

TATTOO SUBCULTURE: CREATING A PERSONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF
SOCIAL STIGMA

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Naomi Joy Tabassum

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“Tattoo Subculture: Creating a Personal Identity in the Context of Social
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By

Naomi Joy Tabassum

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with
North Dakota State University’s regulations and meets the accepted standards
for the degree of

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. James Korcuska

Chair

Dr. Brenda Hall

Dr. Jill Nelson

Dr. Tom Stone Carlson

Approved:

11/08/2013

Date

Dr. William Martin

Department Chair

ABSTRACT

Tattooing is a growing and diversifying practice in the United States (Roberts, 2012), yet mainstream society maintains negative stigmas (Bell, 1999). Nevertheless, individuals attach personal meaning to tattooing (Atkinson, 2002; Kosut, 2000). There is little literature on the tattooed individual's experience of social stigmatization and its impact on identity construction. This study employed a phenomenological approach to address this gap in the literature. The researcher used a semi-structured protocol to interview seven tattooed individuals (five men, two women; age range 25 - 38 years). Data analysis extracted three main themes: "identity project," "cultural context," and "tattoo timeline." Findings suggest stigmas associated with tattoos remain embedded in the cultural context, most significantly within career. This finding has implications for career counseling. However, participants intentionally defined themselves outside negative stereotypes, and described a sense of community within the tattoo subculture.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, tattoo popularity has been on the rise, resulting in over 20% of the American adult population having at least one tattoo (Braverman, 2012; Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kapperler, 2007). More specifically, there is a notable increase in the diversity of those acquiring tattoos in terms of race, gender, social class, and subculture. There is also an increase in the diversity of tattoo design, meaning, quality, and acquisition (Goulding, Follett, Saren, & MacLaren, 2004; Wohlrab et al., 2007). Although tattooing practices have been modernized and popularized in the U.S., the social stigmas associated with tattoos have changed very little. A popular perception is that tattooing is outside the acceptable behaviors of mainstream activity (Bell, 1999; Goulding et al., 2004), is performed by subpar, unsuccessful individuals (Martin & Dula, 2010; Roberts, 2012; Wohlrab, Fink, Kappeler, & Brewer, 2009), and especially for women it is seen as unattractive and decreases female credibility (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2002).

The dominant cultural view of tattooing holds that tattoos and the individuals who bear them are inherently criminal, deviant, and pathological (Atkinson, 2004; Goulding et al., 2004). However, not all hold this belief as many practice tattooing for meaningful, pro-social purposes (Atkinson, 2004; Kosut, 2000). Kosut (2006) describes a sense of cultural limbo for individuals with tattoos. They exist in a space where the majority population rejects the practices of body modification. Yet, a growing and diversifying population engages in and accepts the practices of tattooing. The impact of this cultural limbo on the tattooed population is largely understudied. However, those desiring to remain engaged in mainstream society without covering their tattoos seem particularly affected by this cultural discrepancy (Goulding et al., 2004). Overall, little is known about the tattooed person's lived experience's in American culture.

A significant divergence exists within popular culture in terms of tattoo acceptance versus rejection, and the same controversies are reflected within the research literature on tattooing practices. For example, Karacaoglan (2012), a psychoanalyst, interprets his clients' motivations for tattooing as coming from a base of pathology, perversion, aggression, masochism, suffering, self-injury, and mental illness. In contrast, Atkinson (2004) informs his readers that, "...tattooing is interpreted in this paper as a pro-social and affectively regulated act of communication, rather than a pathological instance of self-injury" (p. 125). While a few studies have shown little difference between those tattooed and those non-tattooed in terms of psychological wellbeing (Fredrick & Bradley, 2000) and academic performance (Marin & Dula, 2010), some argue that the focus in social academic research has predominately connected tattooing with deviance (Atkinson, 2004; Degelman & Price, 2002). Atkinson (2004) calls for researchers to pursue the direct experiences of those choosing to be tattooed instead of relying on outdated, stigmatizing explanations of the tattooed person's character and practice. Clerici and Meggiolaro (2011) call for researchers to explore whether or not value systems and/or peer groups influence tattooing.

Critical components of the counseling process include addressing the client's cultural values and background. The practice of tattooing defines a subcultural group that extends across race, gender, age, socioeconomics, as well as many other boundaries (Goulding et al., 2004; Wohlrab et al., 2007). However, research in the field of counseling has yet to address the unique experiences of this population. Research thus far related to tattoo acquisition and aftermath has primarily been conducted in the fields of psychology, sociology, health, and popular culture. While counseling literature addresses major cultural differences, a closer look at subcultures, tattooing proposed here, might reveal individual as well as group concerns that are relevant to

counseling. Elements of tattoo subculture most applicable to counseling discussed here include, identity construction concerns, the risk of stereotype threat, and the importance of addressing subcultural competence.

Identity Construction

A social constructionist perspective holds that individuals explore, negotiate, and develop identities within a larger social context (Gergen, 1985). Human development and identity construction are key areas addressed in counseling practice and literature, however little is known about the influence of tattooing on identity, self-expression, and the interchange between self and social context. Raskin (2002) discusses how the social sciences have historically de-emphasized the impact of cultural and environmental factors on identity exploration as the focus has been on the individual. However, the self-concept has gradually expanded to include social influence, relationships, and the impact of language of identity construction (Gergen, 1985; Raskin, 2002). With social change comes a change in personal as well as group identity. Also, as contexts vary, the individual lives out a different identity to adapt to each context (Raskin, 2002). Knowing this, how then does the social opinion of tattooing as a deviant act impact the subculture of tattooing and the individual's process of identity construction?

In cases where tattooing is unaccepted in the workplace, little is known about the impact of social stigma on career construction. Savickas (2006) looked specifically at the impact of career on self and social identity. His Career Construction Theory involves exploring career beyond the historical vocational process of matching scores and skills to occupations. Savickas looks at how careers matters to individuals, and how the one pursuing career is received by and matters to other individuals in the field (2006; 2012). Savickas argues that individuals today are seeking a sense of social meaning and relatedness in career. How then is covering one's tattoos

to hide this sense of self affecting one's perception of mattering and relating in the workplace? As career counselors, Savickas emphasizes the importance of identifying and exploring the client's self-limiting notions, cultural barriers, and confining assumptions (2012). From a counseling perspective, it is useful to better understand the social context in which the working tattooed person is functioning in order to adequately address the client's barriers to career as well as their construction of identity, both in a social and career contexts.

Stereotype Threat

Closely related to identity construction is the concept of "stereotype threat" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). This term refers to the idea that the existence of a stereotype will influence one to perhaps adjust oneself to better fit that stereotype. Steele and Aronson (1995) conducted a series of studies to detect evidence for a stereotype threat within an African American college population. The stereotype under investigation was the belief that African Americans are less intellectually inclined than their White counterparts. The researchers found that test performance was significantly poorer for the African American participants who identified the stereotype. Because the degrading stereotype was detected as applicable to this testing scenario, participants experienced the stereotype threat by self-confirming its nature, in this case inferior intellectual ability. With stereotypes of the tattooed population relating to characteristics such as rebellious (Atkinson, 2002), criminal (Goulding et al., 2004), and overall unsuccessful (Martin & Dula, 2010; Roberts, 2012; Wohlrab et al., 2009), how might this influence a tattooed person's experience of stereotype threat? As a counselor, addressing a client's identity construction in relation to their presenting concern(s) may involve the influence of a stereotype threat. Being aware of and versed 4 in the preexisting social stigmas related to

tattooing might better prepare the counselor to distinguish between the stereotype threat and the person.

Subcultural Competence

As evidenced in Steele and Aronson's (1995) work, much attention in the literature has been given to overarching cultural categories, in this case race. In terms of multicultural competence, the categories that are most often focused on in counseling include race, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and physical ability (Ratts, 2011; Sheely-Moore & Kooyman, 2011). Beyond these major cultural differences, little attention is given to subculture categories in counseling literature. Multicultural competence training often consists of three main stages, which are (a) increasing self-awareness of own biases and cultural identity, (b) increasing knowledge of the client's worldview, and (c) developing and implementing culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions (Ratts, 2011; Sheely-Moore & Kooyman, 2001). In addition, other factors that are encouraged in multicultural competence training include open-mindedness, exiting one's comfort zone, maintaining empathy, and being comfortable with ambiguity (Sheely-Moore & Kooyman, 2011). While the field of counseling has seen increased cultural awareness in the past few decades, the multicultural competence standards remain somewhat general and non-specific. Subcultures, such as the tattooed population, have so far existed off the radar in counseling literature specific to multicultural or subcultural competence.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to understand the meaning ascribed to a participant's tattoos and how he or she experiences prejudice in relation to them. At this stage in the research, the studied phenomenon will be generally defined as one's understanding

of and response to the identified reactions of others, specifically in regards to their tattoo status and the meaning(s) ascribed to it.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Based upon the literature, individuals with tattoos are likely to face stigmatization and/or discrimination on some level. Also, tattoos have been associated with identity construction and expression. This lead to two central questions. First, how have individuals assigned meaning to and integrated their tattoos into their identity project? Second, how have tattooed individuals experienced and responded to the stigmatized traits associated with tattooing?

Significance of Study

The population that is acquiring tattoos in America is growing and diversifying. However, limited research has been done on the motivations for and repercussions of tattoo acquisition. While it is a vital component of the counseling process to address the needs and experiences of underrepresented and marginalized populations, those who engage in permanent body art expression are currently recognized and/or explored little to none in the counseling literature. This study may bring awareness to the motivations for tattoo acquisition, tattooing as a form of identity expression, and the existence of negative stigmas that may impact individuals with tattoos. By conducting this phenomenological study, the results may assist counselors in developing an understanding of this subculture.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study. These terms are common among the tattoo subculture. The researcher has developed the majority of definitions. These terms were not obtained from a specific reference unless otherwise noted.

Body Art

This refers to any changes made to the natural body that are done so for decorative or meaningful purposes. Body art includes but is not limited to tattoos, piercings, dying of hair, and make-up. This does not include self-injurious behaviors made for the purposes of coping with stressors or other mental health concerns.

Body Modification

This term encompasses body art, but also extends to more extreme practices such as surgical procedures. This may include but is not limited to face lifts, tummy-tucks, liposuction, breast augmentation/reduction, and dermal implants. This does not include any bodywork done for medical purposes.

Tattooed Person

Some discussion in the literature addresses the use of the terms “tattooed person” versus “person with a tattoo.” While it seems most authors pick a term based on personal preference, some would argue there are distinctions (Goulding et al., 2004; Roberts, 2012). Such as, “tattooed people” refers to a group that is fully immersed in the tattoo subculture, while “people with tattoos” represents the group of individuals who wish to conceal their ink when engaging in mainstream culture. Due to the subjectivity of these terms, they will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Tattooing

For the purposes of this paper, tattooing refers to the process of injecting permanent ink into the dermis layer of the skin via a rapidly oscillating needle (or needles). Tattooing is here considered permanent, as the rate of successful tattoo removals after 10 laser-surgery sessions is

0%-22.4%, depending on the ink color of the tattoo. After successful removal, the skin does not return to natural or pre-tattoo appearance and is often left discolored or scarred (Dooren, 2012).

Sleeve

A full sleeve is considered an arm that is completely tattooed from shoulder to wrist. A half sleeve is shoulder to elbow, and a three-quarters sleeve is shoulder to mid forearm.

Flash

A tattoo design often displayed in a tattoo parlor's lobby for rapid and repeated use. A tattoo flash might be considered a generic or common image in tattooing.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review was assembled based on relevancy to the phenomenon under study and research questions. A historical look at tattooing provides a foundation for the reader to better understand the origins of current social stigmas related to tattooing. A recent increase in the popularity of tattooing offers a sense of significance and urgency in addressing the concerns of the tattooed population. While individuals who tattoo find meaning and purpose in their practice, the perceptions of others and the workplace standard present a dilemma for those tattooing. While not all individuals view tattooing in a negative light, the impact of social stigmas can be harmful. The sections of this literature review include, “history of tattooing,” “current trends in tattooing,” “current perceptions of the tattooed,” “body art in the workplace,” “motivations for and meanings associated with tattoo practice,” and “impact of others’ perceptions on the tattooed.”

History of Tattooing

In an effort to better understand this current separation between the dominant cultural view of tattooing practices and those who engage in tattooing practices, it is necessary to take a look at what has lead up to this incongruence. As the negative stigmas and stereotypes associated with tattooing are linked to the historical practices of tattooing worldwide, and more specifically in the United States, a brief history of tattooing practices is here explored.

It is difficult to trace back to the origins of tattooing practices, as it is and has been incorporated into the traditions of many different cultures. Bell (1999) mentioned a few populations that have tattooing customs, such as the Japanese, New Zealand Maori tribes, and Australian aboriginal tribes. The Maori tribes used tattooing as a way to mark their bodies in relation to the family they came from. It is called the *moko*, and it acts as a sort of signature or

form of identification, usually displayed on the face. Japanese tattooing practices focus on mythological imagery, and traditionally encompass the majority of the body in a sort of body suit. This differs significantly from American tattooing, where the content is often a single, self-standing image. In the U.S., it is common to see a variety of tattoos, each isolated and unrelated to the other or multi-themed. In all of these cultures, the practice of tattooing is historically done for decorative, ritualistic, religious, status, or personally meaningful purposes (Bell, 1999; Wohlrab et al., 2007).

The history of tattooing specifically in American culture is equally difficult to trace back to one core event or group of individuals. It is rumored Captain James Cook coined the word ‘tattoo’ in 1769 while on a journey to the South Pacific. The word comes from the Tahitian work ‘ta-tu’, which mean ‘to mark’ (Bell, 1999). While Captain Cook was a British explorer, the association between sailors and tattoos seemed to stick in American culture (Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2006; Roberts, 2012). Over time, tattooing became integrated as a form of group affiliation among military, gang, prison, and motorcycle groups (Atkinson, 2002). As tattooing practices became associated with lower class, marginalized groups, so did several stereotypes. Negative stigmas of the tattooed population include a belief that the tattooed individual is thrill seeking, sexually promiscuous, deficient academically, religiously detached, lacking decision making skills, unprofessional, and weak under peer pressure (Martin & Dula, 2010; Wohlrab et al., 2009).

Specifically for women, tattooing made history on the circus scene in the late 1890’s and early 20th century (Fischer, 2002; Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004). Carnival ladies were women who tattooed the majority of their bodies to make money as unusual attractions in circuses. As individuals came to gawk at their scantily clad bodies, these carnival women soon became

known as a freak show ‘peepshow’ and were often ridiculed (Fischer, 2002; Hawkes et al., 2004). At that time, American women were largely not allowed to acquire tattoos by practice of the majority of tattoo artists until the 1960’s. With the coming of the sexual revolution, tattooing was used by women to redefine their sex roles and reclaim their bodies in an expression of female empowerment (Hawkes et al., 2004). Janis Joplin and Cher often get credit for popularizing tattoos for women by sporting their own on stage (Armstrong, 1991).

While the 1960’s brought an increase in tattooing for American women as well as within the art and music culture, it wasn’t until the 1980’s when tattooing rapidly expanded across all social classes (Bell, 1999; Hawkes et al., 2004). Tattooing spread from celebrities to middle-class to the underground culture where tattooing was always practiced. Also in the 1980’s, body modification practices, including tattooing, were used as political protests against conservative and discriminatory middle class norms among groups such as the gay movement (Wohlrab et al., 2007). By the 1990’s it seems tattooing practices began spreading across many cultural groups and classes. Up through today tattooing is used for a complexity of purposes, be it personal, fashionable, or affiliative (Goulding et al., 2004; Wohlrab et al., 2007). The media in several ways has popularized tattoos as well. First, by coverage of actors, models, and other celebrities sporting ink, as well as highlighting the topic of tattooing on TV shows, movies, and talk shows (Kosut, 2000; Roberts, 2012). Although tattooing has historically been considered pro-social in other countries, tattooing in America is often associated with lower class, deviant, gang-related behavior. While these associations may explain the development of stigmas, not all individuals support these negative stereotypes.

Current Trends in Tattooing

There are three main timeframes that stand out in the literature in regards to the prevalence of tattooing in America. A poll in 1960 estimated that about .5% of the general population was tattooed at that time (Martin & Dula, 2010). Several polls taken around 1980 reported about 3% of the general population as being tattooed (Martin & Dula, 2010; Roberts, 2012). It is estimated that today, roughly 20% of the total adult population is tattooed in the United States (Braverman, 2012; Roberts, 2012). Roberts (2012) reported about 35-40% of Generation X and Y (or Next) are actively acquiring tattoos. 10% of the Baby Boomer generation tattooed itself. Also, because tattoos are most frequently acquired in young adulthood, Generation Y especially is still actively increasing the percentage of those tattooed. The 2012 Harris Poll reported that 38% of those ages 30-39 have at least one tattoo (Braverman, 2012).

As women began to acquire tattoos in the 1960's (Hawkes et. al, 2004), they were met with much resistance. Even as recent as the 1990's, some American tattoo parlors had policies making it difficult for women to receive a tattoo. These policies forbade unmarried women to get tattoos. Married women were to be accompanied by their husband, with prove of marriage, and be at least 21 years of age. Because of these resistances, women tattoo artists began to emerge in the 1970's and some ran their own shops as a venue for other women to become tattooed. Today, women acquire over half of all tattoos. Based on the Harris Polls, there were 2% fewer women than men with tattoos in 2008. In the 2012 poll, 4% more women than men reported having tattoos (Braverman, 2012).

With the substantial rise in tattoo acquisition, the methods of tattooing have also changed. With the rise in numbers came a demand for more skilled, artistic, and unique designs. Many tattoo artists are now academically trained and often come out of art schools (Kosut, 2006). The

tattooist has gone from a tradesman selling flash, to an artist producing custom, fine art (Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2006). As far as the change in imagery, it has expanded to include any and all visual description. However, many tattooed individuals choose to represent the historical practices of tattooing by incorporating Japanese mythology or tribal designs into their tattoos (Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2006). Although tattooing as a whole has changed dramatically in the U.S., it is important to note that many of the traditional groups associated with tattooing continue to practice tattooing as was customary 100 years ago (DeMello, 2004). DeMello warns her readers to be careful not to place traditional practices of tattooing into solely historical categories as the tattooing traditions of bikers, gang members, and convicts are still alive and well. With this in mind, however, tattooing is reaching revolutionary levels of popularity among many diverse social and economic groups (Atkinson, 2004; Goulding et al., 2004; Wohlrab et al., 2007).

Current Perceptions of the Tattooed

Although the practice of tattooing has dramatically changed over the decades, the negative stigmas persist with much resiliency (Armstrong, 1991; Bell, 1999). These stigmas may focus on a person's lifestyle (Roberts, 2012), productivity and societal contribution (Martin & Dula, 2010), or personality characteristics (Wohlrab et al., 2009). For tattooed women, there is an added stigma of separation from their traditional gender roles (Atkinson, 2002). Because tattooing in America has traditionally been a practice from men, women are questioned for their engagement in this masculine practice. Though negative stigmas continue, not all individuals support them, and their prevalence may be changing. Recent studies were conducted to explore in depth the variety of attitudes held toward individuals with tattoos.

Martin and Dula (2010) conducted a study in which they measured the negative attitudes held toward individuals with tattoos. The authors utilized the Martin Stigma Against Tattoos

Survey (MSATS) as their main measure. This 17-item survey includes items that measure one's belief in stereotypes, such as individuals with tattoos are irresponsible, prone to violence, and users of illicit drugs. Martin and Dula (2010) found that participants with tattoos scored significantly lower than participants without tattoos, evidencing that there are negative attitudes held for the tattooed population. The participants were 210 undergraduate students with a mean age of 20.3 years. This suggests that a higher educated and younger generation ascribes to the stigmas associated with tattoos. One limitation of this study was the participants came from a narrow range of age and educational level.

Wohlrab et al. (2009) conducted a study in which perceptions of personality were rated for tattooed vs. non-tattooed human avatars. The authors were specifically predicting that tattooed avatars would be rated higher for sensation seeking traits and sexual habits as compared to the non-tattooed avatars. The significant results showed tattooed avatars were rated higher on experience seeking, thrill and adventure seeking, disinhibition, and susceptibility to boredom. Tattooed avatars were also rated as having more sexual partners than non-tattooed avatars. The participants were again college students with an average age of 23.8 years. One major limitation of this study was that there was no distinction made between participants with tattoos and those without. Had that distinction been made, it might have been more clear whether these ratings were predominately made by the non-tattooed population, or if it is the tattooed population that identifies with these traits. Overall, however, these researchers identified that tattooed individuals continue to be viewed with prominent, character-related assumptions.

Hawkes et al. (2004) conducted a similar study in Canada in which the participants evaluated a written scenario of a woman with or without a tattoo. The participants were also university students predominately of traditional college age. The women in the scenarios were

rated on four personality scales, passive—active, powerful—weak, pleasant—unpleasant, and cautious—rash. Across all four scales, the participants with tattoos had more favorable attitudes toward the tattooed woman in the scenario as compared to the non-tattooed participants, suggesting that non-tattooed individuals adhere to negative stereotypes of the tattooed population significantly more than tattooed individuals do. Both male and female participants rated the tattooed woman as more powerful and active. However, the male participants rated the tattooed woman more negatively overall. This comparison might suggest that women are still desired to be the weaker and more passive sex by men. Tattoos are indicative of a strong woman, therefore male privilege may be threatened. While these patriarchal patterns in response were noted, further research may be needed to assess the full extent of these attitudes and how they may play out in real life situations. It is also noted that the tattooed population is less attached to historical perspectives on tattooing and may be in movement toward changing the negative stereotypes.

While the male opinion of women tattooing is still under question, there is more evidence that those without tattoos continue to have negative views of those with tattoos. The Harris Poll is a national survey conducted by Harris Interactive online that measured not only the number of adults (ages 18+) with tattoos over past years, but also opinions about the character traits of individuals with tattoos. Results from the 2003 and 2012 polls showed that about one in four associated deviance with the tattooed population (Braverman, 2012). There was no significant difference between the two polls, suggesting that the association between tattoos and deviance is persistent over time. In the 2012 Harris Poll, individuals without tattoos rated individuals with tattoos as 25-45% less sexy, spiritual, attractive, intelligent, and healthy. Non-tattooed individuals also rated those with tattoos as 50% more rebellious. Tattooed respondents reported feeling either no difference or a reverse effect on all of these scales in comparing when they were

not tattooed to now having at least one tattoo. The gap between tattooed responders and non-tattooed responders is evidence that there may be a vast difference between how a tattooed person perceives himself or herself compared to how a non-tattooed person then perceives the tattooed person in terms of character or personality traits. While many studies have restricted their participant sample to college students on one campus, an advantage of the Harris Poll is that it is nation wide and has been taken by adults of all ages.

Degelman and Price (2002) conducted a study in California in which 196 high school and college-age participants viewed a photograph of a woman either with or without a tattoo on her upper left arm. After viewing the photograph, each participant completed a 30-item attitude scale in which 13 personality traits of the woman were rated. Of the 13 personality characteristics, 9 were rated significantly higher for the woman without a tattoo. These traits included attractive, intelligent, artistic, athletic, motivated, generous, mysterious, religious, and honest. Inconsistent with other studies, Degelman and Price (2002) reported no difference in ratings between males and females, non-tattooed and tattooed participants, and high school versus college attenders.

P. S. Bekhor, Bekhor, and Gandrabur (1995) conducted a study in Australia in which they measured 242 employers' attitudes toward employees with visible tattoos. The authors placed employers into 8 categories, which included retail, hospitality, beauty, office work, building industries, motor, personal care, and public service. In the categories of retail, hospitality, beauty, and office, less than 30% of employers reported that they would employ someone with a visible tattoo. In fact, both hospitality and beauty reported they did not currently employ one person with a tattoo. Based on their results, the authors discussed tattoo prevention programs as the optimal option to avoid stigmatization and employment difficulties. With the biases held by the

researchers against tattoo practices, their research procedures and findings may have been clouded.

Some research suggests that tattooed individuals are deviant, rebellious, impulsive, and antisocial. This unsavory side of tattooing history continues to follow the tattooing practices today evidenced by a negative perspective of those tattooed (DeMello, 2004). Some argue that negative perceptions of the tattooed are influenced by tattoo design, size, and body placement (Degelman & Price, 2002; Kosut, 2000). The current research on tattoos supports that tattoos can elicit negative attitudes and opinions of the character of the person tattooed. These negative reports primarily come from the non-tattooed population. While less researched, another perspective on tattooing might suggest that tattoos can be meaningful and pro-social. As evidenced in the 2012 Harris Poll, tattooed individuals tend to have a more positive perspective on themselves and their status as tattooed (Braverman, 2012).

Body Art in the Workplace

While some have responded poorly to tattooing in general, one territory of the American experience most avidly resists the tattoo image. This would be the world of work. One of the first considerations to address when planning a tattoo is its visibility, or rather, hide-ability. Many tattooed individuals report that this is a major concern, as it affects their employability (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2002; Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2000; Roberts, 2012). Not only do many business have policies requiring employees to cover up their tattoos or other body art (Elzweig & Peebles, 2011; Johnstone & Van Buskirk, 2004), but many employees feel disclosing the existence of a tattoo could negatively influence one's credibility in the workplace, or even opportunities for advancement (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2002; Roberts, 2012). Many individuals enter the workforce in long sleeves and a high collar to avoid discrimination, but

simply feeling the need to cover oneself is considered oppressive by some (Roberts, 2012). Because tattoos carry deep personal meaning for many, the act of covering them up to satisfy the image of their employer feels degrading, like an alienation of the self (Kosut, 2000; Roberts, 2012). Some individuals identify very closely with their tattoos, and they prefer to be addressed as a “tattooed person” versus less directly as a “person with a tattoo” (Roberts, 2012).

Currently, there are no laws to control the discrimination of body art in the workplace (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011). Of the lawsuits filed relating to tattoo exposure in the workplace, there are two legal avenues that have been used with minimal to moderate success. Those include claiming a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbids employers to discriminate based on religion and sex (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011). In case of a religious violation and in order to have a legitimate case, the employee must be able to claim that they (a) have a sincere religion, (b) have informed the employer of the conflict, and that (c) the policy adversely affects the employee’s religious practices (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011). However, even if all criteria are met by the employee who is able to provide discriminatory evidence, the employer is always able to trump the employee by then claiming that accommodating for the religious practice would, “...cause undue hardship to the conduct of its business” (Elzweig & Peeples, 2011, p. 14). What is the undue hardship? The most common reason given by the employer for refusing to accommodate the employee is that doing so would taint the professional, clean, businesslike image of the company (Elkzweig & Peeples, 2011; Johstone & Buskirk, 2004). It is unclear how tattoos are unprofessional, unclean, and unbusinesslike. While in some cases, the employer agreed to make adjustments for the employee with a tattoo, in others, judgment is ruled in favor of the employer, and the employee must comply with the policy.

If one's tattoo does not have religious qualities, there is no option but to comply with the employer or seek other employment. Roberts (2012) identified tattooed Americans as being in a sort of cultural limbo. Tattoos are popularized and acceptable, just so long as no one has to look at them. Especially in the workplace, individuals with tattoos must negotiate between social acceptance and social rejection. Will tattoos gain more cultural acceptance, or is 20-40% of the population subject to a future of bodily concealment?

Motivations for and Meanings Associated with Tattoo Practice

While many view tattooing in a negative light, others support and enjoy the practice of tattooing. By taking a look at the complex motivations for and meanings attached to tattooing practices, an effort is made to better understand the tattooed population and to question unsupported evidence against current practices of tattooing (Atkinson, 2004; Wohlrab et al., 2007). Five main areas of motivation for tattooing that repeatedly stood out in the literature were (a) social relatedness or group belonging, (b) self-expression in terms of identity, (c) experiences of the body, (d) art and aesthetics, and (e) female-specific motivations.

Social Relatedness

Many individuals choose to obtain a tattoo as an intentional step away from the mainstream (Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2000). Tattooing is a way to reject the ideals of the American Dream and what popular society considers successful, professional, or appropriate. Kosut (2000) notes, however, that a deviance from the rules does not mean an absence of the rules. Many Americans with tattoos still plan on being productive members of society, just on their own terms. However, Atkinson (2004) argues that within every expression of individualism, one is also acting out of conformity to a larger group. That group is not necessarily mainstream society, but may be a subculture or minority group. Self-expression must follow the norms of the group

one ascribes to, and is therefore expressing “civilized individuality” (p. 130-131). Kosut (2000) also reported the presence of existential concerns that prompt the acquisition of tattoos. As individuals pause to question and examine what their purpose in life is and to deconstruct the status quo, a tattoo might represent a sense of personal authenticity or intentionality in daily living.

Another common form of social relation seen in tattooing is the process of honoring family or loved ones through tattoos (Bell, 1999). Tattooing the name, birth date, or portrait of a loved one onto the body often does this. Atkinson (2004) interviewed a woman who honored her daughter by tattooing her daughter’s artwork onto her body. Group affiliation, noted historically, is still a very common purpose of tattooing practice. Tattooing as a way of identifying with a group is seen in biking, military, prison, and gang groups as well as LGBT, religious, ethnic, or addiction recovery groups (Bell, 1999; Fischer, 2002). There is no limit to the number or type of group that a person might be affiliated with. Tattooing might also have the purpose of presenting a persona that represents a type of person, for example a rocker, or even a specific rock band (Kosut, 2006).

Self-Identity

The meaning attributed to tattoos is often related to the formation of the identity (Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2000). Tattoos can represent the documentation of biographical stories, whether literal or figurative (Kosut, 2000). They might represent specific events, stages, or marks in a person’s life. While not always intentional, tattoos often come to represent the change and growth that a person has gone through over time. A tattoo that represented a person 15 years ago may not represent the person accurately now, but it serves as a reminder of how that person identified then compared to now. Some find it to be a reminder of where not to go back to, for

instance abusing substances (Kosut, 2000). One might assume because a person has changed significantly since they were 18 years old and got their first tattoo, that 15 years later they might regret that decision. Contrary to that notion, Armstrong (1991) found that after interviewing 134 women with tattoos, 93% reported having no regrets to getting a tattoo. It seems instead that an early tattoo represents an historical reference point of a person's self-identity.

Atkinson (2004) found in his research that participants used their tattoos as a form of emotional expression. Tattooing a portrayal of an emotional event is a way for some to manage and control their emotionality. This author found this form of tattooing to be especially useful for expressing the feelings of grief and loss. As some would say the grieving process in America can be overlooked and poorly handled, Atkinson found that tattooing as a representation of grief was a healthy and novel way for individuals to engage in the grief recovery process (2004). Overall, the concept of stepping away from the norm and being different, expressing individuality, personal growth, and self-identity were highly acknowledged as strong motivations for tattooing (Atkinson, 2004; Bell, 1999; DeMello, 2004; Goulding et al., 2004; Kosut, 2000; Wohlrab et al., 2007).

People as Bodies

As mentioned earlier, tattoos are permanent markings on the body, and thus represent a sense of permanence for the person carrying it. Kosut (2000) explained how many individuals are forced to face their impermanence when committing to a permanent, bodily change. Some participants were reminded of the brevity of life when they considered their tattoos. It may force one to face the existential concern of the reality of death. Tattoos can also allow an individual to reconsider how they see their body and skin. Because tattooing is becoming accepted as a form of art, individuals often view their bodies as canvases on which art is created and displayed

(Kosut, 2006). The body becomes a kind of gallery or museum on which art is constantly and permanently exhibited.

The bodily experience of tattoos has also been explained as a form of physical communication with others that surpasses the abilities of verbal expression (Atkinson, 2004). Tattoos offer a display of imagery and form that cannot otherwise be communicated to a passerby. A participant in Atkinson's study conveyed a message of bodily protection with her tattoo (2004). In the face of many bodily threats, such as sexual assault, polluted products, and disease, this participant stated, "I put on this armor [tattoos] and show how I won't lie down and be a victim" (p. 138). Tattoos allow one to display messages on their person as well as make stands of self-empowerment and resistance against sources that might aim to hurt the body. In the case of one's body already being taken advantage of or controlled beyond compliance, tattoos have also been used to reclaim or take back control of the body (Fischer, 2002). By way of a tattoo, one might be claiming a new stance of self-controlled or self-directed, versus others-directed.

Female Empowerment

One entity that individuals with tattoos may understand is the extent to which bodies are socially and culturally constructed (Kosut, 2000). For women, American ideas for how their bodies should look can play into the process of tattoo acquisition (Atkinson, 2002; Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2000). As mentioned earlier, tattooing can be a way for one to take back control of one's body. For women who have been sexually assaulted and/or abused, tattooing was noted as a sort of therapeutic reclaiming of the body (Atkinson, 2002; Wohlrab et al., 2007). Some women have reported reclaiming their sense of femininity and sexuality through the process of tattooing (Kosut, 2000). The traditional, patriarchal definition of femininity might include an unspoiled,

purely natural body for the purpose of pleasing the male partner (Atkinson, 2002; Kosut, 2000). Some women reject this ideology and are able to take back their bodies and own a new, self-defined physicality. Tattoos can still communicate female beauty, but they also often communicate a sense of strength, sexual independence, and autonomy (Atkinson, 2004).

Female Disempowerment/Objectification.

In contrast, some women use tattooing as a way to further fulfill the role of pleasing and submitting to men. Atkinson (2002) interviewed 40 women and found that 62% reported receiving consent from a boyfriend, male partner, or male friend before acquiring a tattoo. The content of their tattoos was also determined based on its alignment with the traditional constructs of femininity. This resulted in women choosing what they considered sexy, girly tattoos, for example small flowers or butterflies on their abdomen or back, in an effort to please their male partners. This suggests that although many women are using tattoos as a tool to claim independence and equality, tattoos can also be used to further objectify women into submissive, sexualized roles.

One area of controversy in tattooing culture has been tattoo magazines, such as *Tattoo* or *Easyriders*, that commonly include female nudity in their issues (DeMello, 2004). Many female models disrobed in these magazines would not be covering up tattoos by wearing undergarments or full clothing, which has been mentioned in notes to the editors. However, other readers of these magazines have protested to the idea of covering up female models, suggesting that those opposed to female nudity could take their “feminist” ideas elsewhere (DeMello, 2004, p. 46).

Art and Aesthetics

While some ascribe deep personal meaning and significance to their tattoos, others enjoy tattoos simply for the visual appeal (DeMello, 2004; Fischer, 2002; Kosut, 2006). As many tattoo

artists now come from art schools and have extensive and unique experience creating art in different forms, there is a movement of individuals in the tattoo community who use tattooing as a way of displaying art (Kosut, 2006). Some art galleries and museums have replied to this notion with favor and have taken part in the popularization of tattoos as art by hosting shows or exhibits of photographed tattoos (Kosut, 2006). While many tattooed individuals collect tattoos based on personal significance, others may accumulate tattoos for the purpose of owning and wearing art.

Some have speculated that the rise in tattoo popularity is simply a fad or sense of style that will eventually diminish, just like a hairstyle or fashion of clothing comes and goes with the change in season (Kosut, 2000; Kosut, 2006). There is one major difference, though, that sets tattoos apart from most other commodities, and that is its permanence. If not worn as a fashion statement then, what explains the rise in tattoo popularity that has spread across all class, age, race, and gender differences?

Impact of Others' Perceptions on the Tattooee

With over 20% of the adult population tattooed in America (Braverman, 2012), one is left wondering how the negative stigmas and stereotypes associated with tattooing practices have impacted the tattooed population (Atkinson, 2004; Degelman & Price, 2002). While tattoos are commonly used to identify with others and self-express, they are also used by some viewers to assess and judge the individual bearer (Goulding et al., 2004). Viewers are not always other tattoo enthusiasts, but may be individuals outside the tattoo community. Individuals in social groups that may have an influence in determining a tattooed individual's success or failure are within a social circle, such as one's family, workplace, friendship clique, etc. Some have rated individuals with tattoos as less attractive, intelligent, motivated, honest, etc., which may put this

group at a significant disadvantage within the workplace as well as society as a whole (Degelman & Price, 2002). With some unfavorable social stigmas still in tact, tattooed individuals may experience explicit negative treatment from others (Degelman & Price, 2002). Because the tattooed community invests significant personal meaning into the practice of tattooing, others' responses to tattoos may be influential considering one's need for social relatedness. Not only is the skin changing during tattoo acquisition, but also how others perceive and react to one's skin (Goulding et. al, 2004).

Specifically for counselors, addressing negative stigmas in terms of potential stereotype threats is critical. With training in identity construction and cultural competence, counselors are more able to understand the implications of subcultural discrimination on the tattooed population. While some research has addressed the negative opinions of others in regards to tattooing (Atkinson, 2004; Bekhor et al., 1995; Degelman & Price, 2002; Hawkes et al., 2004), few researchers have explored the personal experiences of individuals with tattoos and their responses to negative stigmas. How have individuals with tattoos made sense of others' opinions of them? How have stereotypes influenced a tattooed person's journey of identity construction?

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Introduction

There is little research on the impact of tattoo stigmatization. It is unclear how individuals with tattoos respond to negative views and socially stigmatized personality traits, e.g., deviance, promiscuity, thrill-seeker, and unproductive. This study has two main goals. The first goal is to explore the experiences of how tattooed individuals have integrated tattoos into their identity projects. The next goal is to capture tattooed participant's experiences of prejudice and/or discrimination in relation to the meaning that he or she ascribes to his or her tattoos. A similar study to the proposed one does not exist in the literature. Thus, a phenomenological approach was selected.

Sample

Purposive criterion based sampling was used to recruit and select participants from a populated area in the Upper Midwest. Researchers use criterion sampling when the phenomenon and participants are constrained by parameters such as an age range (Polkinghorne, 2005). In the current study, selecting participants within an age range was important since the phenomenon under study involved individuals likely to be in the earlier stages of career and identity development, as well as falling within the same generational cohort. The criteria for participating included adults between the ages of 25 and 40 years old, individuals with more than one tattoo that have been tattooed for five years or longer, and individuals with tattoos in commonly exposed areas, i.e., arms, legs, neck. Goals for the sample included recruiting both men and women, and reaching a sample size of 5 to 10 participants.

Research Design

The phenomenological research method was chosen as it addresses the participants' lived experiences and personal meaning they ascribe to their tattoos (Wertz, 2005). The phenomenological approach is best suited here as the nature of this study is subjective as well as descriptive. A semi-structured interview (see Appendix E) was developed to elicit how participants (a) attributed meaning to their tattoos, (b) expressed identity through tattooing, and (c) experienced and made sense of social stigmas associated with tattooing.

Data Collection

Before conducting the study, the Master's thesis committee approved the proposed research project. This committee consisted of four members with doctoral degrees and years of practice in the fields of counseling and couple and family therapy. The research project was then reviewed and certified by the NDSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview consisted of eight primary questions as well as unplanned probes to elicit rich and thorough responses. The eight interview questions are listed in Appendix E.

With approval received from the researcher's Master's thesis committee and NDSU's IRB, data collection commenced. The researcher recruited participants by distributing flyers to approximately 10 tattoo parlors in an urban area located in the Upper Midwest region. Potential participants then contacted the researcher and were informed of the study's nature and purpose via an oral script. If participants met criteria for the study, a meeting was scheduled to provide more information about the study in order for participants to make an informed decision whether to consent to the study. See Appendices B, C, and D for materials used for recruitment and informed consent.

After obtaining verbal consent, the interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded, and transcribed for analysis. The interviews produced approximately 150 pages of transcribed data. Participants were assigned numerical values to protect confidentiality, i.e., 101, 102, 103, etc. Numbers were preferred over pseudonyms as names can elicit reactions from the reader that are not intentional or representative of the participant. All identifying information was removed during the transcription process. Audio recordings were erased upon transcription, and all transcripts were saved on a password-protected external drive.

Before starting the study, the researcher wrote a personal reflexivity statement (see Appendix A) to disclose her biases, personal experiences, assumptions, and opinions regarding this study in an effort to bracket these standpoints to ensure credibility. The researcher also maintained a personal journal throughout the interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing process to identify and bracket personal responses to the participants and their stories. For instance, when the researcher was feeling overly supportive or overly frustrated with a particular participant or response given, she would pause and reflect on that emotional response by journaling. The researcher would return to transcribing or analyzing when she was less reactive to the participants' stories. The purpose of this process was to keep her ideas and reactions out of the interpretation of data and development of themes. The researcher checked in with the chair throughout the process of data collection to report and explore reactions to and observations of participants. In addition to transcribing the interviews, the researcher also maintained notes on each interview detailing each participant's physical appearance, non-verbals, and any other information that was not captured in the audio recording.

Data Analysis

The goal of phenomenological data analysis is to bring forward the fundamental nature of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This involves striving to derive essential meaning from the concrete data of a participant's experience of a phenomenon with as little researcher influence as possible. Since the researcher was novice in the area of qualitative research, she followed the phenomenological analytic procedures described by Moustakas (1994). The thesis chair, a published qualitative researcher, provided verification during the data analysis. Horizontalizing the data was a goal. Rather than placing data into hierarchical order, meaning statements were assigned equal weights so the data continued to speak for itself. Furthermore, the researcher used the chair and her personal journal to ensure bracketing of preconceptions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

Data were analyzed using the following procedure. The chair and researcher separately read transcripts for their overall narrative. Next, they re-read each one, generating codes line-by-line. These separate analyses yielded 42 color-coordinated codes with subcategories. This initial process included taking hand-written notes to record curiosities and observations. These notes assisted in the description, classification, and interpretation of themes. A second level of analysis identified central themes and subthemes as they related to the two overarching research questions. Thus, responses to questions posed in the interview were examined based on the participants' reported experience of stigmatization and integration of tattoo meaning into his or her identity project. As other themes emerged, adjustments were made to the data analysis process. At this point, the thesis chair and researcher compared identified themes each extracted from the seven transcripts to verify dependability of themes. The researcher determined the final

themes. Finally, the researcher compared themes to relevant academic literature and analyzed them as they related to the essence of the phenomenon.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This section presents the results of the interviews of seven tattooed persons. Following the phenomenological analytic procedures described by Moustakas (1994), the researcher extracted themes and subthemes from the data. These themes help illuminate the phenomenon under study, which was to better understand the tattooed individual's identification of and reaction to others' responses, specifically in regards to their tattooed identity project.

Participants

Seven participants were recruited for this study ($n = 7$), five men and two women. Five participants responded to flyers posted in local tattoo parlors, and friends of the researcher referred two. Participant ages ranged from 25 to 38 years old. Although demographics beyond age were not intentionally gathered, participants offered occupational and parental statuses. A diverse range of occupations was represented, including student, small business owner, and employment in the fields of business, pharmacy, and information technology. Four participants reported being parents of small children. It is noted that while no participants identified race other than Participant 104, all others appeared Caucasian. Brief descriptions of each participant are offered here.

Participant 101

Participant 101 responded to a flyer. She was a 31-year-old female, and she identified as a single mom. 101 was a college student, but also had 12 years experience working as a hairdresser. 101 came to the interview in a bathing suit underneath a beach dress. Participant 101 stated she came prepared in her bathing suit in order to show the researcher all her tattoos. She had short brown hair with one blonde streak down the right side of her face. 101 brought her seven-year-old daughter to the interview. 101 was lively and animated during the interview,

laughing frequently. She had one full sleeve and the start of another full sleeve. She also had a full chest piece, several tattoos on her back, and tattoos down both legs. The top of one foot was tattooed. 101's daughter sat quietly during the duration of the interview, only interrupting to point out tattoos her mother had forgotten to mention.

Participant 102

A friend of the researcher referred Participant 102. 102 was a 38-year-old male who identified as married with a child. He worked in information technology for a prominent insurance company. Other than living in the Upper Midwest, 102 spent some time in the South while in the military. He came to the interview in a short-sleeve polo shirt and jeans. He had short brown hair and a trimmed full beard. 102 was friendly and humorous during the interview, cracking jokes often and at his own expense. 102 had three tattoos with one small one on his chest, one covering his upper right shoulder, and one down his upper left arm, ending at the elbow. 102 pointed out that the researcher had tattoos as well.

Participant 103

Participant 103 responded to a flyer. He was a 37-year-old male, and he identified as a divorcé with a 6-year-old son. 103 is a college graduate and reported working in marketing. He came to the interview well dressed in a fashionable polo, shorts, and trendy shoes. He had short, styled hair and was clean-shaven. 103 had 10 small to medium tattoos. Six of his tattoos spanned from one upper arm across shoulders and chest to other upper arm. He had one tattoo on his lower right leg, two on his left wrist, and one on his hip. 103 stated he often wears a watch over his wrist tattoos, but wanted to expose them for the interview. 103 took his shirt off twice during the interview without request to show the researcher his tattoos. 103 was somewhat reserved in discussing his personal life, however he answered all questions posed by the researcher. 103

stated a history of mental health concerns with hospitalization. 103 reported his symptoms are well managed with much support from family. After the interview he asked the researcher about her tattoos and what they meant. He complimented her on their uniqueness and asked if she had plans to get more tattoos.

Participant 104

Participant 104 responded to a flyer. He was a 25-year-old male and identified as Mexican American. He brought a female friend into the interview with him. 104 wore shorts and a sports logoed t-shirt to the interview. He had short black hair and a goatee. 104 was comical during the interview, joking often, however he was somewhat reserved in discussing his past. He did answer all questions posed by the researcher. 104 had his right lower leg completely tattooed, both his upper arms, and one tattoo on his back and on his chest. 104 stated he was originally from the South, but had moved around in the military. As he walked into the interview he commented that the researcher was tattooed. After the interview he asked more about the researcher's tattoos.

Participant 105

Participant 105 responded to a flyer. He was a 38-year-old male, and he identified as married with three children. He brought his eldest daughter to the interview. She was 7 years old. 105 reported owning a family business since he was 22 years old. He wore black dress shorts, a graphic t-shirt, and black, decorative tennis shoes to the interview. He had short brown hair and a full beard. 105 had multiple piercings, including stretched ear lobes, a lip piercing, and small studs above each eyebrow. 105 had two neck tattoos, one tattoo on an ear, and the majority of his arms, legs, and back tattooed. 105 was friendly and contemplative throughout the interview, often going into depth with each response. He had lived his whole life in the Upper Midwest.

105's daughter sat quietly and was attentive throughout the interview. She pointed out tattoos her dad had forgotten to mention.

Participant 106

Participant 106 responded to a flyer. He was a 27-year-old male with identified Irish roots. 106 wore khaki shorts, a short sleeve dress shirt, and a green cap to the interview. He had short blondish/reddish hair with a full trimmed beard. 106 reported he recently finished his Master's in corporate communication and was currently working for a prominent phone service provider. He had four tattoos at the time of interview, including a large tattoo on his lower right leg, one on the inside of each bicep, and one on his left shoulder. He reported having an appointment to get tattoos on each forearm and plans to finish his left full sleeve. 106 was friendly and straightforward during the interview process. He stated he has lived in multiple states, from the West Coast to the Northeast and Southeast regions of the United States.

Participant 107

A friend of the researcher referred Participant 107. She was a 25-year-old female with identified Norse and Germanic roots. 107 reported working at a pharmacy. She is a college graduate and majored in literature. She wore a black shirt and jeans to the interview. She reported wearing a shirt with a deep back for the purpose of showing her back tattoo to the researcher. 107 had two tattoos, one on her foot and one on her back. She reported having plans for more tattoos, which would go on her shoulders and/or back. 107 was contemplative and open during the interview, sarcastic at times. She reported having a sexual trauma history. She spent most of her life in the Upper Midwest, but had lived for a short time on the East Coast.

Themes

The data analysis produced three main themes that emerged for all seven participants: “identity project,” “cultural context,” and “tattoo narrative.” Within each theme, there were 11 subthemes.

Identity Project

The connection between identity construction and the practice of tattooing merged as a major theme labeled “identity project.” This major theme encompasses the way in which participants expressed their sense of self, personality, values, and lifestyle through tattooing. It also describes how tattooed participants’ identities are connected to their families, friends, and larger social circles. The subthemes in this section include “self-expression”, “movement toward uniqueness,” “daily reminders,” “gender empowerment,” “family/friend influence,” and “sense of community.”

Self-expression. All seven participants viewed tattooing as an opportunity for self-expression. Whether this process was considered more private or public, participants acknowledged a conscious decision to describe themselves via tattooing. Throughout the course of each interview, the participants linked their tattoos to their identities, using words such as extravert, strong, happy, obnoxious, gregarious, hardy, persistent, neurotic, and genuine to describe themselves. Evident in each story was the intentional, conscious decision made to project a message about oneself onto the skin. Participant 107 described tattooing as:

...a way of owning my skin. Um, because so much of me is build from what my family is. You know my genetics contribute, and like I remember thinking at the time that it was really neat that fingerprints, this is so emblematic of who we are. Our fingerprints are identity. But they’re absolutely random the way they’re generated. It’s swirling and

slashing in the amniotic fluid when you're in the womb that carves your fingerprints in. But, so it's randomized or it's dictated through genetics. But when we get tattoos, it's, it's our choice that we're branding onto our body. And it's much more emblematic of who we are then our shape that's either been dictated or it's randomized.

Movement toward uniqueness. With this sense of control over the body also came a sense of creativity and effort to be different. Six participants described an effort to be unique in their practice of tattooing. This often meant choosing imagery that was personally significant, not mass-produced flash, and in some cases one's own artwork or creation. Participant 102 shared, "The whole reason you would get a tattoo, which to me to some extent is a unique customization of yourself." Participants prided themselves on being different and original. Many of them described themselves as making their own way in life or being on the cutting edge.

Daily reminders. All participants had one or more tattoos that served as a reminder of self, values, goals, and/or loved ones. These reminders served as indications of growth, movement out of the past and into a better place in life, or an intention to stay true to oneself and one's passions. Participant 104 shared a quote tattooed on his body, "I got it, just, just like a daily reminder. It's like no matter what you do, no matter how bad you've been or how- the things that you've done you can always be a better person." Participant 106 described one of his tattoos thusly, "One's a reminder all the time, every time I look down at it I remember you know, those that I've lost, things like that, remember to keep them in my heart." In addition to tattoos serving as a reminder, four of the participants also had personal mottos tattooed on their body. Some of the mottos include, "Pour Out Your Heart" "Live With Intention" "Perseverance" "What We Do in Life Echoes in Eternity".

Gender empowerment. Four participants, two men and two women, described tattooing as a way to self-empower or take control of one's body. This involved challenging or stepping out of a socially dictated gender role. These participants felt a need to take power over their bodies and mark them as territories of the self, instead of properties of the culture. Participant 105 shared:

I guess I'd call it showing ownership of my own body, in a sense. Yeah, just saying, well this is mine now and I can mark it however I want to... You know showing control over your own actions and things like that... I kind of looked at this as you know in America and- your stereotypical if you're- if you're supposed to be a man you're not supposed to show emotions and that. So I thought, I wonder if that's how I'm expressing it. You know. If I'm physically supposed to suppress things so maybe I'm just showing it on my body instead.

Participant 107 described her empowerment process as:

Being a woman in society our bodies are often objectified, sexualized, made not our own, in a lot of different ways. And, while I want my tattoos to be attractive, um, I feel like they are more of a stamp of personal ownership of my body. Like, you don't get to dictate, like I get to dictate, like, so.

Family/friend influence. In addition to making a personal statement or representing the self, participants' tattoos also represented their loved ones. Six participants had tattoos that were directly representational of friends and/or family. From portraits to symbols to abstract art, participants shared about their grandparents, parents, siblings, children, extended family, ex-girlfriends, and friends. Often the tattoos represented specific events tied to their loved ones, such as a day on the lake, a trip to Florida, or playing video games. All seven participants

described getting at least one tattoo as a bonding experience with friends or family. This means the imagery is matching or similar and/or the tattoos were done at the same time or close to the same time. Participant 106 described such an event unfolding with his friends:

So we all went to the same shop, set up an appointment and all four of us were getting tattoos at the same time so it was kind of like, that experience...that was the first time we've ever done anything like that. So it was a nice experience cause it was like a little bonding experience so now, you know, we don't have matching tattoos but we all got it done at the same time.

Most participants described their parents and grandparents as either supportive of or indifferent to tattooing. One participant described her parents as disapproving initially, however they both ended up tattooing themselves. Two participants described their parents as disapproving or not fond of their tattoos. Four participants reported having children and several described their children reacting with curiosity and favor for the participants' tattoos. Participant 103 describing using his tattoos as a teaching opportunity with his son:

If he wants to get one when he's older, fine, when he's old enough to make that decision, but I want to, all along the way, even before he does it, I want him to be like me, I want him to think about it and saying this is something that's permanent you know. Remember you, you're 6, Daddy's had this since you were 6 and now you're 18. That's 12 years. You know how long 12 years is? You're gonna have this from when you're 18 till when you're 88, you know, that's 70 years you can have this. Are you willing to live with what you're going to do?

Sense of community. Beyond the family and friend circle of influence, all seven participants felt a strong sense of community within the group of tattooed individuals.

Participants described a sense of belonging to a group and a feeling of safety and understanding within the group. Participant 107 described a sense of commonality:

I became a person with tattoos! And that's cool! You know like it's, it's almost like a club. Um, where like tattooed people have more understanding of the process and understanding of what it is to be a tattooed person. So there's- I feel like there's more unity among people with tattoos then there would be among a random group of people thrown together.

Participant 102 alluded to a feeling of safety and belonging in this group:

If somebody already has a tattoo then I would feel like there wouldn't be that- any kind of an associated stigma, like I could talk freely about why I have one because I could see that, you know, you do so I would be more comfortable talking about that. Camaraderie.

Participants commonly referred to their tattoos and others tattoos as conversation starters. It was described as common practice among tattooed individuals to approach a stranger and ask about their tattoo(s). Questions might relate to where they got tattooed, the story behind the imagery, and ultimately the person behind the story. Participant 106 referred to this practice:

I do it all the time when I see a good tattoo I start talking about it to that person. You know what make them get it, things like that. So it's an easy way to open it up, and be more, be more human with each other really.

Tattooed individuals are practicing a new level of identity construction and self-expression.

Overall, all participants had a steady narrative relating to identity on a personal, familial, and subcultural level. Within that identity narrative was a strong sense of independence and control as well as group belonging.

Cultural Context

This section includes the influence of cultural stigmatization on the tattooed experience. Participants identified the prevalence in which stereotypes related to tattooing were evidenced in their social/cultural contexts. This theme includes the extent to which participants made sense of and responded to these stereotypes, both when confronted personally and intimately by them, as well as within the larger societal setting. The subthemes include “identification of stereotypes,” “response to stereotypes,” and “professionalism.”

Identification of stereotypes. All participants identified ways in which tattooing and tattooed individuals have been and are viewed in a negative light. The words that participants used to describe the negative way tattoos are viewed in society include but are not limited to the following, “Rebel, biker gang, drugs, sailor, rock star, bad person, non-conformist, sketchy, shady, not clean cut, not trustworthy, loud music, criminal, drunk, deviant, rough life, no opportunities.” These stereotypes were not necessarily abstracted out of personal interactions that the participants experienced but are considered general assumptions that the culture still holds true. With that said, several participants did share individual experiences of stigmatization. Participant 105 shared one such encounter, “We’ll be walking the strip and people will come up and say, ‘Hey, do you got any drugs?’ You know or whatever. And I say, ‘Why would you say that?’ ‘Well, you have tattoos and piercings.’” Participant 103 responded to tattoo stigmatization in general:

I just wish that people would get over the stigma that you know they’re for rock stars and everybody else that they know. Sometimes there’s more meaning to them for that person that gets them more than anything else and it’s for them, not for- for their own

consumption and not for a public display or what other people think. And get over the stigma that its, their bad you know, that they would make assumptions about that person.

Gender specific. Three participants identified gender-specific expectations that influence tattoo stigmatization. This included a dictation of where it is appropriate or not appropriate for men or women to tattoo, for example a “tramp stamp” on the lower back is appropriate for women but not for men. For tattooing in general, these participants felt it was overall less acceptable, according to the social standard, for women to tattoo as compared to men. To clarify, these participants did not agree with the social standard. Participant 107 discussed this double standard:

I almost wonder if, you know it's somewhat more acceptable for men to get tattoos, and I almost wonder if it does come back to an ownership and control of bodies. Um, when women get tattooed it's dictating things about where people look. It draws the eye. No look at this, not at this. Um, and also it's a form of personal expression that it's very difficult to strip off of somebody. So you know you can really, um, put it into your flesh and make it a part of you a lot more. So I think that it is transgressive in that it transgresses against what societal [expectations] and patriarchal [expectations]... But yeah, I'm defying expectations about what a good girl does when I go get tattooed.

While identifying these cultural standards and stereotypes associated with tattooing, participants were confronted to explore whether or not they confirmed the bias. Were they rebels, deviants, or bad people? Participant 104 defines himself:

Growing up I never -most people would never see me as a tattoo-type person. I was the good kid. Played sports all four years. Was in band all four years. Graduated with a 4.0. I was the kid to be professional at all times.

For Participant 104 as well as several others, a conscious effort was and is made to distinguish oneself from the stereotype. Participant 102 found in some ways he fits the stereotype:

There are definitely connotations that go along with it, at least I perceive that there are and the ones I perceive that there are maybe this guy is a rebel against the norm, not a conformist. I mean that was my experience in the military...I mean following the orders and doing what I was told was never a really big thing that I was in to but because I was doing really well at my job, and I was the only one who did what I did you know most of the people I reported to just left me alone.

Response to stereotypes. All seven participants were able to identify what stereotypes and stigmas exist in the American culture that relate to tattooed persons. Each participant described ways that they have responded to this stigma in their own life. This generally plays out in when, where, and how much participants expose their tattoos to others. Participant 104 sums this process up well, “Some people would never have a tattoo showing, and some people are like, what does it matter?” The participants for this study all fell along a continuum of tattoo coverage to tattoo expose at different points. On one end, Participants 103 and 107 felt passing incognito as a non-tattooed person was safer to avoid negative consequences and treatment, especially in the workplace. Participant 103 shares about covering his tattoos:

I don't tell people, I won't go and tell my boss you know, there are certain people I wouldn't go and just tell...I would never tell the president of the company even if we were talking about tattoos I probably wouldn't say, you know, I have 10 of them.

Participant 101 and 104 described an evolution of their tattoo exposure over time. Initially, both participants favored covering their tattoos when 42 in public or professional settings either out

of respect or out of self-protection. They now expose their tattoos in all settings. Participant 101 describes her process to uncovering her tattoos:

I think at the time to be able to cover it up. And then I kind of got over that, like, I mean, I have it for a reason to show, for it to be seen. So, I battled with it for a little bit, and I finally was like alright, you know what, I'm, I'm- How do I even explain this? Um, I've always been the type of person to always do what I want to do, when I want to do it...that was kind of falling into what society thinks would be acceptable. And I kind of got over that.

The general consensus seems to be, the more you have your tattoos exposed, the more susceptible you are to criticism or judgment. Some are more comfortable with this reality; others are less content with it. Participant 105 was the most tattooed of all participants with tattoos down both arms and legs with multiple tattoos on his neck. He has made it his mission to publically prove individuals wrong when it comes to tattoo stereotypes. He has received a lot of push back for this and shares how he responds to it:

I guess it's kind of like anything in life where if you start hearing things that you don't want to hear or you're not really comfortable hearing, they can kind of grate on you at first. So if you really dwell on them, they can destroy you. I think that goes for almost anything. If someone keeps saying, "Oh I don't like your hair," or "I don't like this," you know. If you let it get to you, it will get to you. So, I think I just- I think you really have to be comfortable in your own skin. So, and just kind of brush things off.

Professionalism. The most prevalent social message that all seven participants received was that tattoos are unprofessional. In fact, the word "professional" including derivatives of was said 41 times by participants over the course of all seven interviews. All participants to some

degree felt it was acceptable to require tattoos to be covered in the workplace to maintain professionalism. Participant 105 shared, “I understand it, I mean I know if you’re a business owner and you want to appeal to a certain clientele or a certain population, then you gotta do what you gotta do.” Participants 103 and 104 understood tattoos to be a distraction in the workplace and thus felt they were appropriate to be covered. In response to those who have tattoos that are difficult to cover, such as on the neck or hands, Participants 102 and 106 were skeptical about said person’s future in career. Participant 106 shares:

I mean, if I see someone that has tattoos on their hands and on their neck above a shirt, things like that, you kind of- even still today, even with me that has tattoos, I respect their decision to do them but at the same time it’s the kind of thing, well, what do you do [for work]?

Participant 102 stated:

The other day I saw a picture of a guy with a tattoo on his throat and I’m just like, I wonder at what point that guy just gave up on life, just like you know what, let’s get a tattoo on my neck, you know. So I guess I see it as kinda yea, kinda just, kinda just checked out of any sort of professional aspiration.

When tattooing was strongly unacceptable in the workplace, four participants discussed a sort of separation of self and the workplace. The main distinction made was between work and private or causal life. These participants felt a sort of detachment at work, as if they were only presenting their very “buttoned-up” personality. Off work, they transition into a more personal, open self. Participant 107 presented this distinction of self as:

I’m like, well, the me that I present to the outside world and the me that I present in a professional context is a very different face than the face that I present when I go home

... I don't have an issue to conforming to professional business standards. I mean if they weren't transgressive I'd probably do it because I like the aesthetics of them.

Participant 107 seems comfortable with this perceived business standard of no visible tattoos, however she also hints at this idea of tattoos as transgressive, and if they weren't tied to certain assumptions, perhaps she would like to have them exposed. While Participant 106 is willing to conform to standards of workplace professionalism and is skeptical of those who don't, he also reports mixed feelings. He mentions,

If you're telling your employees that they have to look a certain way and that they have to conform, then you're losing identity as- you're forcing them to lose their identity as an individual in a workplace. And that's something that I don't really agree with.

Overall, there were mixed reactions to identified social stigmas and workplace standards. While each participant was able to identify negative characteristics associated with tattooed individuals held by the majority culture, they distinguished disapproval in the general public from disapproval at work. At work, it seemed acceptable to conform, perhaps as the alternative was no work at all or unprofessional, poor paid labor. Participant 107 alluded to this, saying, "I do want to continue in the professional and make the dolla dolla bills, so I can't have any like facial piercings or any really visible tattoos in my chosen field."

Tattoo Narrative

Within the tattooed group, there are many experiences that make the subculture distinctive. The "tattoo narrative" theme highlights areas that are unique to the tattooed, such as the sense of stepping into a new culture or community and the strong artistic influence found there. Tattooed persons can engage in an elaborate process of decision-making when it comes to

tattooing, and often express a sense of urgency to acquire more tattoos. The subthemes include “diverse group,” “tattoo timeline,” and “planning process.”

Diverse group. With so many stereotypes and assumptions made about the tattooed population, one must ask, are there essential differences between tattooed and non-tattooed people? Each participant weighed in on this question and the results are varied. Three participants stated there are ultimately no differences in personality, lifestyle, or otherwise. Two participants stated there are likely more differences among the group of tattooed individuals than between the groups of tattooed and non-tattooed. Two suggested people without tattoos are more uptight, straight-laced, and conservative while people with tattoos are more fun, outgoing, and not afraid to be different. Participant 105 explained it this way, “I’m just a big believer in tattoos don’t really change you a whole lot...I think depending on how you were raised, I think your personality traits are going to be there well before you get your first tattoo.”

Tattoo timeline. In exploring the backstory of each tattoo with participants, a rich, vivid life synopsis unfolded. Participants shared deep, intimate details of their life due to not only the imagery and design choices of their tattoos, but also due to the time in their life at which they got each tattoo. Tattoos represented life makers for participants, markers of good times, bad times, and all of the in between. Stories were told about childbirth, job changes, divorce, military service, hospitalizations, graduations, hitting rock bottom, witnessing a brother cry, losing faith, being spiritual, experiencing trauma, attending a convention, and many more. Participants discussed their hobbies, interests, favorite movies and music, cultural heritage, places of origin, religious status, political status, marital status, place of employment, and more. Throughout this process of sharing, stories unfolded in chronological order with participants regularly using units of time, i.e., 7 months, and 12 years. In a sense, participants’ tattoos have use in keeping track of

past events. Participant 105 said frankly, “ They’re stories, so when I’m older I’ll have stories all over me.”

Planning process. While each participant’s process of planning and getting a tattoo was different, the common denominator is that it is just that- a process. Generally participants started with a motivation for a tattoo, which might have involved “catching the bug” from someone they knew who was getting a tattoo, having an idea for a design that was personally meaningful, or knowing of an artist who’s art they wanted to wear. Participant 106 describes his planning process:

There was a couple times I almost got tattoos, but I found myself just like picking artwork instead of creating artwork I guess. And I still, I don’t ever want to pick, and so I always just held off from doing it until I found what I actually wanted. I’ve never tattooed anything that I wasn’t a 100% sold on.

Three participants demonstrated an evolution of planning over time. Initially, they described tattooing as a sort of foreign process they stumbled through. As they gained experience and became more involved with tattooing, they gradually started planning more thoroughly and meaningfully. Overall participants emphasized the importance of planning tattoos carefully due to their permanence.

Art appreciation. Six participants showed a strong sense of appreciation for tattoo artists and their work. Participant 101 announced, “I love art. I don’t say that I’m tattooed, I say that I collect tattoos.” These participants explained how they collaborated with their tattoo artist to combine their ideas with the artist’s style and skill. Important to the planning process was consulting the tattoo artist on location, size, color, and design of a tattoo. Participant 106 emphasized the importance of finding a good tattoo artist:

I don't walk into just any tattoo parlor either. Like when I first moved here, that was the first thing I started doing was research on different tattoo artists in the area. Looking at portfolios extensively, uh, cost to me is the last thing I worry about. When it comes to tattoos. I'm more worried about one the quality of the work that I'm getting done and then also making sure they work in a sterile environment.

Itch for more. Six participants described an urge to get more tattoos. Some felt they were addictive, as if they are constantly wanting more. Others described a cyclical pattern where they would go back to get another tattoo every year or every few years. Participant 103 describes his tattooing urges:

To me its an addictive nature, once you get one, you just- you like what you get, if you're really proud of it, you um, it's something that's truly meaningful and dear to you, you just want to have that and cherish that piece of work.

Participants experienced the sensation of being tattooed differently. One participant described the experience as stress relieving. Another described getting an endorphin rush from being tattooed. The remaining four participants that mentioned a pain experience described it as a barrier to getting the desired results. These participants avoided tattooing areas on the body that are notoriously more painful, and stated they would put off getting a tattoo due to the pain experience. Male participants also described a sort of badge of honor or toughness that comes with pain endurance. Participant 105 discussed the experience of pain, "It just shows that you really want something if you're willing to accept the consequences before hand and kind of know what you're getting into and go through with it anyway." Participants experienced a unique sense of permanence by tattooing, which emphasizes their commitment to the process.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand how individuals assign meaning to and integrate their tattoos into their identity project. Another goal of this study was to explore how people make sense of and respond to others' reactions to their tattoos, specifically when those reactions relate to stigmas held by the majority culture. Participant interviews revealed rich and specific examples of how tattooed persons define themselves and note discrepancies between their self-expression and majority culture definitions of tattooed people. Within their personal lives, the tattooed participants seemed unshaken by social stigmas, and found instead a sense of community and reward in the practice of tattooing as well as the group identity of being tattooed. The results were categorized by "identity project," "cultural context," and "tattoo narrative."

Overall, it was evidenced that tattoos are intimately communicative of the wearer's identity. The tattooed individuals in this study took pride in having an active role in the creation of their personal identity and expression of self. The findings in the major theme of "identity project" closely aligned with previous studies (Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson, 2004; Fischer, 2002; Kosut, 2002). These authors also described an intention to be different and unique, and a sense of empowerment in the practice of tattooing. Atkinson (2004) emphasized tattooing as a way to empower women to reject traditional gender role expectations. He also mentioned tattooing as a way to express emotionality and cope with stressful life events. In addition to his findings, these results suggest tattooing can also be an empowering process for men as well as women. Emotional expression can be tricky for men in American culture, and tattooing offers an outlet for men to communicate a gender role rebellion. From a relational-cultural perspective, traditional gender roles may be considered controlling images of how members of a society are

expected to be (Jordan, 2010). By resisting the powerful influence of the majority culture and expressing a creative, authentic voice through tattooing, individuals are empowered to have a voice and determine their own identity (Jordan, 2010; Mahoney, 1996).

In terms of group expression, Atkinson (2004) also argued that within the act of nonconformity and movement towards individualism, there is a larger group or subculture that one then associates with. This appeared to be true for the participants in this study. Participants reported feeling safe and understood around other tattooed people. There was a sense of community and relatedness, as if one were crossing a threshold and entering a club by getting tattooed. Jordan (2010) argued that when disenfranchised individuals come together to form a community, power is developed within the group, as opposed to over the group. Silence no longer holds individuals in isolation, and the individual can be empowered within the shared group as well as on personal level. The tattoo subculture accepts and supports individual expression, creativity, and openness. Inconsistent with common stereotypes associated with the tattoo subculture, participants portrayed an image of success, intentional living, family commitment, and empowerment. Kosut's findings corroborate this sense of intentionality in daily living expressed through tattoos (2000).

Beyond personal expression and social relatedness, a larger cultural context revealed more about the concerns of the tattoo subculture. All participants were well aware of social stigmas related to the tattooed population. Consistent with previous findings (Martin & Dula, 2010; Roberts, 2012; Wohlrab et al., 2009), participants found evidence for stigmatized definitions of tattooed individuals in modern American culture, such as drug user, deviant, and undependable. Participants responded to these stigmas by choosing to whom, where, and when they would expose their tattooed skin. While tattooed persons chose to wear their heart on their

sleeve, they would only do so in settings that were perceived to be safe. This effort to manage tattoo visibility was made in order to protect one's self and success in the greater cultural context. The more one exposed one's tattoos, the thicker one's skin would have to be. Concern over exposing tattoos to others is consistent with previous research (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2002; Roberts, 2012).

Participants unanimously acknowledged the workplace as the least tolerant social place for tattoos. Three participants were employees in the fields of business (2) and pharmacy (1). Working in formal settings, these participants were aware of and compliant with intolerance for tattoo exposure when it applied, which dictated where participants could tattoo and what clothing they could wear to work. Two participants shared hiding their tattoo identity at work and passing as a non-tattooed person in order to avoid rising unwanted attention or negative consequences. As mentioned by other researchers, tattooed individuals are concerned about their employability and opportunities for advancement, should employers discover their tattoo status (Armstrong, 1991; Atkinson, 2002; Bell, 1999; Kosut, 2000; Roberts, 2012). While participants of other studies found tattoo intolerance in the workplace to be oppressive and dismissive (Kosut, 2000; Roberts, 2012), the participants of this study were mixed on the topic. Some disassociated the negative stigmas associated with tattooing and the purpose of workplace policies banning tattoo exposure. Instead of finding the policies offensive, all participants to some degree reported understanding tattoo intolerance policies as an effort to maintain professionalism in the workplace. Having said this, two participants who worked in formal settings did suggest they would like tattoos to be more acceptable in the workplace. Participants who worked in less formal settings and were not effected by policies prohibiting tattoo exposure expressed a sense of satisfaction in their workplace environments.

Beyond the negative stigmas associated with tattooing, few previous studies have focused on the tattooed experience. By interviewing tattooed individuals, the tattooed narrative was explored. Contrary to the findings of previous studies (Braverman, 2012; Degelman & Price, 2002; Hawkes et al., 2004; Martin & Dula, 2010; Wohlrab et al., 2009), five participants felt there were no intrinsic or lifestyle differences between tattooed and non-tattooed people. In fact, several participants suggested that labeling a group “tattooed” was too broad of a category for comparisons to be made. Though two participants suggested tattooed individuals are more fun and outgoing, overall most participants felt there were not significant differences in personality. One previous study showed no significant differences in four of the Big Five personality traits, which supports the participants’ perspectives here (Wohlrab, Stahl, Rammsayer, & Kappeler, 2007). One commonality among all participants was their rich and time-oriented narratives, addressing past, present, and future stories. All participants had tattoos that served as markers of life events, which has been addressed in previous research (Kosut, 2000). These markers may have represented good or bad times. Regardless, participants were generous in sharing their stories embedded in their tattoos, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Participants put a lot of thought and planning into their tattoos. The planning process is an area of tattoo subculture that was not specifically addressed in the literature. A common thread among participants was a thorough investigation of the imagery or symbolism they wanted to tattoo, the talents of tattoo artist they were considering, and the options they had to make their tattoos as unique and original as possible. Participants had a clear appreciation and respect for the tattooing process. They felt rewarded by the experience of tattooing and wanted more of it. Also new to this research area is the tattooed person’s itch for more tattoos. Tattooing was described as contagious and addictive. Although two participants mentioned a physical

experience of relaxation or an “endorphin rush” with tattooing, the majority of participants compared the addictive qualities of tattooing to a desire to have more personalized art as a unique expression of identity. Whether or not tattooing has addictive qualities, all participants had intentions to continue tattooing.

Implications for Counselors

With the prevalence of tattooing in America, counselors can benefit from knowing more about the tattoo subculture in order to adequately address tattooed clients’ therapeutic needs. Each participant was asked to give advice to a counselor seeing a tattooed client. There were two main messages given: “don’t judge/assume” and “ask what they mean”. Counselors can achieve this by following a multicultural approach to counseling. These suggestions essentially cover step one and two of the multicultural competence training, which includes (a) self-exploration of own biases and cultural identity, (b) learning more about the client’s worldview, and (c) developing culturally appropriate interventions for the client (Ratts, 2011; Sheely-Moore & Kooyman, 2001). Counselors need to be aware of the cultural context in which tattooed individuals live. Whether tattooed clients have personally experienced discrimination or are more generally aware of the stereotypes held by the majority culture, stigmatization influences tattooed people.

Tattoo exposure may be a barrier to career that every tattooed person could explore with counselors. Several participants discussed a sense of detachment at work, or being a different person at work than in a personal or casual setting. All participants reported tattoos as considered unprofessional by the American culture in general. How is this discrepancy between one’s self and work identity being negotiated? If individuals want to feel valued and appreciated at work (Savickas, 2006), how might this sense of detachment effect their overall job satisfaction? The

social setting in which a tattooed person works may be an area for a counselor to explore and deconstruct in order to uncover assumptions, cultural barriers, or inadequate storylines that are impeding the tattooed client's career satisfaction.

Limitations

The researcher is new to qualitative research. While she worked under the supervision of a seasoned committee, her lack of experience may prove a limitation to this study. Also, although she took precautions to bracket her biases and personal experiences, it is impossible to remove her perspective entirely from the analysis of data and results. Another limitation to this study was the geographic constraints. All participants were currently living in a populated area in the Upper Midwest. Had this study expanded to other regions in the U.S. or more rural or urban areas, the results may have varied. There were also no incentives for participation in this study, which may have deterred some from responding.

Areas for Future Research

These findings suggest a number of areas for future research. For example, how is job satisfaction effected by the tattooed client's work environment? Future research might explore how tattoo friendly versus tattoo unfriendly workplaces effect overall job satisfaction. According to Savickas' theory of career construction, tattooed employees may be missing an element of connectedness at work due to their inability to express a sense of identity and uniqueness through their tattoos (2006). Also, to what extent are employees experiencing a fear of losing opportunities or status at work should their tattoo identities be revealed? Two participants stated they limited their discussion of tattoos at work. Both suggested that in order to be successful and make money, it is necessary to conceal one's involvement in tattooing. The link between

success/money and non-tattoo status may be strong for tattooed individuals. How does this linking act as a cultural barrier or self-limiting idea to career choice and satisfaction?

Another area for future research is the use of tattoos for memory maintenance.

Throughout each interview, tattoos acted as a visual reminder for participants to recall life events and experiences. How successful are tattoos in maintaining memory for clients experiencing memory loss or dementia? One participant shared that when he is older, he will be happy to be covered in stories. Tattoos can act as expression of identity, representations of loved ones, and markers of life events. All of these elements may prove useful for a person losing their orientation to self. Future research may explore how aging adults experiencing memory loss may receive memory cues from their tattoos.

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APPENDIX A. REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT

Having multiple tattoos myself, I have come to experience disadvantages in the workplace, negative reactions from loved ones as well as strangers, and yet a sense of personal fulfillment and identity expression through the practice of tattooing. Looking beyond my own experiences, I am curious to know how other tattooed individuals have made sense of and responded to the reactions they have received from others in regards to their tattoo status. I am specifically interested in how the phenomenon of tattoo stigmatization may be impacting their journey of identity construction. As a counselor-in-training, I find it is a topic of cultural competence to consider and better understand the unique experiences of the tattooed population.

As I interviewed, transcribed, and analyzed data, I was self-aware of my own connection to the subject matter. At times when I felt myself leaning into or pulling away from the narratives, I made a practice of pausing and remembering my purpose, which was to represent each participant as accurately and transparently as possible. While coding a transcript, I wrote, "I'm here to give voice to those that have not yet had a clear voice in academic research and literature." To ensure trustworthiness, I found the process of bracketing my personal experiences and reactions to be necessary throughout this research process. I also found this parallel journaling process to be useful in identifying areas for further research.

APPENDIX B. ADVERTISEMENT FLYER

NDSU Research: Tattoo Subculture

What is it? This research project is designed to study factors related to tattoos, such as why individuals get them and how they are an expression of identity.

Can I participate? You qualify for this study if you are between the ages of 25-40 years old, have had tattoos for 5 or more years, have multiple tattoos, and have tattoos on commonly exposed areas (arms, legs, neck, etc.).

What will I be asked to do? Participants will be interviewed and asked questions regarding their personal experiences as a tattooed person. Please allow up to 60 minutes for the interview. There is no monetary compensation for participation.

For further inquiry. Please contact Naomi Tabassum at 320.760.6938 or at naomi.tabassum@ndsu.edu for more information. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or a complaint to report, please contact the Human Research Protection Program via (1) phone at 701.231.8908 or toll-free at 1.855.800.6717, (2) email at ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu, or (3) mail at NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

APPENDIX C. ORAL SCRIPT

Tattoo Subculture: Creating a Personal Identity in the Context of Social Stigma

Hi, my name is Naomi Tabassum and I am a Master's graduate student at NDSU in the Counseling program. I am conducting a research project studying factors related to tattoos, such as why individuals get them, how they are an expression of identity, and how individuals respond to others' opinions and reactions to their tattoos. My goal is to learn more about individuals with tattoos so that counselors will be better prepared to work with their clients who have them.

I will gather data for my research by interviewing individuals with tattoos. Individuals eligible for this study will be between the ages of 25-40 years old, tattooed for at least five years, and have tattoos that are commonly uncovered by clothes, such as tattoos on arms, legs, or neck. I might interview you, or someone you know who meets these requirements. I hope to get a sense of what your experiences have been like as a person with tattoos.

The interview will take about up to 60 minutes. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview to ensure accuracy. Once the interviews have been transcribed into a written document, I will erase the audio recordings. You are not likely to benefit directly from this research study. Potential risks may include emotional distress as a result of discussing any negative experiences you may have had in regards to your tattoo status.

Your confidentiality will be carefully protected. The audio recordings I make will be transferred to a password protected computer file and will be destroyed at the end of my research study. I will transcribe your interview for data analysis, at which time I will change your name and any identifying information to maintain anonymity. Your information will be combined with

information from other individuals participating in this study. I will write about the combined information that is gathered.

If you would like to participate in this study, we can set up a time to do the interview. At that time we can go over the informed consent process in more detail. If you'd like to think about it, you can contact me with further questions or concerns by phone at 320.760.6938 or by email at naomi.tabassum@ndsu.edu. Here is my card with my contact information.

You have rights as a research participant. If you have any questions about your rights or complaints about this research, you may talk to me or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at 701.231.8908, toll-free at 1.855.800.6717, by email at ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu, or by mail at: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050. Thank you for your participation in this study. If you wish to receive a copy of the research results, please email me at naomi.tabassum@ndsu.edu or call me at 701.231.6296.

APPENDIX D. INFORMED CONSENT

North Dakota State University School of Education: Counselor Education

SGC C117 | Department 2625 | P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108 | SGC 117 | 701-231-7202

Title of research study. Tattoo Subculture: Creating a Personal Identity in the Context of Social Stigma

This study is being conducted by. This study is being conducted by Naomi Tabassum, a graduate student in the Counseling program at NDSU, and Dr. James Korcuska, an associate professor in the School of Education at NDSU

What is the reason for doing the study? The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of individuals with tattoos. The population that is acquiring tattoos in America is growing and diversifying. However, limited research has been done on the motivations for and repercussions of tattoo acquisition. We are interested in the experiences related to motivations for getting tattoos, how tattoos have been integrated into identity, and how others' reactions to tattoos are experienced.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study? You are invited to take part in this study because you are between the ages of 25-40 years old, tattooed for at least five years, and have tattoos that are commonly uncovered by clothes, such as tattoos on arms, legs, or neck.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer questions related to the study topic. Your answers will be audio recorded for transcription, data analysis, and report writing. The answers you give will be analyzed for themes related to the research topic, and will be reported in Naomi Tabassum's Master's thesis. In the future, the data collected from your interview may be used in a presentation or journal articles.

Your name and any other identifying information will be changed or deleted to protect your identity.

Where is the study going to take place, and how long will it take? The interview will occur in person or by telephone. If feasible, interviews could take place in an office at NDSU, or at another place convenient to you. The length of the interview will vary depending on your personal experiences, and how much you are willing to share. Please allow up to 60 minutes for the interview.

What are the risks and discomforts? Some of the questions regarding challenges you have faced may be very personal and private to you. You may refuse to answer any question, for any reason, or you may stop the interview at any point.

What are the benefits to me? By participating in this study, you will have an opportunity to reflect upon your experiences.

What are the benefits to other individuals? You will help researchers learn more about the experiences of persons with tattoos. We may learn what is beneficial for counselors who are working with individuals with tattoos.

Do I have to take part in the study? Your participation in this research is your choice. If you decide to participate in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are already entitled.

Who will have access to the information that I give? We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. The recordings of the interviews will be kept in a locked cabinet, that only the researchers have access to until they can be transcribed. Once transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. Your name and any personally identifying information, e.g., specific details of your tattoos, will be changed in the transcription and in any

report produced from your contributions. If you wish to obtain your interview data, you may do so by submitting a written request to the researcher. You may only view the information regarding your interview, and not information collected from other participants in this study.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study? There is no compensation for participating.

What if I have questions? Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to participate in the research study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have any questions about the study, you can contact the researchers (a) Dr. James Korcuska, research director/supervisor at 701.231.6296 or at james.korcuska@ndsu.edu, or (b) Naomi Tabassum, student researcher at 320.760.6938 or at naomi.tabassum@ndsu.edu.

What are my rights as a research participant? You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or a complaint to report, please contact the Human Research Protection Program via phone at 701.231.8908 or toll-free at 1.855.800.6717, email at ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu, or via mail at NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050. The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: www.ndsu.edu/research/irb.

Documentation of informed consent. You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Beginning the interview means that you have read and understood this consent form, you have had your questions answered, you have decided to be in the study, and you have offered verbal consent to participate. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you decide to get your first tattoo?
 - a. Prompt: Second tattoo? Third? Following tattoos?
2. What factors influenced you in choosing the designs, locations, and sizes of your tattoos?
3. How are your tattoos an expression of who you are or trying to become?
4. How have others responded to your tattoos?
 - a. Prompt: How have you made sense of others' experiences of you?
 - b. Prompt: As a _____ (insert demographic, i.e., woman, Hispanic, teacher), how is your experience with tattoos different?
5. Being a tattooed person, how have you experienced changes in opportunities?
 - a. Prompt: In relationships? In jobs and/or careers?
6. How does your lifestyle or personality differ from individuals without tattoos?
7. What do you think counselors should know about working with tattooed individuals?
8. What else would you like to add about your experience with tattoos?