since gotten her second tattoo covered up because “it was shitty.” Thinking out loud, she quietly asked herself questions about her tattoos.

Watching her eyes get bigger as she recalled her experiences, she pointed to a tattooed area and explained “that was for me and my second ex-husband. It was a piece for both of us.” Elizabeth quickly followed this with: “That’s covered up.”

Elizabeth’s voice became softer. She looked at me and said, “Then, I got my dragon and I think the dragon was probably the most emotionally motivated tattoo that I have.” She leaned in towards me and tilted her head to the side, asking if it made sense. Instinctively I tilted my head to the side also and acknowledged that it did. As Elizabeth continued to speak, her posture seemed to stiffen and her voice became a little stressed. She explained:

There were more emotions in that tattoo than any one that I have had before that or since then. I was dating a guy that was killed in a car accident. And that’s what that dragon represents. I was so hurt and so fucking angry and had no outlet for it, do you know what I mean? And that’s what that dragon represents. [It] actually turned into my waist piece and then it goes down my thigh. It is a whole huge piece and that was the most emotionally motivated tattoo that I have. And I think they lose their power after a while, um but it acts as a reminder, does it, does that make sense?

I responded that I understood as she took a drink of her coffee. Jokingly she quipped that she [remembers thinking] “I could drink this away,” but that “tattooing just seemed better.” She moved the conversation towards the grieving process and expressed that “everybody has a different way of dealing with grief, that was my way.”

Elizabeth paused and took another sip of her coffee. Waving my hand around, palm out, I asked if she knew from the beginning that tattooing would be a big part of her life. She shook her head and declared, “No idea, no idea. No, I never planned it.” She further added that tattooing was something that she hid under her clothes for the most part, at least until she ran out of room. Elizabeth explained:

For the longest time every tattoo I got was in places I could hide and then I had to make a decision, well I could stop getting tattoos or I’m going to have to start tattooing in places that I can’t hide anymore. It was difficult because I didn’t want to stop being tattooed, not at all. I didn’t want to stop because I didn’t want to feel like I had to stop. You know what I mean?

Elizabeth paused to look over my shoulder. I turned to see a tattoo artist walk into the room and go to the book shelf. Idle chat occurred during this time between us and the artist; however once he left the room Elizabeth steered the conversation towards the relationship between her and her mother and her mother’s perception of tattooing. Elizabeth pointed out that her mother attempted to dissuade her from getting a tattoo on her neck. She explained, “My mom felt like it would be hard on my son if I was tattooed in areas that everyone could see. And she felt it was disrespectful. So I really had to think. I thought a lot about it.” A large smile broke out across her face. Her eyes got bigger and she began nodding her head. She gave a small laugh as she said, “I thought you know what, fuck her! It’s me. I guess – but my mom will tell you I’ve always been one to push boundaries.” I thought about all her tattoos and was a bit confused because I know her son is the youngest of her children, so I asked about the tattoos she had while

raising her daughters. Elizabeth clarified that when she had her first daughter she had no tattoos other than a “hand poked” or a home-made tattoo. When she had her second and third daughters Elizabeth only had one tattoo, but by the time she had her son, she had about seven tattoos. Except for the one near her wrist, all the tattoos could be covered by clothing. She explained “I have had twice as much tattoo work done now since *my son* has been born. So the bulk of my tattoo work has been done in the last six years.”

As Elizabeth continued to tell me stories, I nodded my head and made agreement sounds not wanting to interrupt her flow. She directed the conversation towards employment and commented, “I have reached a point, I’m here working in this shop. As far as I know this is the last real job I’ll ever have.” She looked at me and balled her hands into fists to look at her knuckles. Elizabeth turned her knuckles towards me and showed me that “TUFF MAMA” is tattooed across them in big, thick, black ink. She explained, “I couldn’t get another job now if I wanted to probably ’cause of this, mostly because of this.” She reached up and touched her neck and exclaimed, “Because I could hide this.” I look at the tattoo on her neck and assumed she meant by growing her hair longer and wearing a turtle neck shirt. I remembered from our past conversations that she mentioned getting rid of her tattooed knuckles so I mentioned it. She lowered her tone and responded:

These would be only thing I would get rid of. Because I look at my jewelry sometimes and how pretty my rings are and I look at them sitting on my fingers, they’re not so pretty sitting there with this. You know, but that’s a decision I made. It’s a decision I made and it’s a decision I’m going to have to live with. So

and that's kind of what I try to tell some people that come in here and make sure that's what you want because it ain't going nowhere. I mean I guess I could take a razor blade, but I'm not sure I would want to do that. Yeah, but even if I got these lasered off, and this is pretty solid dark black and it would take quite a few passes with the laser to get them off. I would still have scars in the shape of these letters. So one way or another it is there, it is not going anywhere, so. And I think too that the attitude I get from people a lot of times is mostly this.

I watched her demeanor shift as she paused while looking at her knuckles. I am surprised that she correlates negative attitude from the public mainly to her knuckles, since she is tattooed in places that correspond with more standard social criticism. Without warning we are interrupted by another tattoo artist looking for Elizabeth. Within a few moments she receives a phone call from one of her daughters, so I chatted with the artists while she was on the phone. She put the phone down and continued to focus on her knuckle tattoos, turning the conversation towards me and posing questions about knuckle tattoos. I agreed with her that knuckle tattoos are mostly found on prisoners, gang members, and men. She then added:

People just don't know how to deal with it and they make assumptions, right? I mean even I make assumptions about people too sometimes you know. I try to stop myself from doing that, but I do, you know.

With Elizabeth already discussing stereotypes about tattooing, I wanted to know what kind of assumptions people have made about her due to her tattoos. She referred back to some of our past conversations where by she had described problems with her

son's school, which is a Catholic institution. Previously, Elizabeth told me stories that some of the staff has assumed that there is violence within their home, as well as "assuming I have a drinking problem, assuming I have a drug problem." In a defensive, exasperated tone Elizabeth continued:

The only exposure they have ever had to people with tattoos is like on the media or magazines or whatever, and it is always recovering gang member or drug addict or you know I spent 10 years in the gutter drinking whiskey or you know? What do they know? I think a lot of it boils down to ignorance. On other people's parts, you know, ignorance, but I'm not an alcoholic, never have been, never had a drug problem in my life, ever. The only addictions I've ever had are nicotine, chocolate, and asshole men.

Together we laughed at her "addictions" and she continued. She claimed that while some people consider tattoos an addiction, Elizabeth does not. She expressed that, "it's not an addiction, it's my right to be able to do that [getting tattooed]. I mean if you think about it, it's the only damn thing besides a hip replacement that you're going to take with you to the grave." I smiled as she continued. She related a story about a friend that constructively criticized her choice of body modification and how it might affect her children. Elizabeth defended her choices by stating that hopefully she was setting an example of "open-mindedness, being accepting of people, [and] that it is okay to try different things. It's okay to step outside of the norm." She tilted her head to the side and exclaimed, "I mean, why the fuck do we have to do what everybody else does?" She paused and looked at me. When she continued, I was struck by the sincerity in her voice.

I still worry sometimes about what people think in certain situations. You know, and I think that this person would take me a hell of a lot more serious right now if I wasn't covered in tattoos. They would actually be listening to what I have to say but they can't quit looking at me long enough to listen.

Elizabeth smiled at me and took a drink of her coffee. I directed the conversation towards her interaction with other people by asking for an example of how her tattoos have created interaction with others. Immediately, Elizabeth related a story that occurred during the prior summer. She explained that she and her son were in a grocery store parking lot when "this guy walks up to me, right in my face and says, 'Jesus Christ!'" For emphasis Elizabeth placed her hands on her hips and leaned towards me. In a child like voice, she mimicked her son who asked, "Momma what was that?" Elizabeth responded, "Just someone being ignorant." She looked at me intensely and remarked, "What am I going to tell him? He didn't like the way mommy looked. Not at six." She paused for a moment and just looked at me. When she continued her voice was a bit softer and she began discussing her thoughts on her tattoo and the possible influence on her son:

But can you imagine if I didn't have my tattoos. Now all of a sudden I didn't have them anymore, I wouldn't be mom. Because I've been getting these since as far back as he can – his only memory of me or all memories of me have tattoos. And sometimes I sit and wonder about how much I have influenced him. Is that going to be an influence? You know. When he gets older and develops his preference in women, how is that going to go? Is he going to be more attracted to women

without tattoos or is he going to be attracted to women, only women with tattoos?

I've thought about it a lot.

After we had a brief discussion about her son, Elizabeth brought the conversation back to herself and tattooing by admitting, "I can't tell you if there was a definitive time where I said this is what I want to look like." Without prompting, Elizabeth re-directed the conversation to her communicative experiences with women. She recalled times when she was in her 30's and other women would make comments to her like, "God, I wish I could do that," referencing her tattoos, piercings, or when her head was shaved. She says that many times the woman's stated reason for not doing such things was, "My boyfriend wouldn't like it. My husband wouldn't like it, or I just don't have the nerve to do that."

The conversation began moving in the direction of getting older and being tattooed. Elizabeth wondered out loud, "What the hell is life going to be like when I'm 60? I'm going to be running around at 60 with "TUFF MAMA" tattooed on my knuckles. How are people going to take me then?" Elizabeth tilted her head to the side with a sincere expression in her eyes. Her voiced sounded stressed, and though I wanted to reassure her, I had nothing to offer. Her voice began to lighten while she recalled a man who expressed to her, "Every time I see you I think 'man, the stories she must have.'" She added, "I have people ask me, actually ask me what's the story behind this one?" Laughingly she responds, "And sometimes, I'll look at them and go you know I wish I had a great story to tell you, I don't... [but] some of them I do."

Conversing about the symbolic meanings of tattoos launched Elizabeth into telling me some of her stories. She pointed to her right arm which consists of a full color water scene that spans from her shoulder to her wrist and explained that the three tropical fish and one crab have meaning, “but the rest of this tattoo was built around those.” Her arm consists of an Olivia style mermaid with a coral reef design and jellyfish. Olivia, a famous pin-up artist, is known for her illustrations of Bettie Page and other pin-up models. Above the three tropical fish and the crab she has Poseidon holding his staff and rising from the water. Since the rest of her arm was designed around the fish and crab, Elizabeth revealed their symbolic meaning:

And I had her [tattoo artist] do the certain colors that to me represented my girls [the fish]. And the green to me represented, well green usually represents jealousy, but to me it represented anger. My oldest daughter at the time was really bad, and then the orange for fire because my middle daughter is Mexican. It's to me just like you know that kind of explains itself and then the pink for my youngest one because she has always been super girly, just real fluffy and so that was the kids. I wanted a crab. I wanted a crab and I thought you know, let's just do Sebastian for my son.

While discussing how she decided to create a full sleeve tattoo, Elizabeth expressed that to her “if you're going to be covered in tattoos it might as well look good together. So then I just went ahead and had him fill the arm up.”

While talking about choices of tattoos, we get interrupted with notification that Elizabeth had three people waiting to become pierced. She responded that we would be

done shortly and continued right back into our conversation. Elizabeth discussed her choice to get tattooed by not only her tattoo artist husband, but other artists as well, saying, “Why would I want to be covered from head to toe in the same person’s artwork?” She related it to “wearing the same designer’s clothes day after day.” As she talked about her tattoos she asserted that they are “empowering” and that “it is a decision that you get to make regarding your own body.”

Eventually, she giggled and asked me if she has even answered any of my questions. I smiled back at her and nodded my head. I mentioned that I get asked a lot about the pain of tattooing and her eyes lit up as she talked with enthusiasm. She explained that pain has a different meaning to her, “to me pain pulls me out of whatever head spins I’m in and brings me back to reality. It brings everything into focus for me.” Elizabeth referred back to the dragon tattoo and explained that while she had begun the dragon tattoo process just before her boyfriend died, she felt the need to get “tattooed the day after he died.” She explained that the “dragon represents to me all of that pain and mental anguish I went through.” Elizabeth elaborated on the pain of tattooing:

I need pain. I don’t like pain. I absolutely don’t like it. It is not something I enjoy, but sometimes I need it. I absolutely need it. It is a cleansing to me because I can’t focus on what just happened with my kid or what happened at work. I’m too busy focusing on the fact that this fucking hurts! It hurts! So I’m focused on that and I forget about why I am here.

The conversation shifted towards motivation for tattooing and Elizabeth stated, “I don’t think I’ve ever asked anybody what their motivations are because it seems so

private.” Her voice softens and drops in tone as she says, “There are very few people that I have ever told the story that I just told you. I don’t talk about that. It’s private, you know.” I watched her non-verbals change as she began to lighten up. She claimed that she “used to be very introverted, very shy” but explained “I’m not that person any more and I think my tattoos have helped me.” Elizabeth says she does not believe that you can “hide behind your tattoos,” but that she does use them “as a wall, as a shield” when she does not want to talk to somebody or be bothered. In a lower quite serious tone she deliberated the “responsibility” of being tattooed:

I have come to learn this. We do have a responsibility. If I come across as an ignorant bitch then someone might get the impression that all people who are tattooed are ignorant or they’re assholes. So I have a responsibility to, I guess, represent, you know, to not come across that way. Because nine times out of ten people are going to assume that I am ignorant, that I am certain ways so I need to show them that what they think is wrong, that I’m not ignorant, that I’m not a bitch, that I’m not uneducated. That, you know, I am a good mother and I am a productive member of society and that I take care of my family and I do my job and I pay my taxes. I just have some really cool artwork that I don’t hang on my wall, I hang on my body.

Turning the question to me, Elizabeth asked what I felt like the first time I was tattooed. I explained there was a mixture of fear, rebellion, excitement, and liberation. She asked if I felt like an outsider and without hesitation I said “definitely!” She continued to explain that while at a body modification conference the speaker explained:

It is kind of like we're in a big club, a big group, you know, and we are all used to it. We have tattoos. We have piercings, but here comes somebody else who is an outsider and they want to become a member of this group. Well if we are an asshole to them what impression does that make to them? So I remind myself of that a lot of times and that gives me patience because, believe me, you have to have patience to look like this. You really do.

Elizabeth's husband came back into the room and reached over her to get to the computer. The interruption brought us back to the reality of being in a busy tattoo/piercing shop. I asked Elizabeth if there was anything else she wanted to tell me about tattooing and she related some minor parting information about her tattoos. As we walked out of the back office we headed for the exit door so she could have a cigarette before getting back to work. While outside Elizabeth continued the conversation and opined "the problem with my tattoos is not the tattoos themselves, but people not being able to relate to me and me not being able to relate to people not understanding." Referring to her tattoos Elizabeth admitted, "You know there's an attachment... And when you carry a tattoo around for years and years and years it becomes who you are."

3.2 Autumn's Conversational Interview

Autumn is a college educated 36 year old female who recently got married for the first time. She now has a 10 year old step-daughter who occasionally resides with her. Autumn and I have known each other for many years and communicate on a daily basis. Our longstanding communication has created a strong level of trust between us that allowed for a very personal interview. Autumn is a woman who displays femininity

through speech and appearance, without being girly and I know her to be a bright, articulate, and vibrant woman with a quick wit.

Autumn and I discussed where she would like to be interviewed and she indicated over lunch at my home would be ideal. Upon arrival, Autumn and I had general conversation for about 15 minutes, decided to skip lunch, and finally settled at the kitchen table. As we began the interview process I provided her a copy of the informed consent and read over it with her. She gave a verbal agreement to participate which I digitally audio-recorded.

Autumn began by telling me that she has eight tattoos and at any given time two of those eight are mundanely visible to the public, however depending on her clothing, sometimes seven of the eight are visible. She explained that she became interested in tattooing when she was a young girl growing up on the East Coast and would draw on herself to represent tattoos. She pointed out that her mother always told her “you will change your mind when you get older... it’s just a kid thing.” However, this did not dissuade Autumn from thinking about tattoos, saying:

In the back of my head it was always, what would be my first one and where would I put it and why would I put it there... I waited until I became 21 to get my first [tattoo].

Autumn recounted that her mother was sheltered while growing up and tended to be closed-minded in regard to things that were socially unacceptable, saying that, in her mom’s opinion, “ladies didn’t get tattoos, ladies didn’t wear jeans, [and] they certainly didn’t drink.” She explained that when discussing tattoos with her mother she was told,

“You don’t want to do that on your body, it’s permanent, what would people think.”

Even though Autumn suggested other responses her mother could have given, such as “is that a way of expressing yourself?” or “I’m supportive,” she still chose to wait to become tattooed. Eventually, Autumn’s mother found out about her tattoos and Autumn explained she told her mom that “each one is kind of a symbolic time in my life” and that “each one means something.” Autumn shifted in her chair and looked at her hands on the table. She paused, began again in a lower tone of voice, and stated, “it was sort of like me becoming myself outside of how my mom should see me.” Autumn added:

Now she’s [Autumn’s mother] able to look at it and see the art work on it instead of, oh that’s white trash. The main thing for her [Autumn’s mother] is to accept and learn a culture, and see things are different. It does not mean that you’re not educated or you’re a slut. That’s the thing, she has realized that people are very well educated, and very respected and they have tattoos. It’s not looked down on like, Oh my god does your mom know you have that! We’ve even joked about her getting one, which of course she won’t.

We laughed together at the thought of her mother becoming tattooed. Autumn sighed and shrugged her shoulders as she returned to looking at her hands on the kitchen table. We sat in silence for a minute and then I prompted her to share the story of getting her first tattoo. A large smile broke out across her face, she leaned towards me and said:

It was actually pretty exciting. The very first one [I got] was in Anchorage. [I was in school in Sitka and some girlfriends and I were on a road trip to Anchorage].

One of the girls was really against tattoos, but the other girl and I had been

planning and getting all excited. *My* friend started to back out and I was like well I'm doing it! I kind of knew exactly what I wanted but I didn't draw and I didn't know that it was an option. I remember seeing tattoo shops growing up with all these [pictures] on the walls so I figured that's your option. Looking back now it would have been kind of neat bringing my own in but then I don't regret this one. I changed the colors so it made it feel more like my own but I actually wasn't as nervous with the first one as I was with the third one.

I found myself curious as to why her third tattoo would make her more nervous than the first one. I posed that question to her and she explained "it was a bigger piece and it was on my lower back which I was afraid was going to be more painful." She admitted freely that her third tattoo, which consists of a fairy and is rather large, turned out to be one of her favorites. Without prompting, Autumn explained:

The fairy was for me, symbolic of getting out of the cocoon... to stop being a person trapped where I thought I needed to be and just kind of realized you can express yourself and be a little different... it's like my private piece.

Without warning, a shift in Autumn's demeanor caught my attention. She attempted to smile while tears filled her eyes. Taking her hands her off the kitchen table, she began wiping her eyes. In an attempt to comfort her, I reached out and took one of her hands. She continued in a shaky voice:

It's sort of just like growing up, you know. You know, being feminine, but not trapped into the same stereotype... which is kind of amazing it's that emotional.

I handed her some tissue to wipe her eyes and she steered the conversation towards the

technical side of the fairy tattoo. After dabbing her eyes, Autumn started twisting the tissue around her fingers. However, her demeanor then visibly changed and she explained in a stronger voice that when strangers ask her about the fairy tattoo she often replies “I just like fairies.” Autumn smiled and shot me a quick, knowing look and then added “of course with you” she chuckles, “you’re a little different.” I needed no clarification to know that she was referring to our friendship. I smiled back at her.

Autumn quickly moved the conversation towards her perception that her tattoos “seem to be more spiritual or kind of a healing” process, adding that tattoos can be a form of “unification for people, especially for women.” I was not sure what she meant and before I got a chance to ask her, she turned the attention to me and referred to a tattoo on my right forearm. She questioned the meaning behind my tattoo, “Daddy’s Girl,” even though she already knew from previous interactions my explanation. I only smiled at her. She maintained that even if a person’s tattoo is of the cartoon character Tweety Bird, such an image does not negate that it is “something powerful.” Autumn then attempted to clarify, saying that:

The older I’ve gotten I’ve realized that most people put a lot of time and energy into what they’re getting because [tattoos do] say something about them, you know, whether it’s a crisis at the time, if they’ve lost somebody or kind of idolizing someone they respect.

Although Autumn was clearly expressing her values of tattooing onto others, she did so in a positive way without malice.

Autumn paused and reflected upon what she had said thus far. She wondered

aloud if she had answered my question. I smiled at her and told her she was doing fine. I reached out to her and took her hand in mine again, which she promptly gave a squeeze of reassurance. I took that moment to redirect her to her first two tattoos and inquired about their meanings. She explained that her first tattoo is of “a wolf with an Alaska sky with a moon, on the right outside ankle” and on the inside of the ankle is her second tattoo which is of the Tlingit sun. She explained that while both have a native theme they do not carry traditional native meanings. She told me “I really like the red and black colors of the Tlingit (Alaska Native tribe) sun. They give me a feeling of empowerment.” Autumn followed with “the sun was sort of the future, [and it] was going to be more bright.” She provided more detail when explaining her first tattoo:

The wolf and the Alaska sky was sort of moving up here and finally seeing the purples and the blues and feeling kind of alone, until I got into who I became. So I wanted them on the same ankle because it’s where I started and where I was going and then it’s like if I get kind of down, well, you’re not alone, you’ve got the future and there a lot of people that you’ll meet and embrace and will stay with you.

Autumn’s voice started to shake while discussing her first tattoo, but she maintained eye contact and seemed almost defiant. When she paused I moved the direction of the interview to her tattoos that are always in public sight. On her right arm, above her wrist, is a purplish lotus flower with Sanskrit writing. I commented that the tattoo is a fairly large piece for a woman, which she confirmed. She held her arm out and we both sat staring at it for a brief moment. She then added that she thought about placing it where it

could be covered, but explained what the tattoo represents:

Spirituality... the world's kind of fucked up and if people would just learn to have more acceptances and be more compassionate. So for me when I shake someone's hand I'm giving them a little bit [of compassion]; handing it out.

Autumn then shifted the focus to the communication that she says occurs when people ask her about the tattoo. She explained that when people inquire about the meaning of the tattoo she interprets that the person has something about them that makes them "curious and not judgmental." Autumn's tone lightened as she remembered her experiences of telling people about her tattoos. She recounted the times when someone seemed shocked that she has tattoos and says she wonders "how are you seeing me where you...would think I wouldn't have tattoos?"

Recalling incidents where by interaction occurred due to one of her tattoos, the conversation turned to the tattoo behind the lower part of her ear. As she reached up and touched her "Q" tattoo I instinctively reached up and touched my "Q" tattoo as well. Not skipping a beat, Autumn explained that because she has to wear her hair up for work, she gets a lot of questions about this tattoo. She excitedly mimicked questions pertaining to the tattoo and looked at me. She tilted her head towards me as her sly grin turned into a large smile, and I smiled back at her as my chin rested in my hand. She brought me into the conversation, asking or my perceptions about when our "Q" tattoos were done and who did them. As my own memories came flooding in and I smiled even broader, I reminded her that the "Q" tattoos were done in 2001. With an animated voice she recalled that we wanted to symbolize our bond and decided to get matching tattoos of our

nickname for each other, “Q.” Autumn reached up and touched her “Q” tattoo, continuing with an emotion-filled voice: “it’s like you’re always with me, you know, and I like to think that I’m with you.” She expressed that while this is a tattoo that she often gets questions about, she does not really know how to explain this image to people.

I noticed that most of her explanations were geared towards men, so I asked if mostly men comment on her tattoos and/or if women ask different questions. The inquiry made her pause for a moment, but then she explained that “women seem to ask more why questions, more of the feeling aspect, did it hurt... [or] was it symbolic.” As she recalled a time when a woman asked her why the “Q” tattoo wasn’t more feminine her face wrinkled and she explained that she had never thought of the tattoo as being either masculine or feminine. I, too, had never placed a gendered connotation on our shared depiction and could only respond with my own face wrinkle and a “hummmmb.” She explained that “men seem, at least in my case to be more direct... like, what it is, although a few have asked if it hurts.”

After a brief pause Autumn talked about her largest tattoo which is located on her left thigh. It consists of a large, colorful Tibetan Buddha. She noted that the piece is not fully finished, but that she is “not quite sure where I want to take it.” Her voice dropped in pitch when she admitted she wants to make the tattoo more visible, but lightheartedly noted that she doesn’t show it because “body image wise” she is not ready. Autumn added, “you have to be actually really close to me to see it.” She confided that retrospectively it is “interesting that I got it on a place that I am so uncomfortable with.” I naturally asked why she became tattooed on an area that is emotionally sensitive, to

which she responded:

I think slowly its going to be an acceptance and I think when I get to a point [where] then I can wear shorts, it doesn't matter what the leg looks like. Because in reality [it] shouldn't matter, you know, and who cares if someone goes well her legs are really flabby. Fuck it; you know it's about the piece and like a healing for me. To say total acceptance, this is just how you are and you spent 30 years trying to change it... so let it go.

Autumn admitted she is looking forward to the time where she fully accepts her body image. Her face seemed to have no expression, but she nodded her head and added "you know." She asserted that when she got the piece she "never realized... how much is wrapped up" in it. Autumn continued to talk about people's body types and where they place tattoos. She related this back to her own self consciousness, then abruptly drew me back into the conversation by asking me a rhetorical question about the Phoenix on my arm. As she motioned toward my arm I looked down at the colorful Phoenix which spans from my shoulder blade to my elbow. She questioned if it would be as powerful a statement if it was much smaller. I did not interject and she continued, "I think too it's nice now that women aren't judged as much."

Delighted by Autumn's ability to provide depth of information, I asked her to tell me about an experience that stands out regarding her tattoos. She paused for a moment and asked if I am seeking a positive or negative experience. I let her make the choice and she initiated a story regarding her brother's acceptance and support in her journey of becoming tattooed:

He was so excited and for my family member to be so supportive... with my mom it was this looking down on, oh my God what are people going to think... with her it's still not that acceptance... for him it's been just that 100% total acceptance. He also will send emails every once in a while, have you ever thought about getting this as a tattoo? Like a coat of arms for the family.

While relating the story, her voice jumped with emotion as she mimicked her brother's responses. She explained that her brother has expressed interest in getting a tattoo but when she asks, "why don't you," his response has always been the same, "I can't."

Noticing that Autumn had not mentioned her father, I asked about his opinions of her tattoos. With a bit of apprehension in her voice she explained that he seems to have accepted her choice, saying that he claims to like "where tattoos have gotten in terms of the art." Autumn added that her father "says he likes mine, but in some way I kind of think he's old school, that women shouldn't have [tattoos]," adding "I think he does judge people, I think he even judges men about tattoos." I prompted her for more information and Autumn continued by explaining that she still wonders if one day her father will truly understand her desire to become tattooed. She revealed that tattoos are a way of letting "somebody into your life and your soul without really saying anything."

Wanting to take advantage of Autumn's insight, I probed for information regarding what she has learned about herself through the experience of becoming tattooed. She paused and looked at me inquisitively, then explained:

... learned of an inner strength... growing up if someone asked, are you a strong

woman I would have said no... I've kind of found empowerment with getting tattooed... its sort of, for me, a quiet way to speak about spirituality... sort of a strength in identifying, I am different, I do count, I do matter, I can stand out in a positive way... in a strange weird way I feel bonded to people with tattoos... there's that commonality.

Autumn's serious demeanor seemed to reinforce her intense emotions. She added that she "never [got] into this ever [thinking] you could heal by having a tattoo or feel complete or a sense of accomplishment." She explained "it's been kind of an on-going journey" and that "it's exciting too to see changes and to get bigger pieces with more color." She reflected back on her tattoo history and exclaimed: "being a woman and finding the strength I kind of wish I would have done it [becoming tattooed] younger." Sensing the conversation was coming to an end, I asked Autumn if she has any regrets. She quickly shook her head and said emphatically "no," commenting that she only wishes she had more. Autumn began to wonder aloud when and where she will get another tattoo. She closed the conversation with "and that's the neat thing. I can keep evolving. Like we should be, right?"

3.3 Heather's Conversational Interview

Heather is a 29 year old married woman and the mother of a four year old daughter. While I have known Heather for over 10 years we have not had regular interaction or communication; however, we do have an established level of trust. Heather has always appeared to be a spiritual person who is not afraid of meeting new people, and I know her to have an outgoing, positive personality. Heather works part time as an

accountant for her husband's business as well as a freelance accountant for other people in the community. Her true passion in life and professionally before having her daughter was working as a jeweler and gemologist. Heather has the least number of tattoos of all the co-researchers and offered a different perspective to my study.

When I approached Heather about participation in this research, she was extremely excited and helpful. She invited me to come to her house during her daughter's nap time so that we could talk uninterrupted. The interview lasted approximately thirty five minutes and resulted in being the shortest interview I conducted. After a brief greeting, Heather and I read over the consent form and she agreed to participate which was digitally audio recorded. Heather positioned herself on the couch and I chose a chair facing her next to a desk where I placed the digital audio recorder.

Heather opened the conversation, true to her humorous self, and suggested that I was seeking "shower stories" about people's tattoos. We both laughed, and this set a positive tone that flowed throughout the entire interview. I began the interview with the explanation that I am seeking to understand her experience of becoming tattooed. Heather offered demographic information about her tattoos by stating that most of her tattoos are located on her ankles and back and are visible to others. She then mentioned that she recently acquired a new tattoo on her hip and stomach area which is the image of an eagle. As she talked about her new tattoo she seemed eager to have the public view it. She explained that she has not had people give her the "wow" moment yet, with the exception of a little girl at the local pool. In a high pitched voice she mimicked the child who exclaimed, "Momma she's got a bird! Look at the bird." Heather smiled and said "so

that was my first experience” referring to another person seeing her new tattoo. She followed this anecdote with, “the other ones are not that dramatic I guess.”

Continuing to talk about her new tattoo she asked if I know the story behind it. I replied that I do know the story from our past communication, but that I would like her to tell the story again. She smiled, and then related how 10 years earlier she and her husband went together to get tattoos. She confided that she got a tropical design placed on her hip, but the tattoo did not turn out well and she never really liked it. She said, “it scabbed, tore, bled, a lot of the ink came out so you couldn't tell what it was but it was on my hip, so it was okay.” As Heather brought the story up to date she added that she is Tlingit (Alaska Native tribe) and comes from the Raven clan. While visiting her father in Juneau, her husband purchased a Tlingit Eagle bracelet for her, which she was initially unsure if she liked since she is from the Raven clan. During the return trip Heather was driving, with her infant daughter in the back seat and her husband sitting next to her, when they got into a car accident. She explained:

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the moose, I saw the moose eye coming across in front of the car, I watched the window shatter. We ended up walking away from the accident. The car was completely totaled and all three of us walked away completely unharmed other than scratches and bruises. Somebody had picked us up and opened up their bed and breakfast to us at 1:30 in the morning and took us in and as we're laying there trying to sleep, but there's no way we can sleep after that, but as I'm laying there all of a sudden, I thought, ‘The bracelet is cursed!’

Heather's voice lowered and she described the way her husband helped her re-interpret the car accident:

That eagle had its wings completely wrapped around the car and that's why we didn't get hurt. And one of the only injuries I had was from the seat belt where the impact was when we made connection [with the moose] and it's the exact spot where my old tattoo was. I've hated that tattoo on my hip, it never came out well, so I decided I wanted to give tribute to the eagle that saved us.

Heather further explained that she wanted a Tlingit style eagle but could not find an artist that would be willing to tattoo the intricate and difficult design, so she settled for a traditional eagle. Smiling at me, she called the eagle image her "most profound tattoo."

After a short pause I asked Heather to tell me about her first tattoo experience. Her face became animated and she began recalling her senior year of spring break with one of her best friends. She described having time off work and no plans, so the two of them decided to take a road trip to Anchorage. While Heather was driving, her friend drew a design on a napkin, and once in Anchorage, they decided she should get it tattooed on her ankle. Heather explained with a laugh that once the first part of the design was completed she was ready to stop due to the pain but that ultimately she allowed the artist to finish the whole design. Her eyes grew large and she smiled at me, explaining that the difficult part was telling her mom that she had gotten a tattoo:

That was kind of a struggle, but uh I was 18 and my mom told me I could do what I wanted with my body once I was 18. But, she was pleased with this one because it was in a place I could cover up and [it's] pretty.

Almost as if a new realization occurred, Heather cocked her head to the side and said, “All my tattoos I’ve gotten with friends; actually that is a theme that carries through all of them.” Her voice rose in pitch as she chuckled and pointed to her ankle exclaiming, “I got one with Autumn, did you know that!” I smiled at her enthusiasm and asked her to tell me the story.

Heather explained that while in New Orleans she got a Celtic sun tattoo on one side of her ankle, and then later while hanging out with Autumn they decided to get a tattoo. Heather figured since she already had a Celtic sun, she would stick with the Celtic design and get a Celtic moon. As Heather related the story she held out her leg and rotated it from side to side so we could view both the moon and sun designs. I watched her move her leg around and nodded encouragement. She looked down at her ankle and explained that the clouds are designed after Salvador Dali's style. Between the symmetry of a Celtic design and the melted look of a Salvador Dali design, results in a uniquely interesting image. Without pausing, Heather continued to discuss her other tattoos and began describing the dragonfly on her back.

The dragonfly located on Heather's upper back was designed “from a piece of jewelry” and “incorporates the earth, wind, air, fire symbols.” She explained that she had just begun her gemology training and was trying to “quite smoking cigarettes and that was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my life” as well as “I changed jobs, which was a struggle for me.” As we continued the conversation, Heather added, “I guess tattoos always symbolize, well at least to me anyways, they have always been for a reason, and social.” I shook my head in agreement thinking about the stories she has told

as well as my own experiences. I prompted Heather to tell me about a time whereby her tattoos gained attention from other people:

The dragonfly on my back has gotten the most attention especially in the summer time. We were in Hawaii, and I think that was a place where people were drawn to it the most...over there, there is such a connection to the earth and with the animals there that people would stop me and want to look at it and people thought I had gotten it in Hawaii, which is kind of neat.

After a brief pause, Heather looked around the room and spoke out loud as if to herself, "let's see, other...[stories]." I watched her, waiting to hear her next story. She returned my gaze and giggled a bit and said, "I will have to think about that."

She prompted me to ask her a different question so I asked her to tell me her experiences of becoming tattooed. Heather quickly interjected laughingly, "I personally like it. I think it's been one of those hurts so bad, but feels good experiences." Heather asserted that she can relate her tattoo experiences to such things as, "what songs were playing on the radio, what [clothes I was] wearing that day" because getting tattooed is like a "time capsule." She continued in a steady soft tone as she discussed her views on the relationship between the tattoo artist and client:

Generally, I think they'd remember if it's a piece they like and would be proud of. I think they'd remember you or something about that, so to me it's neat that you're making an impression on someone and they're forever changing your life too.

Heather began to chuckle and a big smile came across her face as she recalled getting the dragonfly tattoo while the artist was teaching an apprentice. She thought it was “neat” to be able to hear what was being done and why it was being done. She mimicked the artist’s voice as she recalled what was being said about the tattoo. I smiled in amusement as she continued to discuss her body and the effects of tattoos:

It was interesting to hear the technical, I mean tattooing itself, what an amazing thing to be able to know how to do and how the skin is going to react. Especially with the eagle on my hip. I mean, I’ve had a baby and my stretch marks are very bad, there’s a lot of scar tissue, so that was an interesting sitting for that one because he only did the outline first because the stretch marks were so bad. He used two different techniques and two different needles in different areas because he wanted to see how my skin would heal and how it would react. It’s just neat to know that tattoo artists are thinking of you and the future. They are not just about right now.

After a short pause we heard a noise from upstairs and together we both look up at the balcony to see her daughter looking down at us. I smiled at Liana as Heather went to get her. With Liana now sitting on Heather’s lap we continued our conversation. Heather looked at the tattoos on my arms and did not say anything for a moment. I watched her looking at me, wondering what she was thinking. When she finally spoke she admitted, “I would love the courage someday to get [a tattoo] on my arm.” Thinking about what she said I questioned her about what she means by courage. She explained that tattoos on the arms are “something that I think is not as easily hidden. It is a little more... It is a much

bolder statement.” Heather went on to admit that she does have a design chosen for one of her arms but that she is “waiting for the right artist to come along.” She explained that the design is “very angular” with “straight black lines,” but that she is having trouble finding an artist who will tattoo the design. I found this interesting and tilt my head to the side as I as thought about all the talented artists that I know. Even though I have not seen the design I can only imagine it must be the placement of the design that is difficult. I posed the question to her wondering if she has ever asked the tattooist. Without hesitation and she nods her head and says, “It is the placement and the design.”

Heather’s voice rose and her speech rate increased as she described the design:

I’m actually very excited about it. The symbol is one that I have created. It is in my dreams and it has been in my dreams since I was a very very little girl. At least once a week this symbol surfaces in my dreams. So it will be neat to see that one put out there some day.

Heather did not offer to show me the design and I did not ask to see it, as I perceived that perhaps the design is still something private for her.

After a brief pause in the conversation I took the opportunity to ask Heather if becoming tattooed has given her any insight about herself or as a mother to Liana. Heather immediately addressed Liana’s interaction with her tattoos. She explained that Liana would ask her “how is mommy’s bird doing?” and would help her care for the tattoo by putting “lotion on it for me.” Heather admitted, “I am curious when she gets older what she thinks of [tattooing].” She acknowledged that Liana “actually saw me getting tattooed.” Heather tilted her head to the side and began to laugh, then blurted out

“well I'm not sure if that's a neat moment or not, yeah I'm not sure about that one yet.” I laughed with her thinking it probably would be okay.

Without prompting Heather directed the conversation towards her personal feelings about tattoos:

Tattoos have always been something that was for me, not for anyone else. It doesn't really matter what anyone else, well yeah I guess you want to know people's opinion, but all in all it's for me. It's something I want to do, it's usually for a reason... they've all been a connection with someone that is very close to me, it's a memory of them.

I shook my head in encouragement as she discussed her feelings. She added, “It's just really nice memories of people you can sit there and re-live those moments through your tattoos.” I prompted Heather about other experiences she has had because of her tattoos and she paused in thought. When she began talking again she explained that tattoos are “good conversation pieces at parties or gatherings.” She described talking with others about tattoos:

It is an opening; it is a connection and something you have in common. It's an experience that isn't exactly the same, but it's a painful experience and it's usually one people like to share. Usually you don't see a tattoo and they go, ‘oh I don't want to talk about it,’ I've never had that happen.

As I thought about what Heather was saying, I nodded encouragingly, and she steered the conversation to her pastor's wife who recently acquired her first tattoo, which consists of “religious verse written in the ancient text.” According to Heather, the pastor and his wife

claimed the tattoo is putting forth a positive message. She explained in a lighthearted voice that she is not sure what the bible's take on tattoos is, but she "thinks it's neat that she [pastor's wife] did that." I turned the same line of thought towards her own tattoos and asked Heather if her tattoos were communicating meaning to others. She paused for a moment and responded, "Possibly the dragonfly on my back because of the earth, fire, water, air symbols." She went on to admit, though, that the eagle tattoo is "the most powerful" tattoo for her, although she acknowledges that she is a "little regretful for not holding out for an artist, because I know it could have been done, [Tlingit style] it was just that particular artist said it was too hard." We continued to talk about the eagle tattoo and she expressed feelings of frustration due to the amount of time it took to get the image tattooed onto her hip. She explained that at times she was:

Disappointed in myself because of my [low] pain threshold... and I said I need to stop and at that setting I felt like I wasn't strong enough, like I was a wussy and I felt like he thought, oh wussy girl couldn't take a tattoo.

Heather explained that she is not fully done with the eagle tattoo and will continue to work on it when she can. She added that her grandfather also "had a huge eagle [tattoo] and the wings went down his arms and that [it] went all the way down across his stomach." Laughingly she added, "Yeah, it's my all my grand-daddy's fault." I laughed at this also while wondering about the rest of her family. I watched Liana squirm in her lap and asked her if the rest of her family is supportive of her tattooed body image. With hesitation in her voice Heather responded, "No one else in my family has any that I know of. My dad doesn't and none of my brothers do." She jokingly discussed getting a tattoo

with her mother or even with her father. Heather paused for a moment and went to get Liana something to drink. I decided I should let her tend to her daughter so I posed one final question. I asked if she had any last thoughts on tattooing. She tilted her head to the side and said:

I think that they're so personal and they give so much to talk about. [They] give so much to share and not with others all the time, but they are something that you can look at and it brings back memories, like I did that or that was a really good friend. They bring back really good memories. I have not had to get a bad tattoo yet, I know some people use tattoos to go through a grieving process and for me mine haven't been that way. I know someday there will be a time when there is a sad one, but I guess right now I'm just lucky.

3.4 Teal's Conversational Interview

Teal is a 29 year old college graduate. She is in a committed, long term relationship and together they are the parents of a four-year-old boy. Teal and I first met in 2001 and became fast friends. We communicate a few times a week and have already established a strong level of trust. While Teal is currently unemployed by choice, she has worked as a bartender in various bars for as long as I have known her. Teal has a soft feminine voice, and a slim build; she has a natural beauty, and a bubbly personality, without being overly outgoing.

Teal and I originally discussed her participation in my study at the beginning of the research process; however, due to conflicting schedules, she was the fourth person to be interviewed. We agreed to meet at a local bookstore cafeteria for lunch, to catch up on

each other's lives, and then conduct the interview. Upon arrival I secured a private room so we would not be interrupted and could maintain privacy. After eating and having casual conversation for over an hour we settled in and began the interview. I gave her a copy of the informed consent and read it with her. She agreed to participate, which was digitally audio-recorded. Throughout the interview, Teal maintained a humorous perspective and spoke in a quiet manner.

To start the conversation I asked Teal some demographic information about her tattoos. She has a total of nine tattoos which are located on her arms, ankles, back, and one on her foot. Depending on the clothing she is wearing, usually all, except the one on her lower back, are visible in some way, meaning the entire tattoo may not be visible, however parts of the tattoo can be seen by others. I prompted Teal to tell me what it was like to get her first tattoo. A huge grin broke out across her face and she explained:

I got my first tattoo when I was 17 and I was with my friend and we were in Wisconsin. We were on a fieldtrip thing and we decided we were going to play tennis in school.... Our reward would be getting a tattoo. I remember we didn't stick with tennis and we just got tattoos.

As she recalled the experience, Teal laughed and leaned in towards me. She continued by confiding "it was the first one and the one that I definitely regret because it was just something that I drew." She added, "I didn't know that they would actually use what I drew." Teal's humorous demeanor continued as she closed her eyes for a moment and kept talking. She brought up the fact that she was only 17 years old at the time and wonders why they chose to tattoo her since she was under age. She quickly whispered

“they could probably get in trouble,” which caused us both to laugh. After becoming tattooed, Teal says her perception of self changed. She explained, “I was like the only kid besides [my friend] in school that had a tattoo and I was like, oh I’m so cool.” Referring to tattoos, Teal added in a lower tone “I liked it, and got addicted after that.”

I realized that Teal’s first tattoo had no inherent meaning in the design, so I inquired if any of her tattoos hold special meaning. She chuckled and confirmed this with, “Yes. Except for the first one. It’s just some black lines.” The older Teal became, she said, the more she thought about the meanings of her tattoos. She explained, “I understood that they should have a meaning behind them instead of just picking them from a picture.” She admitted “I have two that I picked off a picture. One is a character...what you call a Japanese character, and the other one is a peacock.” Even though the peacock tattoo is a replica picture, she says it still has meaning, explaining that she “really, really liked it and it’s also the sign of Hera. The goddess Hera [Greek goddess of woman and marriage].” Teal, however, did not explain how she relates to Hera herself. Her discussion about meaning concluded with a confirmation that “the rest of them definitely have lots of time and thought [that went] into them.”

Knowing that her tattoos are mundanely visible to the public, I asked Teal what kinds of responses she has gotten from people about her tattoos. She laughed and confided that she has been thinking a lot about this question because she thought I would ask. Teal answered this question by providing some background information about her residential patterns. She explained that she and her son spend a lot of time in Arizona where her father lives. Due to the heat she usually wears less clothing such as tank tops

and shorts. Her father lives in a retirement community which causes Teal to be more aware of people looking at her tattoos. She explained, "I definitely feel.... I mean nobody ever says anything, but I definitely feel not.... I don't know... I feel like I should have them covered up."

Teal then related the experience to taking her son swimming. In a low exaggerated voice she mimicked what she believes other parents are thinking about her because of her tattoos, "I sometimes feel like other parents are like, "Oh my god, look at that woman, she procreated! And she has tattoos all over!"

The exaggeration in her voice combined with the statement caused us both to start laughing. She admitted that although there are times when she is more aware of people looking at her tattoos, it normally does not bother her. Teal then steered the conversation towards her son and tattoos. She expressed that:

Now [my son] likes, he understands, well he doesn't understand, but he knows tattoos so he likes to get the rub-on ones. So he's out there with the rub-on ones and I feel sometimes parents or other people are a little bit judgmental, but I've never been approached or [nobody] said anything about it. It's mostly the old people. And I don't know why because nobody ever said anything, but I just feel that way.

Wanting Teal to further elaborate on this topic, I urged her to keep talking. She explained that in her opinion "a lot of older men have tattoos from being in the service... so I don't think it should be that big a deal." She added that older women do stare at her and she

wonders what they are thinking. Again she laughed, but this time it the laugh seemed strained.

Quickly and eagerly, Teal interjected that her father is proud of her tattoos. Sensing that she wanted to talk about her father and his perceptions of her tattoos I encouraged Teal to continue. She took a deep breath and related:

I got a turtle tattoo for my mom when my mom died and he was just awestruck by it. Everywhere we went he had to lift up my sleeve and be like ‘Look at this...do you see what it says in there?’ He’s very proud of that one.

On Teal’s left upper arm is a colorful, intricately designed turtle surrounded by water. Teal got the tattoo after her mom died, as a memorial piece.

Next, Teal began to describe the new tattoo on her upper right arm. Through our past conversations I know she recently acquired a new tattoo of a golfer in full swing. The tattoo is symbolic of her father. With hesitation and humor in her voice she described her father’s reaction to the golfer tattoo by saying “he likes it, but I think he is just blown away by the size of it.” Teal explained that her father does not have a problem with tattoos, but that her mother did not like tattoos:

My mom disagreed with it! Definitely! She was always like, ‘Oh, my gosh, what are you doing?’ That kind of thing. And she was always more for piercing because piercing you can take out and they will go away whereas tattoos are there for life. She would always tell me that. ‘It’s there for life!’

Without hesitation, Teal discussed her thoughts on work and tattoos. She confided that “I worry about tattoos and jobs.” Even though Teal can cover all her tattoos

with clothing if necessary, she has not had a job requiring her to do so. She explained that working as a bartender allows her to show her tattoos and they “just kind of went along with the job.” Teal mentioned that she does not know what she wants to do for a living but none-the-less, she still has concerns regarding tattoos and employment. She laughed as she explained, “if all else fails then I think I can always wear long sleeves for the rest of my life, or at least three quarter sleeves.”

As the laughter subsided she made reference to her significant other and his thoughts on her tattoos. Teal explained that sometimes he “harps on me about it, like you’re a mom, and moms are suppose to be mommy like.” Almost defensively I blurted out, “but you had tattoos before you became a mom!” She laughed and responded by pointing to her newest tattoo. Teal continued, “Well, yeah but when I get more, like since this one, I’m like oh I want to get another one.” She explained that he [significant other] believes “you’re a mom and you need to worry about that kind of stuff.” Her non-verbal facial expression indicated that she believes his thoughts are ridiculous.

Teal paused as if she was thinking and just looked at me and smiled. I did not think she was going to continue, so I directed her back to her work experiences. I was curious as to what kind of communication had occurred at work due to her tattoos. When I began to question her about how she felt at work she immediately cut me off and said laughingly, “I feel cool! I do! Sometimes I feel cool!” I burst into laughter with her as she continued “you know it’s like yeah, I’m bad. Sporting them around and at the bar... but I would get annoyed because people would be like, what is that?” Teal is referring to the tattoos on her back. Taking up an entire side of her back from shoulder to lower back is a

moose antler in full color. On the opposite side, just as big and in color, is a duck wing. She claims in a defensive tone that a lot of people ask her if she is attempting to represent an angel and a devil. Neither of us understands how someone can reference an angel and a devil out of a duck wing and a moose antler. She explained:

I get annoyed sometimes when people ask that kind of stuff, or are like 'why do you have a golfer on your arm?' Some people don't really understand it or when you know, you get like the people who have one tattoo and are like, 'dude that's so cool you wanna see my tattoo?' You know, that kind of thing and of course you're like, 'ok tell me about it.'

When describing her experiences, Teal made it clear that just because she has tattoos it does not mean that she wants to discuss them or hear about someone else's tattoos. As I watched her I thought about what she was saying and wanted to know if she thought there is a difference between people with one tattoo and people with many tattoos. She replied:

Well, it depends... like the boys are out, oh let's get tattoos and then just pick some goofy flash art. Sometimes I'm just like uhhgg, but if somebody has meaning behind it... and granted, I have mine that don't have meaning behind it but when you're like 30-something-years -old and you're showing me some tattoo, 'I just picked it cause it was cool' kind of thing. I generally like people who have stories behind it. It makes it more interesting.

Wanting to know more about Teal's tattoo stories I asked her if she shares them with people, and if so, to share some with me. She confirmed that she does share stories with some people and without hesitation, began sharing stories with me:

Well, the turtle [tattoo] because well I've had the turtle for a long time and so people ask about it and I will say that it is a memorial piece for my mom. And that it's the body of a larger head and the shell of like a land turtle because she liked turtles, so I mixed both of them together.

Teal continued:

The moose [antler] is an actual antler from a moose that an ex-boyfriend of mine shot. It was his first moose and there was a lot behind that because I felt very connected to him other than being boyfriend and girlfriend at the time and still do feel connected to him. It represents the land, the animals, like the walking part, and the duck wing is like when my mom died I turned to duck watching and bird watching and was completely self-absorbed. Almost obsessive at some points about it, but it also represents the water and air animals that's over the world.

Teal's voice became more animated. She began describing the Japanese character tattoo which she originally thought meant "family" only to find out later that it means "home." Teal conceded that she does not mind that the tattoo means "home," saying, "I actually like [it] better than family." She described the other tattoos, explaining that she has two bugs, beetles to be precise, on her ankle. While in Las Vegas with a friend they got matching tattoos. Teal explained that the beetles "are for [their] friendship" combined with the fact that her friend was "obsessed with the Beatles [British music band] at the time." Finally, Teal discussed the tattoo on her foot, a colorful tie-dyed peace sign which she also received in Las Vegas. She held out her hands to make a peace sign as she described it. Softly, with a chuckle, she said "peace baby."

Teal turned the conversation quickly to the amount of money she has invested in her tattoos, but added that she has gotten “good deals” on her tattoos. She claims she has never spent over \$185 on any tattoo. Knowing how expensive quality tattoos are I questioned if this was because her friend tattoos her. She confirmed this with a sly smile and non-verbal affirmation. I smiled back at her thinking how lucky she is because I know how much more money I have spent on my tattoos.

After a brief pause, I remembered Teal liked to “drop by” when I was getting tattooed. I wondered if she viewed tattooing as a social phenomenon so I asked her if she likes people to go with her when she gets tattooed. Teal quickly began talking and provided background information about her friend, the tattooist. She informed me that they went to high school together so they “have a long history.” She admitted that she does appreciate a “friend that will pop in, you know, bring me something to eat, something to drink, some coffee or something like that.” Teal, however, does not prefer “somebody just to sit there with me the whole time because I like to talk to [my friend, the tattooist] too.” With a big smile that lights up her whole face Teal added “But, I definitely will make the phone call and say, ‘I’m a little hungry. Can somebody bring me some food’?”

Teal steered the conversation to the tattoo environment, noting, “I’m just not a big fan of the aggressive music when I’m getting tattooed.” Laughing with a scrunched up face she explained:

You’re having a needle, like, pounding in your body someplace and then it’s just this aggressive music pounding in the background. I just get like very, like when I

got it [tattoo] done [last time] I was like, oohhh, I have a lot of anxiety right now! I feel like it actually hurt more and I was getting annoyed. Yeah, I'm not a big fan of that.

Teal finished her sentence by laughing and trailing off. She paused and looked at me with a smile. I smiled back.

Sensing that she was ready to move on in the conversation and knowing that I wanted to gain more knowledge about her communication with other tattooed women I redirected the interview. I questioned her about her interaction with other tattooed women and I wanted to know if she felt more open in communicating with women she does not know. Teal immediately said, "No!" She then related an incident where she attempted to talk to a woman about her tattoos. Teal explained "I have tried to converse with people that have them and sometimes they're rude." She tilted her head toward my right arm, and I followed her gaze to the large colorful Foo Dog that spans from my shoulder to about an inch above my elbow. She noted that the woman also had a Foo Dog and attempted to discuss the tattoo with her. Teal laughed and explained "she was not having it." In an exaggerated voice she added, "And so, I was like, okay." I was curious about this interaction and asked Teal if her own tattoos were showing. Teal confirmed they were. I decided to turn the question around and asked what kinds of questions people ask her. She responded that people mainly comment on the vibrant colors of her tattoos. She smiled and explained that occasionally strangers ask her questions about tattoo as if she is an artist. As she recalled these questions she laughed and whispered, "I don't know, I'm not a tattooer." She claims that most of the questions are "care questions,"

meaning the questions pertain to taking care of a new tattoo.

I then moved the discussion to her future plans for tattoos. She admitted there are at least two or three more tattoos she has planned and probably more to follow those.

Teal explained, "I want something for my son, when he gets older, when he actually has hobbies or things that define him. I want something for him." As she discussed her future plans for tattoos she demonstrated by pointing to the turtle tattoo and explaining that her father likes waterfalls. She said she is contemplating adding a waterfall around the turtle. The idea of discussing future tattoos with her father was surprising to me. Interested in the communication that occurs between her and her father I asked her to elaborate. Teal chuckled as she told the story and at times she lowered and scrunched her forehead to mimic her father:

Well, I asked him, actually he was in the hospital when I asked him and I said I need something that defines you because I want to get a tattoo. He was like, well... I like golf, I like hockey, I like waterfalls. It's like alright let's try and think, because I'm not doing anything hockey, and then the more I thought about the golfer, the more I thought to do something old school ya' know. It's actually a picture of Payne Stewart. He was modern but he wore like the knickers and the tassel hat thing and so I drew it. I asked my dad, you know, what he thought and I said I wanted him to be in swing and we discussed it. He said that it's pretty big, but he likes it. He liked being involved with it.

Wanting to know more about her experience with family and tattoos, I directed the conversation towards her son. Teal explained that most of the time she keeps her tattoos

covered when at her son's school. She stressed that "I want him to have friends... that would actually come over, I have to befriend other mothers which I have a very, very, very hard time with. Extremely hard time." Her response caught me off guard and I wrinkled my face, questioning her if it is because of the tattoos. She gave a negative response, but said she chooses to cover them at all times in the school environment. She concluded this with "maybe it's just me dwelling or thinking about things too hard I'm sure." As the conversation wound down I asked Teal if she has any insights about herself as a woman who chooses to be tattooed. She looked at me from lowered eye lids, smiled, and slowly replied "yes." She hesitated, but then explained that tattooing has led to "soul searching," and that getting the turtle and duck wing tattoo was "a healing process."

A few days after the interview Teal called me to say she had been thinking about our conversation. She wanted to add that her tattoos are symbolic chapters of her life and that as she moves through the future chapters of her life she will continue to become tattooed.

3.5 Rotten and Militia's Conversational Interview

Prior to the interview experience with Rotten and Militia, I did not know them. Rotten was suggested to me as a possible co-researcher through a mutual contact. I called Rotten and explained who I was, how I got her number, and the purpose for the call. She was excited to be part of the research and suggested we meet within the following days when she returned to town. I called her at the assigned time and she suggested we meet at a local bar to talk. I explained that I would be digitally audio-recording the conversation and asked if she would mind meeting someplace a little more private.

Rotten informed me that she was staying at a friend's house and offered to conduct the interview there. She further informed me that her friend also has tattoos and wanted to know if she fit the criteria and could participate in the research as well. I replied it was a possibility and we could discuss it upon meeting. Within an hour, I arrived at the house and met Rotten and Militia for the first time.

I was pleased to see that both women had many tattoos in very public places. They welcomed me in and we had idle introduction chatter while we got our drinks and settled into the living room. In the dining room alternative music was playing at a low volume. I sat on the floor with the coffee table in front of me, where I placed the digital audio recorder. Rotten sat on the couch to my right and Militia sat in a rocking chair slightly to the left. Immediately I observed that Rotten has a very outgoing, animated, and dominant personality. She seemed to be a very positive, up-beat person and yet very intense. Conversely, I observed Militia to be more reserved and quiet. She appeared deliberate in her communication as well as in her movements. Militia is married and now has a two-month-old son. I produced a copy of the informed consent for each of them and read it to them. Both Rotten and Militia verbally consented to participate in the research which was digitally audio-recorded. Throughout the interview, overlap in talking occurred as well as Rotten and Militia finishing each other's sentences. These two women displayed a strong level of friendship which I hoped would allow for a high degree of trust during the interview.

Wanting to establish a level of comfort, I chose to begin by asking for demographic information about the women. Rotten responded first and explained that she

is 21-years-old and is about “a third covered [in tattoos].” Most of her tattoos are big, bright, and bold. A self proclaimed “military brat,” she grew up with a “hard core military dad” who “doesn't have any tattoos and doesn't believe in them.” I watched her as she moved around in an animated fashion as she spoke. I quipped that I was excited to see all her tattoos and Militia agreed and interjected laughingly, “Yeah, every time I look at her I’m like looking at a new piece, I can find something different about it, it’s really cool.”

I turned my attention to Militia and started to pose the same question; however she talked over me, already suspecting the question, and began her response. Militia told me that she is 28-years-old and was born and raised in the Southwestern United States. She described her family as “very conservative,” and admitted that her choice of living as a tattooed woman “was really hard for them.” Rotten shouted jokingly, “you’re destroying your body!” We laughed and agreed as Militia continued, “my mom's pretty religious... and I'm Christian too but I don't really see it like she sees it [tattooing].” Militia elaborated on her family by saying, “I think that’s what set me off is they are so religious about it and so strict about it... and made me go the other way, it just it drove me to a lot of this [tattooing].”

Excited that Militia jumped right into her family’s opinion of her tattoos I asked her about her first tattoo. She explained:

I was 17 and I said I was going off to the Army [to the artist]... ya know, and the guy didn't card me. I got a little kanji [Asian-inspired writing] piece but now it just looks like this blob, this line down my back. Part of it was like, I wanted to

start the whole tattoo process, and part was like I really wanted to piss my parents off. I didn't want to be anything like them, so...

When Militia paused, Rotten began describing her first experience of becoming tattooed:

I was 16. [There were] two apprentices working and I walked into the shop and I was like, I got a piece drawn up, I'm an artist too and I wanted to get it tattooed. Mother fuckers conned me into getting it on my lower back because at that time it was really popular, but I was like I want a chest piece, I want to work with my chest. But no, he's like you gotta get that on your lower back and that's my dumb shit I'm like, oh yeah that'd be cute and I let them and they're like oh you gotta cute body and you should put it there and its a cool ass piece so I let them put it there and now its busted to fuck!

Rotten jumped off the couch, turned around and pulled the top of her pants down to show the tattoo. It consists of two flowers with a skull in between them and thick black lines around it. Jokingly Militia called it the "tramp stamp." Without missing a beat, Rotten related the experience of getting her second tattoo which is located on her lower stomach and is of two traditional style birds, which are dead, with daggers penetrating them in a criss cross pattern. In an animated voice she exclaimed, "I went balls deep, my second one, I was like fucking all or nothing and sat through that for 6 hours.... I could feel the pain going through me to the other side through the kidneys, on my stomach, certain spots fucking suck!"

I wanted to understand what Rotten's family thought of her becoming tattooed at 16 so I asked her to expand upon her family's perception of her decision. She related that she started body modification through piercing. With sheer defiance in her voice she said, "when I started getting tattooed they were like, why did you get that? I was like, cuz I fucking drew it, isn't it bad ass!" Rotten mimicked a man's voice, "why do you want that attention, it's going to be negative attention." Returning her voice to normal and calming her demeanor she explained, "no matter how old you are any attention is attention, everybody craves it, negative attention is better cause you're just jealous, you're just jealous that I can get tattoos and you can't." Rotten used her hands as emphasis as she finished the sentence and we all laughed. Watching her lively hand movements that pointed to her chest drew attention to the tattoo around her collar bone that circled her neck. I asked her about the tattoo and she explained that the lettering "gra bean uasal" means "lady to love" in Gaelic. Militia's son began to cry and Rotten got up and walked over to him.

I asked Militia about her family's reaction to her choice of living as a tattooed woman. She paused for a moment and took a deep breath:

At first I think they were really upset about it, but I think they started to see the tattoos and knew saying anything was not going to change it. It may just make it worse and after a while my parents just started to accept it for who I was, but I remember... my mom saying look what you've done to your beautiful skin. My mom has this image of what she wants her daughter to look like and my dad has this image of... I just I don't fit into it. I was just telling her [Rotten] before you

came by that ever since I was little I just fought against... I just wanted to do my own thing and it's not exactly beneficial for me now because I see that I run into problems because I have a 2 month old son.

Militia further described that she has a sister with a tattoo and brother who does not have any tattoos. She admits that now her family has become "very accepting" and that they "still love me for it." Rotten sat back down on the couch and joined the conversation. She added that her family "was just weird about it," explaining that her father wanted her "to join the military, he wanted me to be his golden girl," and that her mom would "buy me clothes from J. Crew." In an exaggerated voice she said, "You're just getting judged and they have an opinion about everything, everything!" Suddenly Rotten's voice took on an excited tone as she emphasized, "my mom even was thinking about getting a tattoo." She mimicked a high pitched woman's voice "something little and something cute on my ankle." Nearly jumping off the couch and pumping her arm in the air she exclaimed, "I'm like fuck yeah! That would be the shit!" Taking a much more serious tone Rotten asserted:

Fuck everybody else if they want to judge you then let them do that! They have problems with themselves, that's what I believe. Like they see tattoos and they're like, why would you do that to your body? Well why does it bug you? It's not hurting you any, you know, I'm happy you care about me but who are you to judge me? Why? Does color really offend you that fucking bad?

Sensing that Rotten and Militia were willing to talk more in depth about their experiences, I asked what people have said to them about their tattoos. Rotten

immediately stood up and in a loud voice exclaimed, "People come up to me and tell me I'm fucking ugly!" She relaxed a little, then related a story about being in Texas and having a confrontation with two other women:

You could tell they were talking about me and you could tell like their style, you could tell that they were feeding off of each other...these chicks that were behind me I turned around and I was like what are you guys so scared of? What is it, are you guys scared of people who are different? Does it really intimidate you that bad? And I was like why are you the way you are? And the girl was like well it's cute. Really? Or is it just in style? No, it's for yourself, live for yourself!

Rotten laughed and paused so I turned to Militia and asked her to describe her experiences. She explained that nobody has ever said anything negative to her because she "lived in a town where it [tattoos] was a little more accepted." However, since moving here "people look at me like I'm from another world." Rotten quickly interjected that, as a person from this town, she can attest that getting tattooed "wasn't that cool" and that "at the time I had my head shaved and I have my head tattooed." She pulled back her hair from around her face and showed me that on each side of her head there are tattoos. Startled, I exclaimed, "Oh shit! Let me see that!" Rotten moved her hair again and showed me the designs which are hard to make out due to the overgrowth of hair. She exclaimed, "When I'm walking around with my head bald and tattooed, people were like dude that chick is gotta be a dyke!" She shouted rhetorically, "What makes me lick pussy because I have a bald head and tattoos!" We all laughed and paused for a moment. Rotten then related an experience that occurred in local large grocery store:

[There was] a lady and her daughter was waving at me and I waved back, and her mom covered her eyes and turned her [the daughter] towards her. I walked up to them and I was like, “dude what’s the problem here?” She was saying hello and I was saying hello and I waved and on this hand you can see the tattoo and she [the mom] was like no. She’s telling her daughter, you know, right there in front of me, no. I want her to live her life, I don't want her to see that [the tattoos].

While telling the story Rotten stood up, re-enacting the scene, and displayed the tattoo on the palm of her hand. In the middle of her right palm is a big colorful crown. She laughed for a moment and then paused before she added, “I’ve gotten some cool feedback, but that’s only from people who have tattoos.”

With a brief pause in the conversation I began to wonder if these women were employed and about their experiences of gaining employment. I posed the question to them and Militia responded first. She informed me that she currently works part-time at a shoe store and is enrolled in on-line courses at a university. Rotten interjected, “I have been denied almost every job I have applied for. It’s really hard for me to find a job.” Militia admitted that she has “never had a problem finding a job” but that her mother had predicted that her tattoos would result in her “never find[ing] a job.” She clarified, “I guess if I was like looking for a banking job or an insurance broker or whatever... but I have never had a problem getting a job.” Rotten laughed and added, “insurance agent, you would be bored as hell!” Militia smiled at Rotten’s response and continued:

I was never worried about it because I knew I was never going to be doing that with my life anyway. I was going to be helping people through drug addiction

where I know my experience and the way I look is going to help me. I know that I'm going to be able to relate to people and they are going to be able to relate to me so I always knew I'm not going to have a problem with this [tattoos] so bring it on, I'm going to get as many as I can.

After a brief pause Militia turned to me and asked, "So this is part of your schooling?" Before I could answer Rotten asked, "Your ending of school, right?" I nodded my head yes and explained that I am completing my Master's of Arts degree in Professional Communication. I thought it necessary to expand upon my choice to research tattooed women and explained that once I got larger tattoos in more visible places on my body, I noticed that people reacted to me differently and at times would make judgmental statements to me. I assumed I was not the only women to experience this response and I wanted to understand other women's experiences. Both Rotten and Militia nodded their heads indicating an understanding.

Rotten then expressed concern that she may "run out of un-tattooed skin." She is worried about "running out of room [on her body]" and joked, "What shitty tattoo can I cover?" Militia talked over her and added, "Yeah, your body is like a canvas." Militia briefly paused and Rotten's voice took on a serious and intense tone:

If you get down to it you can take away my friends, you can take away my family you can take away my house, you can take away the clothes on my back, but you can not take away me! You can not take away my work [tattoos] and you can not change anything about me, that's the cool thing about being human, you're an individual.

Rotten then directed the conversation towards religious beliefs and in a frustrated voice explained, “Western religion says you can’t scar your body and the bible says you can’t go to heaven? Why? Jesus says come as you are. So there’s a contradictory there.”

Militia, without waiting for a pause, turned to Rotten and opined, “Well I think people take it out of context when they read that.” Looking back at me she added, “I think the hardest part for me is when I go into ministry or when I decided to go into the ministry for my life, that is going to be an obstacle because I know the church is... or some people, as sad as it is, are going to be very prejudiced.”

The conversation remained on religion for a few more moments until Rotten directed the focus to how she feels about the attention she receives about her tattoos. She explained that at times she feels “hostile” since people are always looking at her. Somewhat cautiously, I questioned whether the perception of others about her tattoos make her hostile or if perhaps her hostility is part of why she became tattooed. Rotten replied, “The tattoos help it, you know, it’s just funny.” In a voice that mimics a question, she asked and then answered, “So why do you have “HART LESS” on your knuckles? Cuz it’s the way I live, ya know. You can’t let people walk all over you. You can not, no you have to be heartless sometimes, fuck.” Militia chimed in, “It’s hard for me to see someone who doesn’t have tattoos and for me not to judge them. I know it’s hypocritical, but I look at them and go well doesn’t it ever interest you, haven’t you ever wanted to do something that.” Pausing for a moment, she corrected herself, by saying, “Well, I mean not that I judge them, it’s just I’m curious as to why they don’t want to do it [tattooing], as they [wonder] why I do it.”

After freshening our drinks, Rotten shared that she has sometimes attempted to try to understand the non-tattooed perspective:

I try and put myself in their shoes, like if I saw me walking down the street with tattoos on my hands, tattoos on my neck every part of me that is visible skin is tattooed, what the hell are they thinking? They are probably like, dude that chick is gonna like fuck me up if I go near her.

In a loud, emotional voice she exclaimed, "I'm not mean! Where does the meanness come with tattoos?" Her voice lowered and she concluded, "I don't think it will ever be socially acceptable." Thinking about her comments, I asked if tattoos never became socially acceptable, would it be such a bad thing. Laughing she replied, "Well, it kinda sucks." Moving her hands around for emphasis, she explained what she feels when she walks into a room knowing that "this side's gonna hate me," and "about four people out of here are going to think that I'm the coolest mother fucker ever, but this side is gonna hate me and you like feel it." Attempting to get back to my original question I asked, "Could that be part of the draw to tattooing?" Almost in unison, Rotten and Militia quickly responded with an excited "Yeah!" As we discussed the meaning of tattoos, Militia interjected, "If it became mainstream then it may lose some of the meaningfulness or individuality." Rotten paralleled tattoos with clothing that people wear and suggest that "tattooing is how one defines oneself." In a calm voice she explained, "Some of the reason why I get tattooed is because I was pissed off and/or I need to get tattooed 'cause I was broken hearted, so like I got a broken hearted My Little Pony because I hate my ex-boyfriend." The pony is located on the right side of her neck and is designed in the

grayscale color style; she referred to the tattoo as a “zombie My Little Pony.” She then moved the conversation to some of her other tattoos, describing the difficulty of dealing with a fresh tattoo. She referred to her chest pieces which consist of a dead bird on each side. The big, bright, colorful birds span from her nipples up over her collar bone. She explained that, “I came up with the idea of dead birds ’cause I wish I could fly and birds can, so I got dead birds all over the front of my body.”

Militia’s son then began to cry at which point she prepared a bottle for him. When Militia returned to the conversation she told us that she began getting tattoos because originally she was “dating a tattoo artist for while.” When he was not busy he would tattoo her. As she talked and moved her arms around I could clearly see the tattoos that line the top of each forearm. I asked her to tell me about these. In dark, jet black ink is a large solid star located at the top of the forearm. In a row traveling down the arm towards her wrist are kanji [Asian writing]. She explained the theme is “the five elements, which is the fire, water, earth, metal, and air.” Indicating that she needed to explain more, she added that the tattoo had not been finished, but that was because she and the boyfriend broke up. Rotten then suggested, “I don’t look at it as just getting a tattoo, I look at it as a bond between me and the artist for this amount of time and we are going to communicate and we are going to share the same passion.”

Seeing that both women have unfinished tattoos, I asked if they have experienced any tattoo regret/remorse. Rotten explained, “I wish sometimes I didn’t do my hands as young because sometimes I can’t get a job.” Referring to the tattoos on her knuckles, Rotten claims that having tattooed knuckles “scares people.”

I then turned towards Militia who shared her one tattoo regret, two cherries on her back. Thinking this is a strange tattoo to regret, she elaborated that an ex-boyfriend, a tattoo artist, tattooed her and she found out later that “two or three of his ex-girlfriends had them too, so he was basically branding me.”

Militia then showed me the tattoo that covers her entire upper right arm. It is a colorful lotus flower with flames rising from it. Above the flower is the head of “Lime,” an Anime character [Asian cartoon character]. The black koi fish tattooed on the right side of her neck is clearly visible. She then turned around and showed me her back which, along with the cherries that her ex-boyfriend branded her with, there is a large Olivia style Bettie Page. Turning back around, she looked at me and in a steady tone said, “I think it is really important for those of us who are really tattooed to break that stereotype even if it’s just by actions or what you say.”

Rotten then returned from answering a phone call, sat back down on the couch, and began moving around to show me some of her other tattoos. Across her toe knuckles she has tattooed “SUCK FUCK” which she claims to have gotten “on a dare.” On her left foot is the image of a large bubble wand with bubbles coming out and floating up her ankle. In strange writing I see another tattoo but can’t quite make it out. I asked Rotten what it says and she replied, “Made in China.” We all laughed at this. We continued to look at her tattoos for a few moments and then she turned to me and began examining my tattoos. Rotten focused on the Phoenix located on my left arm and asked how long it took to get it completed, then exclaimed, “I love the colors.” I explained the Phoenix took about 10 hours to complete and the Foo Dogs on my left arm took about 12 hours.

The conversation then moved towards the pain of tattooing and both women began to laugh. We all agreed that we get asked about pain a lot. Rotten laughed as she said, "If you are so scared of it [pain] then you shouldn't get a tattoo! If you're calling to see if it hurts then it's not for you!" After a brief pause I turned to Militia and asked if she thought about the influence of her tattoos on her son. She thought for a moment and replied:

I don't really worry about it because I can still instill good morals and responsibility in a child and tattoos have nothing to do with that. And besides they get to a point where they have to make decisions on their own. I have to let my kids be who they are and not put them in a box like my parents tried to do with me. Sometimes I sit back and wonder how he is going to rebel against me, I don't know. I just have to let them be who they are.

Wanting to know what they may have learned anything about themselves as they have gone through the tattoo process I posed the question to them. Rotten responded first:

They have opened my eyes up a lot to living, to the way that I see things, everybody grows and has a line when you're younger [and] you're influence by your peers and now with tattoos I feel as if it has opened up my eyes to who I am and what I stand for. It has made me stronger, stronger as an individual, like it something that you can't take away.

Militia picked up a hot pink wig from the floor and put it on before she answered. Rotten and I watched her fluff the wig around her face before she finally said, “I think that’s the coolest part about having tattoos is like, not the drama, but the shock value and getting that reaction. I like to push the envelope.” Not really knowing if I understood her, I changed the way I posed the original question regarding self-enlightenment, to which she responded:

Not really the tattoos themselves but the experiences, I’ve learned from them, but to me these are just artwork and a way to express myself but I don’t really look at it as a way to identify myself.

Surprised that she does not perceive her tattoos as part of her identify, I rephrased her response. She tilted her head to the side and replied, “No, it’s just a way to express myself.” Rotten, on the other hand says she does view her tattoos as part of her identity claiming that, “if somebody skinned me, I would be an angry bitch because I would feel as if I had nothing.... I would not have what represents me.”

Interview Summary

Throughout each interview my co-researchers communicated their past experiences and thoughts, as well as new insights into their own identities. Ellis and Bochner (2000) posit that “narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present” (p. 745). As humans reflect on their experiences there is rich possibility to gain new insight into these experiences. New insight into past experience is a natural part of narrative

story-telling. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), “meaning of pre-narrative experience is constituted in its narrative expression” (p. 745).

Each of the six co-researchers offered a unique perspective into the experience of living as a tattooed woman. The choice to become tattooed does not alter one’s physical body alone, but alters one’s perception of self as well. Conversational interviewing allowed my co-researchers to tell their narrative stories using their voices and natural language, which permitted me to gain insight into the lives of these women. As they shared their lived experience through narrative stories, I found myself relating to my co-researchers experiences.

Chapter 4

Human Science Research Analysis

The conversations with my six co-researchers gave me insight into their experiences of living as tattooed women. Through conversational interviews, the co-researchers and I “co-author and co-produce” the knowledge captured in the interviews (Kvale, 1996, p. 159). Following the same recognition, Gergen (1994) posits that “narratives do not reflect but construct reality” (p. 188). Therefore, the reality shared between my co-researchers and me provide snapshots in time into our lived experience. As the researcher, I am the research instrument and acknowledge my biases along with my association to the targeted experience. Kvale (1996) asserts that the researcher “may alternate between being a narrative-finder.... and being a narrative-creator” meaning, the researcher can look for narratives within the interview, as well as participate in the creation of narratives by sharing her own (p. 201).

Narrative inquiry anticipates themes of lived experience as the resulting final analysis. Lindloff and Taylor (2002) state that a “strong current of inductive thinking stimulates the development of categories...” (p. 215). The development of categories can then be reduced to themes found in the data. According to Polkinghorne (1988), the events of life can be gathered together “as they relate to the theme of the story” (p. 142). Thematic analysis is flexible and provides a “method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). Being the research tool, I take an active role in identifying themes and must be fair and accurate in the analysis of the interviews.

The process of interpretation is a reflexive process that offers my perspective on the interviews. As the researcher, I interpret the natural language used by my co-researchers; therefore I acknowledge my “fingerprints” on the interpretation. Kvale (1996) asserts that “the researcher has a perspective on what is investigated and interprets the interview from this perspective” (p. 201). Denzin (2000) posits that the interpretive text “should possess depth, detail, emotionality, nuance, and coherence” so the reader can form “a critical interpretive consciousness” (p. 902). Therefore, I am providing a breadth as well as a depth of information so that my interpretations “can be tested by other readers” (Kvale, 1996, p. 211). In this final analysis stage, I will interpret “natural meaning units ...explicate their main themes,” (Kvale, 1996, p. 196). Through my interpretation of the co-researchers narratives, three emergent themes are presented along with my own experiences and narratives.

4.1 Emergent Theme I

Each co-researcher offers a unique and interesting perspective on the experience of living as a tattooed woman in everyday U.S. America. The many narratives provided by the co-researchers display noticeable commonalities of experience. The first obvious commonality among my co-researchers was their perceptions of societal norms. While discussing societal norms, Elizabeth exclaims, “I mean, why the fuck do we have to do what everybody else does?” The implication is that being different from mainstream society is asserting individuality and is not negative in an individualistic culture. Autumn relates that tattoos are a way to “express yourself and be a little different” which keeps her from being “trapped into the same stereotype.” Militia claims “I just wanted to do

my own thing,” meaning that she too did not want to be stereotyped in mainstream societal norms. Rotten’s standpoint reiterates other co-researchers’ perspectives in that tattoos are “how one defines oneself.” Identifying with my co-researchers, I remember acquiring my first tattoo and feeling as if the tattoo somehow made me different from the rest of society. Researchers Millner and Eichold (2001) state that individual expression is the most reported motivation for becoming tattooed. Atkinson’s (2004) research highlights the perception that tattoos are sought in order to form identity and individuality.

The physical perspective of tattooing can be found at many levels. For example, Elizabeth claims that tattooing is her right and that “it’s the only damn thing besides a hip replacement that you’re going to take with you to the grave.” Victoria Pitts’ (2003) research on body modification highlights “the power relations that surround the body and undergoing painful, often emotional ritual to transform the self-body relationship” (p. 57). Autumn and I relate to Pitts’ (2003) research when Autumn expresses that she is “body image wise” not comfortable with an area of her body that she chose to get tattooed. In an explanation of why she chose to become tattooed in an emotionally sensitive place, she says she believes that “slowly it’s going to be an acceptance” as well as “a healing for me.” Autumn’s statement reveals that she is aware of her physical insecurities and is attempting to use the process of becoming tattooed as a way to change her perception of self. My own experience is similar to Autumn’s experience. I chose to tattoo an area of my body with which I was uncomfortable, and in doing so I was able to change a negative perception into a positive perception of self. This

emotional self revelation did not emerge until well into the research process when my interview conversations allowed me to gain that newfound insight of myself.

Along with the physical change of identity that occurs during the tattoo process, a cognitive change occurs as well. Elizabeth, Autumn, and Rotten all state that becoming tattooed has given them a feeling of “empowerment” in some way. Elizabeth elaborates, saying that her “empowerment” comes from “decisions that you get to make regarding your own body.” Substantiating Elizabeth’s claim of ownership, Atkinson’s (2002) research reveals that some women are getting tattooed to re-claim their bodies. As well as feeling empowered, Elizabeth explains that she “used to be very introverted, very shy” but explains “I’m not that person anymore and I think my tattoos have helped me.” Autumn explains her definition of “empowerment” as “inner strength” that identified for her the perspective that “I am different, I do count, I do matter.” I too can identify with Autumn’s definition of feeling empowered. Becoming tattooed has enabled me to feel more confident as well as to change my perception of self and to solidify my own identity. Rotten did not elaborate on her definition of empowerment, saying only that “tattoos are empowering.” While not all co-researchers describe empowerment, all co-researchers did express some conscious change of self-identity. Teal notes that when she first became tattooed her perception of self changed to a feeling of “coolness.” Through further conversation she admits that “sometimes I feel cool... you know, it’s like yeah, I’m bad.” The explanation of feeling “cool” and “bad” could be re-interpreted as synonymous with feelings of empowerment, of an enhancement of self.

The occurrence of physical and cognitive changes to one's identity that transpire while becoming tattooed was not unnoticed by the co-researchers. In their natural language, all my co-researchers describe becoming tattooed as "a process," "a journey," or "a chapter of life" that will "continue." They each elaborate on the change in their perceptions of their own identities. Teal expresses that she continues to live through experiences; therefore, she will continue to become tattooed as the tattoos address "chapters in [her] life." Heather's tattoos have "always been something that was for me not anyone else" and that she continues to design and think about new tattoos that graphically represent her. Autumn describes the process of becoming tattooed as "going through a journey." She describes the tattoos as "like peacock feathers" which show "who I became." Militia refers to the process of becoming tattooed as "making myself the way I want." Rotten repeatedly explains that "I found me" throughout the process of becoming tattooed and that if someone "skinned her she would feel as if she has nothing;" meaning that without her tattoos her construction of self would be "silenced." She further adds that no one can "take away my work" [tattoos]; "therefore no one can take away me." Empathizing with the expressions of my co-researchers, I anticipate that I will continue the process of becoming tattooed in that my tattoos represent who I am; they represent my on going construction of self.

Palermo (2004) emphasizes that tattoos are "a permanent statement of facts or feelings, conscious or unconscious, and should be viewed as intrinsic to the personality of the bearer" (p. 9). Goffman (1959) posits that when in social situations with unknown individuals we use appearance to interpret identity. This supports the consensus among

my co-researchers and myself that our choice to live as tattooed women is a venue for public expression/representation of self and identity. As ever-changing human beings it is inherently logical that women who choose to wear their identities “on their sleeves” will continue becoming tattooed since that is how we choose to express our identities. The wearing of identities permanently on our skin for the general public to view opens a floodgate that affects our relationships with others as well as self. The theme of this experience is expressed adequately by Elizabeth who asserts that becoming tattooed “becomes who you are.”

4.2 Emergent Theme II

The world we inhabit is inherently social; therefore our actions of becoming tattooed not only have an effect on us; they have an effect on our relationships as well. The relationships between self and others are constantly in a state of flux. Gergen (2000) asserts that, “one’s identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships” (p. 139). When making the choice to become tattooed, we are choosing to alter our relationships with others, be it creating a bond, or attempting separation. The terms “bond” and “connection” is commonly used language among all my co-researchers when discussing relationships and tattoos. While the terms were used specifically from five of the six co-researchers, the sixth co-researcher made non-verbal affirmation while listening to another co-researcher discuss “bonding.” The terms were used in describing different relationships, implying that the act of becoming tattooed alters our perception of our relationships between self and others while we construct our own identities.

4.2.1 Sub-Theme One

The perceived “bond” and “connection” that tattooing provides between the tattooed woman and her friends can be found in the natural language of Heather, Teal, and Autumn. Heather describes numerous tattoos that she had done while in the company of friends; one such tattoo experience included Autumn. During the interview Heather realized that getting tattoos with friends is a “line that carries through all of them [her tattoos].” Becoming tattooed with “people who are near and dear” to her gives her the ability to “re-live the memories” of their friendships through her tattoos. Teal describes getting her first tattoo as a pact with a friend. She cites another one of her tattoos, which she got with a different friend, as symbolic of “being friends for so long.” Autumn, like Teal, explains that her first tattoo was planned with a friend as a shared experience. I, too, share one of my own tattoo experiences with Autumn. We have matching tattoos located on our necks behind our left earlobes. Autumn describes this tattoo as a “bonding” for us and says she believes the tattoo symbolizes that I am with her and she is with me at all times. Becoming tattooed with friends furthers the process of identity management in that once we share the tattoo experience with someone else we are in effect creating another aspect of both self and relationship. Therefore, the first emergent sub-theme is the connection between tattoos and friendship. Along with tattoo relationships among friends, my co-researchers express tattoo relationships within the tattoo community as well.

4.2.2 Sub-Theme Two

As with any culture there are many sub-cultures, and the tattoo culture is no exception. While this research does not claim to represent all aspects of the tattoo culture, my co-researchers communicated their lived experience as a “connection” within the tattoo culture. A common belief among Elizabeth, Rotten, Heather, and Autumn is the feeling of a “connection” or “bond” to others in the tattoo community. Vail (1999) claims that tattoo collectors “learn to build their collections from other people” (p. 259). Elizabeth recognizes women who have tattoos as being part of a “big club” or “big group.” This mass generalization is explained in more detail by Autumn and Heather who believe that tattooed women “share a similar experience,” which creates an immediate “bond” and “unification.” Rotten’s perception of “connection” to the tattoo community is explained when she views a person with many tattoos. She believes that “obviously we have a common interest and maybe we can build a friendship out of it [tattooing].” In such incidences co-researchers seem to recognize their participation in a larger, group identity.

Not only do some co-researchers feel a “connection” to the tattoo community as a whole, but Teal, Heather, and Rotten express their “connection” to their tattoo artists as well. Teal chooses to become tattooed from artists with whom she is “friends.” She and her preferred artist “have a long history” together and since they live in separate states she has at times chosen to wait to become tattooed until she can get to his location. Heather says she likes to have a “strong bond” with the tattoo artist because she likes to know that the artist is thinking about “her and the future” of the tattoo. She implies that

the artist is putting thought into both her and the long term artistic appeal of the tattoo. Rotten articulately expresses that she perceives getting a tattoo as “a bond between me and the artist,” and that they will “communicate” and “share a passion” about tattoos.

The “connection” or “bond” that is expressed by my co-researchers with their tattoo artist and the tattoo community displays a feeling of identification to a particular group. Identifying oneself with a group or community reinforces one’s perception of one’s social self. Alcott (2006) asserts that “the relationship between ascribed social categories and the lived experience” of self takes on the community with which one identifies (p. 86). These experiences among my co-researchers have led to the second sub-theme; the relationship between the tattoo community and the tattooed woman. Relationships within the tattoo community and with friends demonstrate a strong connection; however, each co-researcher spoke the relationship between their experience of becoming tattooed and their family’s reaction to this choice.

4.2.3 Sub-Theme Three

Although “bonding” and “connection” are less commonly used when my co-researchers discuss their relationships with their families there is no indication of a “lesser” relationship between becoming tattooed and the tattooed person’s family. If one interprets the term “family,” as it is used by my co-researchers, it is inclusive of immediate family as well as secondary family. All co-researchers then communicate how their tattoos affect their relationships with their families.

While Elizabeth has many tattoos that symbolically represent her specific family members, she describes the actual experience of getting tattooed with her brother as a

“bonding experience.” They were tattooed while saying good-bye to a brother who was dying. Elizabeth further describes tattoos as symbolic of her spouses, both ex-spouse and current. Some of the tattoos have since been covered; however at the time the tattoos were symbolic of those relationships. Heather, like Elizabeth, explains that she got her first tattoo with her husband, her boyfriend at the time. She has since covered that tattoo with another tattoo to “pay tribute” to a car accident that she and her family survived. I, like Elizabeth and Heather, have tattoos symbolic of my relationship with my husband, which has created a feeling of connection to him. Becoming tattooed for, or with, a significant other can be considered an implicit symbolic bond or connection.

Teal offers a unique perspective by including her father in her decision to get another tattoo. Her father assisted by helping her choose the image of a golfer symbolically represents him. Teal also has two tattoos that are linked to the passing of her mother. One, a turtle, is a memorial piece that is symbolic for Teal of her mother. She says the duck wing is symbolic of how she made it through the grieving process after her mother’s death. These types of family relational tattoos inherently express a bond, or a true love connection.

Alternatively, in discussing family relationships with my co-researchers, Autumn, Rotten, and Militia all express that becoming tattooed was a way for them to “separate” themselves from their parents and their feelings of childhood. The choice of phrases like, “I wanted a separation of myself from how my mom sees me,” or “I didn’t want to be anything like them [parents]” and “my parents have an image of what I am supposed to look like” all imply that the choice to become tattooed was a result of a negative social

relationship with family. Interestingly, Autumn, Rotten, and Heather all express a desire to become tattooed with their mothers. Autumn and Rotten attempt to create a separation between themselves and their families, yet they discuss encouraging their mothers to become tattooed. This concept implies a complex relationship between mother and daughter. The need to separate oneself from family is a rebellious stance and the desire to share that rebellious experience with their mothers implies the desire to be re-connected and perhaps finally enjoy acceptance from their mothers. The relationship between the tattooed woman and her family emerges as a third sub-theme.

The role of relationships in the tattooed experience is evident on multiple levels. Vail (1999) describes becoming tattooed “as both an individual and collective journey,” which can be seen in the descriptions of my co-researchers’ narratives (p. 269). Gergen (1994) asserts that “narratives are not possessions of the individual but possessions of the relationship” (p. 186). Therefore, my co-researchers and I use tattoo narratives to communicate symbolic meanings for their tattoos, and their relationship with friends, the tattoo community, and family provides an understanding of my tattooed women’s lived experience. Alcott (2006) posits that “identities are relational both in the sense that their ramifications in one’s life are context dependent and that the identity designations themselves are context dependent” (p. 91). The relationships affected when a woman becomes tattooed emerge as the second theme from this experience.

4.3 Emergent Theme III

Within the tattoo literature, readers will find tattoo regret themes. Current tattoo regret discourse focuses primarily on the regret of getting tattooed and much of the

literature addresses the process of tattoo removal. While none of my co-researchers expressed any desire to actually remove a tattoo, all co-researchers express some sort of tattoo regret, or remorse. Even though some co-researchers have used the term “regret” I have chosen to use the term tattoo remorse as a way to differentiate from current tattoo regret discourse. The term tattoo remorse encompasses my co-researchers’ expressed feelings of not being fully happy with the way a tattoo turned out, no longer happy with the placement or existence of the tattoo, and concern about the future impact of being viewed as a tattooed person.

Elizabeth and Rotten express the most explicit type of tattoo remorse. Both have their knuckles tattooed and both discuss how that specific location of their tattoo has negatively impacted their lives. Elizabeth admits that her tattooed knuckles would be the “only thing I would get rid of” and she believes she is not likely to get another job because of responses to her tattooed knuckles. Similar remorse also affects Rotten who says: “I wish sometimes I didn’t do my hands [tattooed]....because I can’t get a job.” Both of these women express the same type of tattoo remorse and yet neither of them is opting to remove the tattoos.

As with any experience, the more one does it the more one gains knowledge of the experience. The experience of becoming tattooed has a learning curve as well. When discussing getting tattooed for the first time, Autumn, Teal, Heather, and Rotten retrospectively express this seeming tattoo remorse. While Autumn says she does not regret her first tattoo, she notes her tattoo remorse over choosing a flash design rather than creating her own design. Conversely, Teal does have remorse with her first tattoo

because “it was [just] something I drew” and did not meet her hopes and expectations. Even though Teal admits her tattoo remorse, she does not want to have the offensive tattoo removed. Instead, she plans to cover the tattoo with another. While discussing her first tattoo, Heather explains that she has “always hated that tattoo” because the artist “didn’t do a very good job.” She chose to cover the tattoo rather than have it removed. Rotten describes her first tattoo experience as getting tattooed in a body location she wishes she had not had tattooed, her lower back. She explains that, retrospectively, she wishes she “didn’t get it” but prefaces her statement by saying, “it was cool at the time.” Four of the six co-researchers describe some type of tattoo remorse over their first tattoo; however this remorse has not stopped them from becoming more tattooed.

Tattoo remorse was not just expressed over tattooed knuckles or first time tattoo experiences, but all co-researchers express other types of tattoo remorse as well. For example, Autumn explains that she is “sorry in some ways it [the tattoo] wasn’t bigger” when referencing the tattoo on the inside of her right wrist. While the regret is not on a grand scale, she is still expressing second thoughts about the tattoo. In describing her eagle tattoo Heather admits “I am a little regretful for not holding out” for an artist who could tattoo the Tlingit eagle design she originally wanted. Teal, on the other hand, describes part of a tattoo she wants to have covered because “the detail didn’t turn out the way I wanted.” Like Teal, Militia says that one of the tattoos on her arm “didn’t turn out quite the way I wanted.” She too discusses covering the piece. Along with the tattoo on her arm she wants to cover, Militia describes the cherries tattooed on her back that she

“regrets.” She explains that an ex-boyfriend tattooed her, but she later found that he put the same tattoo on three other women; she grimaces, “he was basically branding me.”

Reflexively analyzing my own tattoos, I too must admit tattoo remorse. Most of my tattoos are of Asian style, and I now wish I had not tattooed kanji on my wrist, although at the time it seemed exactly what I wanted. My remorse over my kanji tattoo is not from the tattoo itself, but that each kanji is approximately the size of a quarter. Now after ten years, some of the intricately detailed kanji strokes are bleeding together and making one kanji almost indiscernible. The tattoo remorse expressed by my co-researchers provides insight into their lived experience of becoming tattooed. While all my co-researchers expressed some type of tattoo remorse, none of them have chosen to remove any tattoos or expressed a desire to stop becoming tattooed. In fact all co-researchers explicitly state that they will continue to get new tattoos in spite of experiencing this remorse. The tattoo remorse experienced by my co-researchers, as well as myself, emerges as the third theme.

Since life is inherently one big learning curve, it stands to reason that when a person chooses to express her identity permanently on her skin, there will be some degree of tattoo remorse. Expressing tattoo remorse, however, does not mean that we, as tattooed women, regret our choice to live a tattooed life. Alcoff (2006) argues that “social identities are relational, contextual, and fundamental to the self” (p. 90). As with any experience, we grow, learn, and understand who we are through our relationships with others. As tattooed women, we are communicating our identities and relationships

through our tattoos. They are unique experiences of self as a social entity, with the recognition that such expression is communal experience.

4.4 Implications for Future Research

This research offers a snapshot glimpse into the lives of seven tattooed women and has provided an understanding of our lived experience. While the glimpse into my co-researchers' lives is enriching, I believe further research is appropriate. With the purpose to gain a better understanding of contemporary U.S. American societal acceptance of tattooed women, research must be conducted on the perceptions of non-tattooed women as well as both the tattooed and non-tattooed male population. As a heavily tattooed female, I do not seek validation from these other demographics; however, understanding their perceptions provides insight into the contemporary U.S. American population as a whole.

This research did not take into consideration religion or ethnic/cultural background as factors for tattoo influence. I suggest further Communication studies examine more deeply the influence of these variables as well as other demographics. I acknowledge that my co-researchers and I are similar in demography; therefore we represent a small portion of tattooed women. I also acknowledge this research has mainly focused on women who consider tattoos as art and therefore possibly provides a one-dimensional perspective on tattooing. Since other genres of tattooing exist, such as biker tattoos, gang tattoos, and prison tattoos, I suggest that research be conducted in order to understand the difference in perception of these types of tattoos among tattooed women.

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Appendix

Informed Consent Form**Living a Tattooed Life: The Female Experience**

Dear Research Participant:

You are being asked to take part in a research study about women and their tattooed experience. The goal of this study is twofold: 1) to learn more about the life experiences that introduce or provide motivation for a woman to become tattooed, and 2) to learn more about the life experiences once a woman becomes tattooed and chooses to live a tattooed life.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you will participate in an interview with me, which will take about one hour, scheduled at your convenience. I will audiotape our interview, and use what is said in the recording as data for my thesis research.

I anticipate no risk to you, but if you are uncomfortable with discussing the experience of getting tattooed, you should decline to be interviewed. A possible benefit of participation in this study is the opportunity to express feelings and explore meanings of becoming tattooed, as well as increase your understanding of how tattoos play a role in today's society. *Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to change your mind about participation at any time during the research process. Should you decide to withdraw from participating in this research, all interview recordings will be erased from the digital recorder immediately.*

I will not reveal your real name, and I will maintain the confidentiality of your responses to research questions. The data derived from this study could be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but you will not be individually identified. The audiotape used in our interview and the resulting transcript based on the recording will be kept for five years in secure storage at the UAF Communication Department, and the only other person who will have access to them is Dr. Jin Brown, who is Director of Graduate Studies in Professional Communication and the Committee Chair of my thesis work, under whose guidance I am conducting this study.

If you have questions now, please feel free to ask. If you have questions later, you may contact me (347-1700 or fskgc@uaf.edu) or Dr. Jin Brown (474-6818 or ffjgb@uaf.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Coordinator in the UAF Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 or fyirb@uaf.edu.

Thank you for considering participation in this study. If you agree to be interviewed, please read the following paragraph and add your signature and today's date.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher Requesting Consent

Date