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Tattoos and the interaction process: managing a tattooed identity

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Tattoos and the interaction process: Managing a tattooed identity

by

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ABSTRACT

The practice of tattooing is something which has undergone a dramatic shift in recent years. Once something deemed worthy for only the lower-class echelons of society, tattooing is now practiced by those from a wide variety of classes, statuses, and demographic compositions. After providing a brief account of the historical and contemporary views associated with tattooing, this paper will discuss the ways in which tattooed individuals manage and negotiate their tattooed identity in relation to audience perceptions and expectations. It is argued that through utilizing various forms of identity work and impression management techniques, an individual's tattooed identity is activated or deactivated dependent upon the interaction process with others.

INTRODUCTION

Tattoos and Symbolic Interaction

Drawing on symbolic interaction and contributions of Goffman's research, this study investigates the ways in which appearance can impact meaning as well as the interaction process with others. One's appearance is important in that it "is a central element affecting his or her self-definition, identity, and interaction with others" (Sanders, 1988:395). By altering one's appearance, an individual may in turn be altering any number of interactional processes they encounter. The specific body alteration topic under investigation in this project is tattoos. Tattoos offer an interesting case study in that the meanings attached to them vary depending upon historical and social contexts. Further, the meanings associated with tattooing or a tattooed individual can significantly impact the interaction process; a point which will be illustrated through an investigation into the tattoo literature as well as my own research.

The question as to why individuals get tattoos is a thoroughly perplexing one for which the answers are as complex as the individuals who wear them. However, choosing to get something permanently marked on one's skin can convey a wealth of information about oneself. As such, whether intentionally or unintentionally motivated, meanings are being shared and interpreted through tattoos. The tattoo then can stand as a symbolic representation, something which is used to stand for something else (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003). Although the initial meaning behind a symbol may not be known at first glance, what it represents and how it is interpreted lends way to its meaning (Sandstrom et al., 2003).

Therefore, tattoos can be situated as a symbolic marker, that which indicates something about oneself to others.

Research Approach

This research is focused on the relationship between meaning and interaction as it relates to tattoos. I have conducted 23 in-depth face-to-face interviews with undergraduate college students narrowing in on the process of getting and becoming a tattooed individual. My primary focus here is to investigate what impact, if any, having a tattoo played on individuals' experiences. Therefore, my questions focused on the process of acquiring and having a tattoo as it relates to interaction with others.

Paper Structure

This paper will begin with a discussion of the historical and contemporary views associated with tattooing. It will be shown that tattooing, albeit thoroughly accepted nowadays within American culture, is still situated as a practice which is potentially stigmatizing based on situational contexts and audience interpretations. The next section provides a discussion of the relationship between one's tattoo and identity (how they view their "self" and how others view them). It is argued that during the interaction process with others, tattooed individuals use a variety of impression management techniques to control the interaction situation. Although there are a variety of ways through which individuals engage in impression management, the most prominent one which applies to the topic at hand is through identity work. Through using various identity work techniques such as altering the

visibility of their tattoo(s) as well as how they talk about them, individuals are attempting to manage the interaction experience that they share with others.

After laying the theoretical foundation, a discussion of the research methods followed by the research findings will be presented. Through analyzing the data, three main categories emerged in relation to tattooing and interaction: deciding to adopt a tattooed identity, managing a tattooed identity, and anticipating future tattooed identities. It is argued that interaction is essential in shaping the process of an individual thinking about, getting, and having a tattoo. Finally, I will conclude the thesis with a discussion of where my research fits within the broader literature, the contributions it has made to the tattoo literature, as well as areas in which future research can build off of my findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tattoos

<u>Historical Views of Tattooing</u>

It has been argued that tattooing has been present in every culture for thousands of

years (Koch et al., 2005) and that "tattooing is the most ancient and widely practiced form of

permanent body alteration" (Sanders, 1988:400). These claims are backed by documentation

referring to tattooing taking place in ancient cultures (such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt) as

well as through physical proof of tattooed mummies such as the Pazyryk mummies (sixth to

second century B.C.) and the recently discovered 5,000 year old ice man found near the Alps

(Armstrong, 1991; Koch et al., 2000; Schildkrout, 2004). Although tattooing has been around

for centuries, the purposes for and meanings associated with it have significantly altered over

time. The following section will provide a discussion of some of the contributions and main

strands of literature on the topic of tattooing, drawing on both historical and contemporary

views associated with the practice.

Although tattooing has undergone significant transformations throughout history, it

has primarily been viewed as something that those in the "social underbelly" of society, such

as "sailors, prisoners, gang members and outlaws", engage in (Atkinson & Young,

2001:118). While tattooing briefly gained popularity among the aristocratic community in the

1800's (Irwin, 2001), and further sparked interest through circus exhibits in the early 1900's

(Govenar, 2000) tattooing continued to be viewed as something that lower-class individuals

engaged in. According to Sanders:

> By the mid-20th century tattooing was established firmly as a definedly
> deviant practice in the public mind. Despite the short-lived flirtation of

European and American elites with tattooing, members of the middle class saw it as a decorative cultural product dispensed by largely unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dingy shops in urban slums. Tattoo consumers, in turn, usually were seen as being drawn from marginal, rootless, and dangerously unconventional social groups (1988:401).

Tattooing then has historically been linked to a particular class of individual; one who is marginal and on the outskirts of conventional society.

While tattooing has been associated with a certain class of individual, it has also been associated with a certain type of individual. This type of individual, by voluntarily tattooing themselves displayed a "mark of otherness" which was often linked to "criminality, mental illness, and deviant subcultural groups" (Kosut, 2006:74). For example, researchers have studied the link between prison tattooing and the contraction of deadly diseases (Strang et al., 2000), tattooing and risky behavior among college students (Burger & Finkel, 2002), as well as the association between tattoos and psychiatric disorders (Romans, 1998). These strands of research may have conveyed an accurate depiction of the types of individuals who had once been associated with tattooing, but the change in demographics of those who currently are getting tattooed does not easily lend itself to using a similar explanatory framework when discussing tattooing.

The Tattoo Renaissance

One of the most significant turning points regarding tattooing took place in the 1960's and has been deemed the "tattoo renaissance" (Rubin, 1988). Around the 1960's, those most closely involved with tattooing (primarily artists) pushed to alter the way that the public had historically viewed tattooing. Many of the well known tattoo artists of this time such Phil Sparrow, "Sailor Jerry", and Cliff Raven to name a few, revolutionized tattooing by

diversifying and professionalizing the art of giving tattoos (Schildkrout, 2004). The impetus

behind the tattoo renaissance was the idea that to alter the views toward those involved with

the tattoo culture, one had to alter certain aspects of the practice of tattooing. One such move

that would help foster a change in society's views toward tattooing was to relocate tattoo

parlors from the run-down areas of town to parts of town that were more visible and

therefore, more welcoming to a diverse clientele. Another practice which changed the views

that individuals held toward tattooing was an introduction of more hygienic practices into

tattoo parlors. The goal here was to change people's fears about diseases that could result

from unsterile tattooing practices. A last characteristic of the tattoo renaissance was that

tattoo artists began to travel to a variety of national and international conferences in an

attempt to explore different artistic practices and customs related to tattooing. These travels

often involved studying overseas with master tattoo artists in different countries such as

Japan, Polynesia, and Europe. Tattooing in these cultures was more focused on contours of

the body as well as full body pieces rather than the typical "badge" type tattoos which were

primarily done in the West (Schildkrout, 2004). This expanded the different types of tattoos

that individuals could get while incorporating artistry into the practice of tattooing (Rubin,

1988). Overall, what the tattoo renaissance encompassed was the transforming of tattooing

into a respectable and professionalized practice.

While the tattoo renaissance was significant in altering the way in which individuals

in society viewed tattooing, it was ultimately the proliferation of those getting tattoos around

the 80's and 90's which changed the face of tattooing forever. Not only had tattooing risen in

numbers and popularity, but also the types of people getting tattoos now began to change.

Irwin argues that it was at this time; through moral passage that tattooing began to enter

popular culture, primarily through the middle-class (2001)[1]. Now it is the case that "at the

turn of the twenty-first century, tattoos are increasingly commonplace within mainstream,

middle-class American culture" (Kosut, 2006:74). Others argue that currently there is not an

easily identifiable class or type of individual who gets tattoos and that "the practices cut

across demographic categories of age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and economic

status" (Atkinson & Young, 2001:118). Some have gone so far as to claim that we are

currently experiencing a second tattoo renaissance (Atkinson, 2004; DeMello, 2000).

 Through what the tattoo renaissance did for altering perceptions toward tattooing

along with the proliferation of a more diverse clientele getting tattooed, it can be argued that

views toward tattooing have significantly altered over time. According to Schildkrout, "As

more and more middle-class people were tattooed, and as artists with formal art training in

other media entered the profession, [the] tattoo gained new respectability"(2004:336). This is

essentially the train of thought which has dominated since the 1960's. Tattooing is no longer

associated with those in the "social underbelly" of society, but instead with the middle class

culture which has revolutionized individual views associated with tattooing (Atkinson &

Young, 2001).

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[1] Moral passage [transition of "behavior from one moral status to another"] results from changes in individual's interpretation of certain behaviors and how they act toward them. (Gusfield, 1967: Irwin 2001). Through her research of middle class individuals getting their first tattoo, Irwin argues that moral passage can happen through informal interactions, not simply larger social forces as had been previously argued in the literature.

Contemporary Views of Tattooing

The majority of the literature since the late 1960's, both academically and throughout various media channels, has helped to further the relationship between tattooing and mainstream culture focusing both on the booming interest in tattooing as well as the shifting demographics of those who are now engaging in the practice. There is such a wide prevalence of tattooing, especially within Western cultures, that there are no definitive numbers as to the current number of individuals who have tattoos[2]. Although no official statistics have documented an accurate reflection of the prevalence of tattooing, it is estimated that as many as 7 million Americans now have a tattoo (Irwin, 2001)[3]. Tattooing is increasingly becoming more popular among younger generations and recently, among females. The most recent strands of tattoo research have focused on the motivations behind getting tattoos as well as attempting to help explain the increasing diversity of those who are engaging in the practice of tattooing.

One of the earliest academic endeavors into the topic of tattooing following the tattoo renaissance was research conducted by Clinton Sanders circa the late 1980's. Beyond being an academic who was interested in the topic of tattooing, Sanders can also be classified as a tattoo enthusiast or collector[4]. His research on tattooed individuals sheds insight into the lived experiences of those he studied. These experiences included decisions revolving around what tattoo to get as well as where to get the tattoo on one's body. His focus then was on the

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[2] The literature I draw on focuses primarily on North American tattooing practices.

[3] Numbers estimating the prevalence of tattooing have varied significantly from one source to the next. There have not been any large scale studies conducted to measure the prevalence of tattooing; therefore, I have chosen statistics that are frequently sighted. It should be noted that the accuracy of these statistics is as trustworthy as their source- the majority of numbers on the prevalence of tattooing are gathered through polls.

[4] The word collector is borrowed from Vail's discussion of tattoo collectors; individuals who engage in becoming heavily tattooed often while working toward full body pieces (Vail, 1999).

process of becoming tattooed as well as how an individual's tattoo impacted their relationships with others. Through six years of research (participant observation, 163 questionnaires, and 16 in-depth interviews), Sanders is able to offer us a rich account of what tattooing looked like for individuals who had and got tattoos around the time at which he was gathering his data. Although Sanders published a significant amount of work from this data, a book included, I will be focusing in on one article which provides a good overall and general summary of his findings (Sanders, 1989; Sanders, 1985; Sanders, 1988).

As was mentioned above, Sanders research focused on the process by which one becomes tattooed (Sanders, 1988). Therefore, his research focused on the initial motives that drove individuals to become tattooed, what impacted their decision to get the tattoo that they did, as well as how their having a tattoo impacted their definition of self and interactional experiences with others.

Through the course of interviewing and researching tattooed persons, Sanders found that individuals often decided to get a tattoo because others close to them had tattoos, which impacted their decision to want to get one. While individuals often discussed with Sanders having wanted a tattoo for a very long time, it was often a spur of the moment event which actually resulted in their getting the tattoo (Sanders, 1988). When discussing how they chose the design that they did, individuals discussed choosing designs which related to "the person's connection to other people", "fit his or her definition of self", or in the case of women, "enhance[d] and beautify the body" (Sanders, 1988:409).

Sanders found that having and being a tattooed individual impacted how others reacted to and therefore treated the tattooed individual. According to Sanders,

> The decision to acquire a tattoo is a decision not only to alter one's physical appearance. It is a choice to change how the person experiences his or her self and, in turn, how he or she will be defined and treated by others (1988:423).

Coming into contact with other (assumedly non-tattooed) individuals brought about both positive as well as negative reactions. Individuals discussed having experienced positive encounters when others could identify that they were affiliated with a particular group (i.e. biker), or when their tattoo brought about attention from others interested in tattoos or the practice of tattooing. Individuals discussed having experienced negative encounters when someone would make off-hand comments about tattoos in general or about an individual's specific tattoo. According to Sanders, those who received negative responses frequently were more selective about "whom they reveal their tattoos [to]" (1988:419). Sanders found that individuals could easily conceal their tattoos when interacting with strangers but that it was more problematic to control the visibility of their tattoo(s) around intimate others.

Sanders concludes this piece with a discussion of the tattoo as being an "indelible mark" which is situated as a stigma symbol (Sanders, 1988)[5]. His exploration into the views associated with tattooing reflects points which were raised previously; that having a tattoo displays one's deviance or differentness to others. He argues that the tattoo symbolizes membership in an unconventional social group. These groups then implement their own sets of practices and beliefs for its members to follow. This is often done through creating

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[5] Goffman used the term stigma symbol to refer to a sign that draws attention to a "debasing identity discrepancy" resulting in a reduced "valuation of an individual" (Goffman, 1963:59). A stigma symbol can be considered that which indicates something negative about an individual to their audience.

associations and conventions in which they are accepted and "*they* are 'normal'" [emphasis original] (Sanders, 1988:425)[6].

Perhaps the second most influential tattoo scholar to publish on the topic of tattooing since the writings of Sanders is Michael Atkinson. Atkinson has published multiple articles as well as a book based on three years of participant observation research with various tattooing groups across Canada (Atkinson, 2003a; Atikinson, 2003b; Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson & Young, 2001; Atkinson, 2004). His research spans the topics of tattooed females (Atkinson, 2002), neo primitives (Atkinson & Young, 2001)[7], as well as the straightedge culture (Atkinson, 2003a)[8]. Atkinson's research is influential in that he juxtaposes his research against the anti-social views which he argues have dominated sociological, psychological, and medical tattoo literature. Atkinson takes the stance that tattooing is a pro-social activity in which Canadians purposefully engage to resist cultural discourses about what constitutes appropriate body projects (Atkinson, 2004)[9].

A few of the other key scholars within the most recent tattoo literature are DeMello, Irwin and Vail. DeMello's research focuses on the current state of tattooing through investigating how various popular cultures as well as academic outlets address the topic of tattooing (DeMello, 2000; DeMello, 1995). She finds that the pop culture representations of tattooing focus on one of three issues relating to tattooing; tattooed artists, tattooed people, or

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[6] This last discussion primarily dealt with those who were tattoo enthusiasts or collectors and; therefore, integrated into the tattoo culture and lifestyle.
[7] Neo primitives are a group of individuals who engage in extreme forms of body modification (Atkinson & Young, 2001).
[8] The straightedge culture stresses that individuals should resist excessive bodily excursions such as alcohol and drugs while attempting to live a "pure" lifestyle free from hedonistic temptations (Atkinson, 2003).
[9] Body project is a term borrowed from the work of Schilling. The term body project encompasses the idea that the body is viewed as "an entity which is in the process of becoming; a *project* which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an *individual's* self-identity" [original italics] (Schilling, 2003:4).

tattoo events (DeMello, 1995). When looking at individual motivations for getting tattoos, DeMello discusses how both media and academic outlets converge on three similar reasons: aesthetics, individuality, and personal growth (DeMello, 1995). Similar to other discussions of tattooing, DeMello highlights the increasing presence that the middle class has had on the tattooing scene.

Irwin, similar to those mentioned above, conducted extensive research into the tattooing culture by living it first and researching it second (Irwin, 2003; Irwin, 2001). She became exposed to the tattoo culture through her involvement with Lefty Blue, the man who later became her husband (Irwin, 2001). Irwin conducted research around the 1990's with individuals who, while in the process of getting their first tattoo, discussed with her issues that they had contemplated prior to getting their tattoo(s). She found that in order to resist their fears of being associated with a lower class and preserve their current social status that the individuals engaged in a variety of legitimizing techniques (Irwin, 2001). These techniques often involved legitimizing their decision to get their tattoo because it was representative of a moral passage that they had gone through from one phase of their life to the next or as a sign of liberation and freedom (Irwin, 2001). While these are just two examples of many, Irwin argues that once the middle-class of the 90's began getting tattoos, that they helped to "reduce or remove the stigma associated" with tattooing (Irwin, 2001:67). She concludes by arguing that there needs to be more research focused on the ways in which interactions are tied to and can impact social changes.

The last main thread of tattoo research I will be discussing is research which Vail conducted on tattoo collectors. Vail's research was based on a multi-method approach in

which he used participant observation and in-depth interviews at a variety of tattoo

conventions which he attended (Vail, 1999). He found that individuals have to learn the

process of becoming a tattoo collector, similarly to how others learn to become deviant[10].

This involves learning the various forms of tattooing practices, customs, as well as traditions.

Along with learning these facets of the tattoo culture, individuals must also undergo a

process of altering characteristics about themselves. Vail argues that the transformation

process which a tattoo collector must undergo is "physical, psychological, and subcultural"

(Vail, 1999:258). This alteration process is so integral to the process of becoming a tattoo

collector that the individual's collection becomes their master status. Vail argues that an

individual's tattoo collection affects how they see themselves and how others see them as

well (Vail, 1999).

Stigma

Tattoos as Potentially Discrediting

Goffman's concept of stigma is one which is frequently used by scholars

investigating the lives of deviant individuals, especially as it relates to managing a particular

stigmatizing identity. For example, researchers have studied ex-psychiatric patients (Herman,

1993), murderers' relatives (May, 2000), women athletes (Blinde & Taub, 1992), voluntary

childlessness (Park, 2000) and women with STDs (Nack, 2000). While the term stigma has

been used to stand for various things historically, its sociological use reflects what Goffman

discussed as a discrediting attribute. According to Goffman, a stigma is a sign which

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[10] Vail cites Matza when discussing the parallels between becoming a tattoo collector and becoming a deviant individual (Matza, 1969).

designates the bearer as flawed ("spoiled") and differentiates them from "normals" (Goffman, 1963). While Goffman's definition has frequently been used, there have been a variety of alternative and more elaborately constructed definitions of stigma since Goffman (Link & Phelan, 2001). For example, Dovidio and colleagues argue that stigma "is a social construction that involves 1) the recognition of difference based on some distinguishing characteristic, or "mark"; and 2) a consequent devaluation of the person" (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000:3). Others argue that it is "a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit" (Stafford & Scott, 1986 quoted in Link & Phelan, 2001). The explanation of stigma that I find most useful in helping to explain the situational nature of stigma is that, "stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998 quoted in Link & Phelan, 2001).

Drawing on the definition just presented above, having a tattoo could be viewed as a stigmatizing attribute based on particular social contexts, a point which has already been illustrated through previous research conducted on the topic of tattooing. For example, Sanders argues that the stigma associated with tattoos varies depending on one's social surrounding. "In conventional social circles the tattoo is commonly stigmatizing". However, "this generally negative social definition is usually not shared by members of the subcultural reference groups with which the tattooed individual interacts or identifies" (Sanders, 1985:18).

Because the nature of stigma as it relates to tattooing is situational and contextually based, having a tattoo can be a potentially discrediting characteristic if discovered. While in

the presence of others, one's stigma may be a discredited or a discreditable attribute. The

former refers to the perception that an individual's differentness is known or evident to others

while the latter refers to the perception that others do not know or immediately perceive an

individual's differentness (Goffman, 1963). Borrowing from Goffman's discussing of

discredited and discreditable, Sanders argues that having a tattoo indicates that an individual

may possess a *potentially discrediting* attribute [Sanders terminology] (Sanders, 1985):

> Because of the historical course of tattooing in the West the tattoo is
> conventionally defined as an indication of the bearer's alienation from
> mainstream norms and social networks. It is *voluntary stigma* that
> symbolically isolates the bearer from "normals". Since tattooees are deemed
> to be responsible for their "deviant" physical condition, the mark is especially
> discrediting [italics original] (Sanders, 1988:397).

Because tattooing is something which individuals voluntarily take part in, they are engaging

in a potentially discrediting activity in the sense that others may or may not initially know

their deviance.

Through years of extensive research, Sanders found that tattooed individuals were

aware that they possessed an attribute which in some contexts was not fully and widely

accepted. "The tattooee, aware of the potentially negative physiological and psychological

effects of having a tattoo" attempts to reduce "the chances that negative consequences" may

result from their getting a tattoo (Sander, 1985:19). By attempting to neutralize any potential

negativity which may result from their having a tattoo, individuals not only have to take into

account that they possess a potentially discrediting attribute but also how the audience may

react to their "differentness". "Choosing to mark one's body in this way changes the

tattooee's experience of his or her physical self and has significant potential for altering

social interaction" (Sanders, 1988:397). As Goffman discussed individual action in relation

to stigma, an individual must decide "to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (1963:57). Through having a tattoo an individual may need to alter aspects of their appearance dependent upon interactional cues that they pick up on during the interaction process with others.

Tattoos, Interaction and Identity

<u>Symbolic Interaction and Goffman</u>

One of the main premises of symbolic interaction is that meanings are constructed and made sense of through interaction with others. One cannot come to understand meanings unless they also come to understand the situational and cultural contexts in which those meanings develop. Symbolic interactionism then "sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (Blumer, 1969:5). Meaning is therefore constantly in flux and plays an integral role in shaping how humans interact with one another.

Arguably, one of the most influential sociological writers of our time is Erving Goffman. His "illustrious career" "vaulted him from near obscurity into the front ranks of American Sociology" and his works are heavily referenced still to this day (Best, 2007:vii). I argue that it is through the works of Goffman that we really begin to see the premises of symbolic interaction brought to life. Much of his research and many of his observations focused on one of the core tenants of symbolic interactionism; that meaning is derived through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). Through his extensive research on

interaction, Goffman illustrates the complexities which are inherent in the interaction process. While his writings cover a broad range of topics and issues, perhaps his most influential contribution was his focus on the ways in which individual's shape, construct, and give meaning to their lives through daily interactions with others (Goffman, 2007).

Although the primary interaction process which Goffman focused on dealt with face-to-face verbal interaction, scholars of the sociology of the body have argued that Goffman's work also illustrates that individuals can exert agency through nonverbal communicative mechanisms such as dress and appearance (Schilling, 2003). Numerous works of Goffman's support this claim such as his research on the ways in which individuals use demeanor to convey attributes about themselves as well as how personal fronts can be used to navigate interaction with others (Goffman, 2007; 1959)[11].

Awareness Context

In discussing identity as tied to one's appearance, it will be beneficial to first discuss a concept which addresses identities as they relate to interactions with others. As Glaser and Strauss point out, "When men confront each other, each cannot always be certain—even when given seemingly trustworthy guarantees—that he knows either the other's identity or his own identity in the eyes of the other" (1964:669). This is to say that when individuals come into contact with one another, perceptions of each other are not always clearly apparent. Individuals must rely on cues inherent in the interaction process to make meaning

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[11] The study of demeanor highlights that through looking at an individual's "deportment, dress, and bearing", we can come to determine an individual's social status or those qualities which we associate with being "desirable" or "undesirable" characteristics (Goffman, 2007:77). Goffman discussed personal fronts as "sign vehicles" or the "expressive equipment" individuals' use during the performance process. Examples include (but are not limited to) clothing, sex, age, racial characteristics, size and looks, facial expressions, and body gestures (Goffman, 1959:22-24).

of their identity in relation to others. This idea, referred to as awareness context, is the "total combination of what each interactant in a situation knows about the identity of the other and his own identity in the eyes of the other" (Glaser and Strauss, 1964:670). Interaction, which is vital to identity formation, is dependent upon the extent or absence of this awareness context.

Awareness context is nowhere more apparent than in relationships between two individuals (or a group of individuals) in which certain aspects of one's identity can be manipulated based on interactional cues. When individuals first come into contact with one another, the fact that one (or both) of the parties has a tattoo may not be readily apparent (as it could be hidden behind clothing). Through altering their appearance, individuals may also, in turn, be altering the interaction process with others. The following quote provides a good discussion of the relationship between the interaction process and individual action,

> Human beings spend a great deal of time interpreting their own conduct and that of others, striving to make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves so that they can act effectively in them (Hewitt, 1991:24).

Therefore, because of their inability to know when in the presence of others how they truly feel about tattoos and the practice of tattooing, individuals must pick up on cues in the interaction experience to determine what appropriate action to take.

Impression Management

As individuals interact, "guided by their respective identities, they develop images of one another" (Hewitt, 1991:139). Individuals want to convey positive images of themselves for others so as to receive positive appraisals. We use a variety of impression management techniques when we are attempting to control how others view us. Through using impression

management, "We try to talk and act in certain ways, or to avoid talking and acting in certain ways, so that others will form desired impressions of us and our current situation" (Sandstrom et. al., 2003:109). Impression management then is selective self-presentation (Collett, 2005).

The concepts of impression management and awareness context complement one another. Regardless of how much individuals know about their identity in the eyes of others, they will inevitably want to increase their chances of receiving positive feedback while minimizing the chances that they will receive negative feedback. "Whenever we interact with others, we emphasize some of our social and personal characteristics while downplaying or concealing others" (Sandstrom et al., 2003:109). Through using various forms of impression management, tattooed individuals attempt to control the impressions that they give off to others through controlling how much of an impact their having a tattoo comes into play throughout the course of interaction.

While my concern with identity inevitably touches upon self-perception, I am more concerned with presenting a clear representation of identity as it relates to interaction. As such, the term I find most useful in discussing identity is one presented from a symbolic interactionist framework. Identity, as Stone discusses, is "situated—that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership in social relations" (Stone, 1962: 367-368 quoted in Vryan et al., 2003). I find this view of identity the most useful as it highlights the situational nature of an identity, one which forms and is given meaning through interacting with others.

Tattoos as Identity Work

The previous discussion brings to light another key concept which I use to help frame my analysis. As was discussed above, impression management is integral in conveying positive images of oneself to others. One way individuals can do this is through engaging in a process called identity work. Identity work was a term first coined by Snow and Anderson while they were researching the homeless population of Austin, TX. Identity work involves identity "construction and assertion" and is "the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow & Anderson, 1987:1348).

Identity work can take place in a variety of activities such as: 1) arrangement of physical settings or props, 2) adjustments to personal appearance, 3) selective association with other individuals or groups, and 4) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities (Snow & Anderson, 1987:1348). Snow and Anderson argue that identity talk (point 4) is the only resource that these homeless individuals have access to in helping them to construct and assert positive images.

Since the initial use and introduction of the term *identity work* by Snow and Anderson in 1987, researchers have broadened the scope of the ways in which individuals engage in and use identity work. While research has used the concept of identity work as it relates to *identity talk,* (Hunt & Benford, 1994; Snow & Machalek 1983; Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994), other researchers have began to focus on how identity is presented by dress, appearance, and other non-verbal means (Hunt & Miller, 1997; Phelan & Hunt, 1998). A more broad and holistic definition of identity work which incorporates both aspects is "an

interactional accomplishment that is socially constructed, interpreted, and communicated via words, deeds, and images" (Hunt & Benford, 1994 quoted in Phelan & Hunt, 1998). This definition of identity work is more applicable to the topic of tattooing as individuals are altering their appearance through getting pictorial images on their bodies.

Individuals engage in identity work while negotiating how they talk about their having a tattoo with others, as well as whether or not to alter their appearance dependent upon situational and audience cues. Through these interactions with others, individuals also engage in self-reflexivity in which they either adhere to or resist definitions of self which are determined by others. Therefore, tattooed individuals use identity work to help them control the impressions that their audience forms of them in an attempt to shape the interaction process they have with others.

METHODS

Research Design

This data was gathered using semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Lofland et. al., 2006). In-depth interviews are beneficial in helping to illuminate individual perceptions through "eliciting each participant's interpretation of his or her experience"(Charmaz, 2006:25). With this strength of interviewing in mind, this research method was best suited to address my research questions. Another strength which is characteristic of this research approach is that it allows the researcher to gather rich detailed information while incorporating flexibility into the research agenda (Charmaz, 2006: Lofland et al., 2006). As such, I developed an open-ended interview schedule to keep the interview process moving along, but followed the lead of my interviewees to allow a natural conversation to occur (Lofland et. al., 2006).

Using purposive sampling, I sought out those who could help shed insight on the topic of tattooing (Newman, 2006). As Newman points out, purposive sampling is useful when "a researcher wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation" (2006:222). The sample that I drew from to gather my data consisted of undergraduate college students attending Iowa State University. My decision to draw from this sample was twofold. First, due to my involvement in the college setting (being a graduate student) I come into contact with a wide variety of inked bodies in a variety of places; the classroom, the food court, or while walking around on campus. These observations lead me to believe that I would have a large pool from which to sample.

Second, while there is an increasingly fluid demographic composition of those currently getting tattooed, research has shown that approximately 36% of individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine currently have a tattoo (Irwin, 2001). It can be assumed that the majority of those who attend college tend to fall between the age ranges of eighteen and twenty-nine, which proved to be the case with college students attending Iowa State University. In the fall of 2007, of the 21,004 registered undergraduate college students, 19,355 (~93%) students fell within the age range of 18-24, while 933 (~4%) students fell within the age range of 24-29 years of age (Iowa State University, Online Enrollment Statistics)[12].

Participant Eligibility

There were two criteria I set in place to help establish those that I would be interested in sampling. Interviewees had to be at least eighteen years of age at the time of the interview as well as have at least one or more tattoos at the time of the interview[13]. I had determined beforehand that I would not turn away any willing participant who met these two criteria, and therefore, do have one non-traditional interviewee who fell outside of the desired age-range. While this individual is dissimilar from the other students in age and life-course circumstances, he tended to share similar tattoo narratives with the rest of the sample and therefore, his data was included as part of the analysis.

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[12] Ninety-seven percent of those enrolled as an undergraduate student at Iowa State University fell between the ages of 18-29 (~93%-18-24 years of age, ~4%-25-29 years of age).

[13] For the sake of avoiding the need for parental consent, all interviewees were at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview.

R*esearch Participants*

The sample was gathered at Iowa State University, which had approximately 26,160 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the fall of 2007 (Iowa State University, On-line Enrollment Statistics). During the semester for which I conducted the interviews (fall 2007), I attended two undergraduate sociology courses in order to recruit interested interviewees. I selected the two classes that I recruited from for a variety of reasons. First, I chose these two classes as they would offer a large pool from which to gather interviewees. The larger 100-level class had 235 students enrolled during the fall semester while the smaller 200 level class had 96 students enrolled during the fall semester giving me a total number of -331 students in my sample. Second, I chose an introductory level as well as an upper-division class to help diversify the sample in both age as well as amount of schooling they had completed. My goal in doing so was to broaden the sample to hopefully incorporate both newly inked students as well as those who had had their tattoos for a number of years.

Before beginning this research project, I went through the formal IRB (institutional review board) procedures laid out by Iowa State University. Upon receiving approval from the IRB committee, I sought out the approval of the faculty members from whose classes I would be sampling. Both gave me full access to their classrooms and approved of the methods I would be using to contact and recruit their students for my study. After receiving permission from the faculty members who taught both of these courses, I attended one of their lectures in an attempt to recruit students who both met the criteria to participate in my study and were interested and willing to be interviewed.

I briefly discussed with the students my research interests (See recruitment script, Appendix 1). After I had described with them my general interests and the types of questions I would be asking them, I placed a visual aid on the overhead so as to allow them to write down my contact information. From there, interested students contacted me to establish a time, date, and location where we would be holding the interview.

Both of the courses incorporated compensation for students' involvement in my research study. One class included it as part of the overall course grade, while the other offered research participation as extra credit. If students did not decide to participate in my study (or were not eligible to) they were given alternate means of attaining compensation toward their overall course grade. Therefore, students where given alternate options beyond participating in my study to either fulfill the course requirements or receive additional credit.

Interview Process

Once the students contacted me via e-mail expressing their interest in being one of my research subjects, we set up a date, time, and location on campus to hold the interview. Having never met any of my interviews, I wanted to ensure that I made the situation the least awkward that I could for them. In order to do this, I attempted to create a warm and welcoming environment. First, I reserved a room on campus in a quiet location where the door could be shut during the interview to ensure confidentiality. Second, I attempted to allow a few minutes of warm-up time at the beginning of the interview process. To help establish rapport with the interviewees I often engaged in a brief conversation in the beginning of the interviews talking about issues such as the weather or how their semester classes were going. I found this helped to establish a certain level of comfort between the

interviewee and me. Also due to my age and involvement in academia (a 25 year old graduate student), I felt I was able to easily relate to students on more of a personal level. Third, I again briefly discussed with them the types of questions they could expect me to be asking, also addressing the fact that they could skip any questions they felt uncomfortable discussing. After this discussion, I administered the Informed Consent document, allowing them time to look it over and ask questions of me they might have. Once they had fully read and understood the terms and conditions of the interview, I obtained their signature and shortly thereafter, began the interview (See informed consent, Appendix 2).

Although there was an established interview schedule, my primary goal was to foster as natural of a conversation style as possible (See interview schedule, Appendix 3). Therefore, the interview schedule was flexible and catered to specific topics that would be discussed if the interviewee had not already addressed them on their own throughout the course of the interview. As mentioned above, my aim in this study was to get at the *process* of tattooing in relation to interaction with others. Therefore, my questions focused on issues such as the decision process they went through in getting their tattoo (such as image and location), the circumstances of revealing or hiding their tattoo dependent upon situational and audience characteristics, as well as the meaning behind their tattoo, both present as well as anticipated meaning of the tattoo(s) in the future.

I conducted twenty-three interviews with interview time ranging anywhere from ten minutes to one hour. The average interview time was approximately half an hour in length. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked for verbal approval to record the interview. I discussed with the interviewees that it was for data analysis purposes and that upon

transcribing their interview, I would be removing all identifying markers such as names and/or locations[14]. After being granted permission from all my interviewees, I tape-recorded the interview and transcribed them at a later date. Also, upon completion of the interview and with the interviewee's approval, I took pictures of their tattoos. I explained that my rationale for doing so was to be to match tattoo images with individuals' tattoo stories. Permission was granted from all interviewees with many individuals willingly and openly displaying their tattoo(s) to me regardless of their gender or the physical location of the tattoo(s) on their body.

Upon completion of the interview, I administered a short questionnaire to students asking demographic characteristics such as age, race, parental income, year in school, as well as current major. Other demographic questions were more catered specifically to tattoos and questions of this nature were how old the individual currently was as well as how old they were when they got their first tattoo. The completion rate of the post-interview questionnaire was 100%, although students neglected to answer all of the questions lending certain variables unusable (such as parental income) (See demographic questionnaire, Appendix 4).

Sample Characteristics

While I had hoped for a fairly representative sample based on race and gender composition, my sample was primarily white and overwhelmingly female (See Table 1).

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[14] All names appearing in the paper are pseudonyms.

Table One: Sample Characteristics by Sex and Race

Variable	Number	Percentage
Sex of Respondent		
Male	6	26.1%
Female	17	73.9%
Race of Respondent		
Caucasian	21	91.3%
Hispanic (Hispanic American)	2	.07%

I am not certain as to why this was the case, but I can speculate as to a few reasons. Regarding race, the university from which I gathered my sample is overwhelmingly White with only 8.49% minority enrolled in the fall 2007 semester (Iowa State University, On-line Enrollment Statistics). Therefore, the race of my sample was fairly comparable to the college's race composition, at least with regards to White versus non-White students. In respect to gender, the proportion of male to female students enrolled at Iowa State University in the fall of 2007 was relatively equal with men slightly outnumbering women [males-14,855; females-11,305] (Iowa State University, On-line Enrollment Statistics). One possible reason as to why I had an overwhelmingly female sample could be because I am female and that males could have felt less comfortable being interviewed by me. According to Lofland et al., "the possibility of "who" the research is, in contrast to "who" the researched are, may throw up barriers to the acquisition of rich data" (2006:23). Many researchers have also discussed how a characteristic of the researcher, such as age, gender, race and/or ethnicity, can impact the research process (Charmaz, 2006).

Another possible explanation as to why my sample was overwhelmingly female could be due to the changing nature of the current tattoo scene. Women are now joining the tattoo culture in startling numbers. In fact, it has been estimated that the number of women who currently get tattoos has quadrupled since the 1970's and that they now acquire half of all tattoos (Armstrong, 1991). Perhaps it is the case that my sample reflects the trend of which is going on within the larger tattooing culture, that women are increasingly joining the practice of having and getting tattoos (Atkinson, 2002).

Although ideally I would have liked to have had a more evenly distributed sample by race and gender characteristics, I used an interest-based approach and therefore interviewed all willing interviewees. About halfway through the interviewing process, I noticed that my sample was overwhelmingly female. I contacted both faculty members from whose classes I was sampling and asked them to announce on my behalf that I was looking for more interested males to take part in my study. While this helped to raise the overall number of men, it did so in only a minimal fashion.

As was briefly mentioned above, certain variables from the demographic questionnaire were incomplete and therefore ended up being of little value to my analysis. However, one other variable beyond sex and race proved to be useful in helping discuss issues relevant to tattooing. This variable was age which I measured by asking both the interviewees' current age as well as the age at which they got their first tattoo. I felt it was important to ask the age at which the individuals got their first tattoo for two reasons. First, I asked this to determine whether or not any discernable patterns between age and tattooing

would emerge. And second, to see what impact if any, age at first tattooing played in the *process* of negotiating and getting the tattoo (such as legal and/or structural barriers).

The average age of the sample was 20.8 years of age while the average age at which people got their first tattoo was 19.1 years of age. The majority of students were at least 18 years of age (the legal age limit in the state of Iowa to get a tattoo) when they got their tattoo while 5 interviewees were under the age of 18 when they got their first tattoo (See Table 2). There are no consistent findings in relation to individuals who got tattoos under the legal age. Three of the five individuals had someone they knew who had a tattoo gun and gave tattoos on the side do their work for them, one had her mother sign a consent form on her behalf and got hers done in a parlor, while the other had a friend give them their tattoo with a safety pin and Indian ink.

Table Two: Sample Characteristics by Age

Variable	Age (Range)
Current Age	
Average age of respondents	20.8 years
Age range of respondents	18-44 years*
Age of First Tattoo	
Average age of first tattoo	19.1 years
Age range of first tattoo	16-38 years*
(Hispanic American)	

*Ages and ranges include one outlier (non-traditional student)

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory is a "qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:24). Through using grounded theory, one is able to see causal connections, interactional relationships, and consequences of actions that may at first glance get glossed over by the naked eye. In using grounded theory, "data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:23). This allows for the researcher to move fluidly throughout the research process. As such, the data gathering and data analysis phases were not distinct but instead occurred in conjunction with one another within an ongoing process. I frequently jumped back and forth between data collection and data analysis, each informing the other as I progressed throughout the research project.

Through using grounded theory, I engaged in a variety of coding mechanisms and extensive memo writing to help make sense of and dissect the nuances of my data (Charmaz, 2006: Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initially I open coded the data followed by axial coding. Open coding is the process of opening up your data to initial categorization and concepts as they emerge whereas axial coding is used to help make connections between categories and subcategories which have been discovered in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Another method frequently used in qualitative research is memo writing (Charmaz, 2006; Lofland et. al., 2006). Memo writing is useful in that it keeps you actively reflecting upon your data and the codes that you are discovering. It was through the process of coding and extensive memo writing that I came to discover the emergent concepts and causal connections of the data.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Tattooed Identity

Identity work involving tattoos is a highly negotiated process which is dependent upon actual and expected interactions within particular contexts. When discussing actual interactions, I am referring to conversations that tattooed individuals had in relation to the process of acquiring and becoming a tattooed individual as well as the process of receiving feedback from individuals regarding choices made in relation to the tattoo. When discussing expected interactions, I am referring to the reflection process that many individuals undertook when anticipating how others they may encounter in their future would react to and perceive their having a tattoo. As the interviews progressed, a key finding emerged in relation to acquiring and becoming a tattooed individual. Many interviewees were very cognizant of the fact that the practice of getting a tattoo is still fairly stigmatizing in certain situational contexts and therefore, getting tattooed may lead to one acquiring a potentially discrediting attribute. Many went to great lengths to engage in tattooing within the confinements of what constitutes acceptable body alteration practices. Therefore, many characteristics of tattooing for the individuals revolved around a variety of factors such as the context, setting, and audience with whom they were interacting. While these will be discussed in more detail later, a few of the key aspects that affected individuals' decisions whether or not to get tattooed, who they would show their tattoos to (and when), as well as how audience perceptions impacted their self-identity were related to what I have deemed the individual's *tattooed identity*. I use the term *tattooed identity* in the sense of it being a situated identity. This is an identity which "allows us to know how (and how not) to act; it

informs our expectations and interpretations of our own and others' behavior" (Vryan et al., 2003:368).

As with other identities, the tattooed identity is one which evolves and takes shape over time. The tattooed identity can be altered depending upon interactional cues being given off and received through the interaction experience. This activity is called identity negotiation. Identity negotiation is the "process through which we locate ourselves and others as social objects in a given situation, thereby establishing how we should act toward one another" (Sandstrom et al., 2003:113). Therefore this identity negotiation process is very integral to one's tattooed identity. It is through interaction that individuals first learn to internalize the motivation for taking on a particular identity (getting the tattoo) as well as how to properly navigate through the social milieu in which they live.

In focusing in on the process of tattooing, it became apparent that individuals managed having a potentially discrediting identity differently at all phases of the tattooing process[15]. I am viewing the process of tattooing as something which develops over time and in relation to interaction. These aspects may include decisions taken into account prior to, during, and after getting the tattoo such as what the tattoo will be, where it will be, and who they choose to expose and/or hide it from. Within each phase, focus will be drawn toward how the interaction process impacted the individual's development, management, and reflection upon having a tattooed identity. As such, I will be discussing the process of tattooing as taking place at three distinct phases: deciding to adopt a tattooed identity, managing a tattooed identity, and anticipating future tattooed identities.

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[15] It should be noted that phases has been used versus stages whereas the later indicates a sequential process. The focus here is not how individuals progress from one stage to another, but instead what the process of tattooing looks like both before and after getting the tattoo in relation to interaction with others.

Deciding to Adopt a Tattooed Identity

For those I interviewed, the decision to get a tattoo was a highly thought out and calculated process. It was not often the case that individuals went out and got their tattoos on a whim, but instead was something which an individual put a significant amount of thought into. Simply committing to getting a tattoo also proved to be a very thought-intensive process for those I interviewed. Many individuals discussed with me not having really thought about wanting to get a tattoo until others close to them started getting tattoos[16]. Therefore, learning the motives for wanting a tattoo, as well as deciding on the specifics of the tattoo such as image and location was dependent upon the interaction process with others. As such, I am referring to the process of becoming a tattooed individual as *deciding to adopt a tattooed identity*.

In deciding to adopt a tattooed identity I am referring to those factors which help account for an individual's reasoning for getting the tattoo that they did. Adopting a tattooed identity therefore includes all the decision processes which occurred prior to the individual actually getting the tattoo. The focus here goes beyond simply deciding whether or not to get a tattoo and includes those factors that impacted individual's decisions regarding the tattoo such as image and location on the body. This process was significant in that it helped to form the context in which the individual became exposed to tattooing as well as how they came to learn and internalize the motivations for wanting to get a tattoo. Through deciding to adopt a tattooed identity, the individual also made decisions such as what the tattoo would be as well as where they would place it on their body. Decisions relating to the image and location of

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[16] This is similar to Sanders finding about how individuals first became exposed to tattooing (Sanders, 1988).

the tattoo were essential as they had the potential to impact impressions given off and received during future interactions.

Tattooed individuals adopted a tattooed identity through: (1) being exposed to tattooing and learning to internalize the motivations behind tattooing, and (2) choosing an image which conveyed their personal or social identities while choosing a location which was considered suitable.

Contextualizing Tattooing

The decision as to whether or not to get a tattoo was highly dependent up a variety of interactional processes with others. For example, the idea of getting a tattoo was something that most interviewees had not thought about until they had either seen those close to them (such as friends and family) getting and having tattoos, or had discussed with those close to them the topic of tattooing. Another key factor which often impacted interviewees' decisions to get a tattoo was that it was something which was both a viable and desirable option around the time that they turned 18 years of age.

Exposure to Tattooing

Although some interviewees could not recollect anyone close to them ever having or talking about tattoos, the majority said that people close to them such as friends and family had tattoos and sparked their interest in getting one. For example, a variety of interviewees had mentioned that siblings or parents had tattoos prior to them getting theirs which made them first think about tattooing for themselves. According to one interviewee,

> I think it [the idea of getting a tattoo] came up, I guess, when my brother
> started getting tattoos. When I was younger that kind of made me want to get

one too just because I look up to him. He is my older brother so that was a big part of it too for me getting one (Male, 21).

Later, this individual discussed how his mother also had tattoos. According to the interviewee, growing up seeing his mother and brother having tattoos impacted his decision in that it helped him "strive toward getting one too" (Male, 21) [17].

Another interviewee discussed how many of her brothers had tattoos and that this may have had some impact on her decision to get one. As she mentions,

Yeah, I have brothers I think they all have tattoos; they are all quite a bit older though. I'm sure it had some sort of factor. I mean you see them around all the time and they all have tattoos and then they'll get a new one and show it off. And I'm sure it had some sort of an effect (Female, 20).

While seeing her siblings having tattoos did not play as significant of a role as it did for the previous interviewees, nonetheless she admits it may have impacted her decision to get one.

Interviewees also discussed how their family members having tattoos helped to influence their decisions to get a tattoo through making them feel as though tattooing was legitimate. For example, a male interviewee discussed how he was under the assumption that his mother having a tattoo was an indication that he could also get one without being reprimanded for doing so. He addressed the issue by stating, "She had hers first. She couldn't put the wrath down my throat for getting one because she had one first" (Male, 20). Another interviewee discussed how her mother had tattoos and that this indicated to her that she would be accepting of her getting a tattoo as well. As she discussed this point she mentioned, "Yes, my mom has some tattoos…I have always wanted one, but once my mom kind of started getting some, then I was like, okay, she'll let me get one" (Female, 18). The

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[17] The number denotes the interviewees' age at the time the interview was conducted.

assumption was that her decision to get one would not be faced with much resistance because her mother already had tattoos as well.

Although a significant number of interviewees made mention of the impact that family members had on their decision to get a tattoo, an overwhelming majority of interviewees said that they were exposed to tattooing through friends and peers. It was often through talking about tattooing or witnessing friends getting tattoos that individuals first became interested in getting one themselves. Through this socialization process, friends helped to define for the individuals the motivation behind wanting to get a tattoo, which in turn, impacted their decision to get one.

For many individuals, tattooing was viewed as a way to be accepted as part of a group. The desire to feel a part of a group culture is perhaps the most prevalent during adolescence and young adulthood. At this time, the views and opinions of our peers are held in high regards as youth often want to fit in with their peers. During this time, individuals learn what behaviors are appropriate and accepted by their peers as well as those behaviors that are not. One of the main ways in which peers reassure one another is through the concept of "coolness." To be cool is to convey a certain desirable persona, one which will gain respect from peers. Repeatedly, interviewees discussed how tattooing was linked to coolness among their peer culture. According to one interviewee, "I thought about it for a while during high school, like when everyone wants one because they thought it was cool. That is what I thought" (Female, 20). In this case, the interviewee parallels the opinions of her peers; that having a tattoo is cool and something that she should want to get also.

Aside from wanting to be considered cool, individuals also mentioned the fact that they found their peers tattoos cool looking and that they wanted the image that they got to be cool looking as well. According to one interviewee,

> My friend Jessica, she had several when we first met and so I always thought the ones that she had were really cool looking and I just wanted something similar I guess to what she had (Female, 28).

Associating tattooing with something which was cool helped to present tattooing in a positive light to these interviewees. Another said,

> I thought theirs were pretty cool, theirs were a little bigger than mine and I guess one of my cousins had one on her back. I thought the idea was cool (Female, 18).

Whether it was cool because of how it looked, or cool because it was just something that everyone was doing, individuals learned to internalize this type of rationale when it came to tattooing.

The decision of whether or not to get a tattoo was one which was highly dependent upon interaction with others. Individuals were not only exposed to tattooing through friends and family, but also learned to associate tattooing with a positive attribute that they wanted to possess. These two elements often overlapped for interviewees, as the following quote illustrates,

> I thought about how it was going to be cool afterwards because I wasn't old enough but I was still in high school and there were only two or three other people in my school that had tattoos. I know when I was younger I thought 'Oh tattoos are cool' then I went through the phase of 'Oh my gosh, I'm so scared of needles I could never get a tattoo, but what if I could?', you know, and then my brother got them and I was like 'Oh those are cool' (Female, 19).

Tattooing as a Rite of Passage

Along the same lines as seeing their friends getting tattoos and associating it with coolness, a significant number of those interviewed got their tattoo on or near their 18th birthday because it seemed like "it was just the thing to do" when they turned 18 years of age (Female, 18). According to one interviewee,

> It was kind of a short-lived thing in high school, like I'm turning 18 before I leave high school so everyone is like 'Oh you're getting a tattoo, WOW' so, the age thing kind of helped out too (Female, 20).

As another interviewee recounts,

> I was really young for my class and so all my friends had been talking about getting them and had been able to get them for like up to almost a year before I could so, I wanted to get mine right away [when turning 18] because everyone had been getting them (Female, 18).

These quotes help to illustrate that these individuals wanted to fit in among their peers and that getting a tattoo was something normal among their peer culture. Although it was not explicitly stated, it can be implied that many interviewees felt the desire to get a tattoo because it was something that all of their friends were doing as well.

Not only was getting a tattoo on or near an 18th birthday considered normal, it was viewed as something exciting that an individual could now legally do. According to a female interviewee,

> When you turn 18 it's kind of like, it seems like the thing to do nowadays is that everyone goes and gets a tattoo because that is about the most exciting thing you can do when you turn 18 and I don't smoke, so buying cigarettes is out of the question (Female, 18).

For this interviewee, tattooing is equated with excitement and something that is a rather common practice for individuals to take part in when they turn 18 years of age. This

interviewee also said that "around peoples' birthdays you would notice a lot more people getting tattoos" and coming to school displaying them (Female, 18).

Beyond wanting to fit in with one's peers, interviewees expressed that the only reason why they got a tattoo was because they could. "I think the main reason I got it was because it was one of those things that you know you can do now because you are 18 so it was like, yeah" (Female, 20). One male interviewee said he started seriously thinking about getting a tattoo "probably just right around the age of 18 because you have a lot more freedom and that is when you can actually get them in our country" (Male, 21)[18].

Combining all of these elements, tattooing around the age of 18 is not only normative, but is viewed as a rite of passage. According to one interviewee,

> [I only] started seriously thinking about getting a tattoo as a senior in high school when a couple of my friends started getting tattoos. You know and then you turn 18 and it is the big thing, like everyone goes to get tattoos as a rite of passage (Female, 20).

This rite of passage included not only the desire to get tattoos because others around them were getting tattoos, but also the desire to symbolize the next stage in one's life. For the majority of those I interviewed, the next stage of life encompassed leaving home and going away to college.

Contextualizing tattooing is a learned process that is dependent upon interaction with others. Although for a few interviewees getting a tattoo was something that they had thought of on their own, the majority mentioned that they first started thinking about tattooing because they were exposed to it through friends and family. In addition, many mentioned not

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[18] My findings are similar to Irwin's findings regarding freedom; a topic that individuals discussed as one that motivated them to get a tattoo.

actively thinking about tattooing until their family and friends first sparked their interest in getting a tattoo. These exposures often lead to an individual coming to believe that getting a tattoo was acceptable as well as desirable.

Specifics of the Tattoo

Once someone internalized the motivation for wanting to get a tattoo, they then went through the process of deciding specifics of the tattoo: the image and body location. Although there are many other choices which can be made in relation to tattooing, that of image and location were the two most prevalently discussed decisions. Because a tattoo can say so much about a person, individuals often put a great deal of thought into these decisions. Individuals often decided what specific image they would be getting because it symbolized either personal or social identities that that they identified with and wanted to express to others. Decisions as to where they would get the tattoo on their body were made in relation to actual and expected interactions they foresaw themselves having down the road. These decisions are not mutually exclusive and often a certain amount of overlap resulted between decisions regarding the actual image, and decisions regarding the actual location. However, the information gathered from this sample illustrates that individuals made a choice of the image primarily in relation to their personal and social identities while decisions of actual location on the body were primarily made in relation to actual and expected interaction with others.

Personal and Social Identities

Individuals chose the image that they did because it symbolically represented characteristics about themselves for others to see. For many individuals, the images that they chose to get tattooed represent attributes which were associated with their personal or social identity. Personal identities include aspects that define us as unique such as our name and biographical information. Social identities consist of our identifications with social arrangements which categorize individuals (Vryan et al., 2003). It should be noted that a tattoo could represent both a personal and social identity; therefore these categories are not mutually exclusive. For the sake of clarity though, they have been discussed separately here. Individuals often picked the particular image that they did because the tattoo was meaningful to them and therefore, conveyed a certain message about themselves or their association to others. One female interviewee summarized these points when she said,

> I know it is like something that I think is showing yourself on your outside…but this is a way to wear my identity sort of on the outside of my body so if I want people to see it, they can kind of see who I am (Female, 18).

Another interviewee presented a similar view when he discussed how tattoos are a good way to express something about oneself to others. He stated,

> I think a tattoo can portray your personality. I think when you look at someone's tattoo it gives you some kind of indication about that person assuming that they have taken the time to think about it (Male, 20).

In a sense then, the image that individuals choose provides a "visual representational text" of who they are and how they identify themselves (Fenske, 2007). What follows is a discussion of some of the personal and social identities which impacted the images that the individuals decided to have tattooed on their bodies.

Personal Identity

Images which were chosen to illustrate individuals' personal identities often depicted characteristics that those choosing the tattoo(s) felt strongly connected to. These characteristics were things they associated with on a personal level and; therefore, could convey meaning to themselves as well as to others. For example, a variety of interviewees chose to get tattoos which represented their astrological sign. Many discussed that the main reason that they decided on their astrological sign as their tattoo was because their sign helped to explain to others what type of person they thought of themselves as. According to one interviewee, she "didn't just get it to get it. It means because I'm a Pisces and if you read a typical Pisces person that's like me, emotional and all that" (Female, 18). She later said that she is a very emotional person who often wears her emotions on her sleeve, and that this tattoo helps to represent that. This interviewee had clearly thought out what her image would convey prior to getting the tattoo and deliberately chose the tattoo that she did to express certain personal attributes of herself to others.

Similarly, another interviewee decided to get her astrological sign because it was something that she really liked, as well as something which closely resembled her personality. The following dialogue illustrates why she chose the image of the tattoo that she did,

Respondent:
> I had been thinking about what kind of tattoo that I wanted and I really am into astrology so I knew that I wanted something to do with my zodiac sign. I am kind of superstitious and I am a Capricorn and I am proud of it and anything I have ever read about a Capricorn has stuck to me and my personality and my life. So I thought it was very representative of me (Female, 18).

Interviewer:
> You mentioned it represents you, so what are some characteristics of a
> Capricorn?

Respondent:
> Um, very independent very strong willed, open minded yet caring, kind of
> opinionated but not disrespectful. I think that pretty much sums it up (Female, 18).

Interviewer:
> So do you think those are characteristics that

Respondent:
> Yeah, and this is going to sound really goofy but I look at tarot cards and that kind of
> thing and it all coincides together and I really like it (Female, 18).

For this interviewee, being a Capricorn is associated with being a certain type of person.

Upon probing as to whether or not she felt that these characteristics accurately depicted her,

she responded that she felt they did and that she liked the fact that they did. For the previous

interviewees, their astrological sign was what led them to pick the image that they did.

Characteristics associated with their respective signs represented attributes about their

personal identities for others to see.

A similar personal identity which motivated an individual to get a certain image for a

tattoo were those that conveyed something inspirational for the individual getting the tattoo.

In a sense, inspirational tattoos indicated to the wearer as well as the audience what type of

person the tattoo wearer aspired to be. As one male interviewee reflected upon tattoos of this

type he said, "I think [they] are a way to validate some thoughts, things that are important to

some people who think it is nice to have a tangible form of different inspirational words,

quotes, and things like that" (Male, 20). A characteristic that usually differentiated

inspirational tattoos from other types is that the meaning behind these tattoos was not easy to

determine at first glance and would therefore, generally require further explanation by the

tattoo wearer. Inspirational tattoos were often written in a different language or were symbols

which represented some type of deeper meaning. Therefore, tattoos of this nature were often

more obscure than a straight-forward and easy to interpret tattoo such as English words or

recognizable symbols such as the cross or an American flag.

Most inspirational tattoos were on women. For example, many women had

inspirational sayings in different languages tattooed on their body. For one female

interviewee, all three of her tattoos that she had at the time of the interview were associated

with inspirational sayings. For example, one tattoo that she has is a Celtic heart which

translated means, *remember the past but live for the future*, another is the saying *dance like

no one is watching* in French, and the last is the Hebrew symbol for *believe.* She described

the meaning of the dancing tattoo:

> I've danced since I was little so dancing is something that has always been in
> my life and I hope always will be a part of my life. And also it kind of means
> to me like do things for yourself and not for other people like always do your
> best for yourself and not just because of what someone else may think about
> it, that kind of thing (Female, 18).

This individual's tattoos not only symbolized something about her personal identity to others,

it also conveyed a deeper meaning about the type of person she aspires to be.

Another interviewee had two inspirational tattoos at the time of the interview, both of

which had a deeper meaning for her. The tattoos that she had were a picture of Kokopelli (a

Native American deity) and a Buddhist symbol called Om. When I asked her what Om

meant she replied,

> It stands for diligence, wisdom, generosity, and bliss. And then basically what
> it is is when you think of it you are supposed to think of it purifying. So like
> generosity, it's purifying you being greedy and those are things that I work
> toward being, like this better person (Female, 19).

The individuals discussed above chose the particular image that they did because it helped to represent attributes of themselves to others as well as served as a reminder of the type of person that they hoped to become.

Social Identity

While the image that an individual gets tattooed can help to convey certain attributes about their personal identity, it can also convey and signify attributes about their social identity. These social identities were symbolic of a relationship or an experience that the individual shared with another person or group of people. Of those that I interviewed, it is estimated that nearly half had at least one or more tattoos that represented a social identity (such as a friend, family member, or a member of a group).

Tattoos based on one's social identity often displayed a relationship to others or membership in a particular group. The tattoo choice was made in relation to one's social identity. The image then stood as a symbolic representation of one's social identity. While there were a variety of different motivating social identities impacting the tattoo image that the interviewees chose, the often repeated ones were that of a friend, a family member, and being a member of a particular group. The three main group memberships discussed with me (by separate interviewees) were that of being in the military, being part of a biker club, and adhering to a particular religion. An example of a membership marker which will be discussed is that of being in the military.

One of the main social identities was friendship. The friend tattoo was shared in that two friends would get the same image tattooed on their bodies perhaps slightly altering the location of where they got it or the color pattern of the tattoo. Therefore, the tattoo stood as a

visual and symbolic representation of a friendship. In this case, it was only females who shared friendship tattoos.

Many females talked about getting the tattoo with someone who had been a friend of theirs for a long time. The length of the friendship gave the tattoo a legitimacy that a shorter friendship wouldn't. Take for example the following response. This female discusses how she and her friend share the same tattoo. She describes the tattoo as,

> A Chinese symbol for friendship and my best friend has it also on her ankle. The one on my foot, people see that one more often because I wear flip-flops. Like I said before, that means friendship and I have it with my best friend who was my very first best friend and the friend that has always been there for me. I've had other friends that are girls but they kind of came and went but she's the one that's always been there (Female, 19).

At numerous other points throughout the interview, she discussed stories and experiences that she has shared with this particular friend and said she thought that they will be friends for a very long time to come.

Another female, through the course of discussing her tattoo, highlighted the long-standing relationship that she shares with her friend. According to the interviewee, the relationship is so strong that it has survived a variety of ups and downs over the years. The tattoo then, stands as a symbolic representation of their friendship. As she describes their situation,

> We've been friends for a while and then we let people and things get in the way of our friendship and then [we] came back around to being friends again. And I don't know, with the tribal sun it is a circle so it is kind of a circle of our friendship kind of thing. And so we wanted something that symbolizes the two of us. I mean we have a lot of differences but we have a lot of similarities too (Female, 28).

Another typical type of tattoo that individuals described as representing their social identity was a last name tattoo, which represented one's membership in a family. Many people who had a last name tattoo said that regardless of what changes life had in store for them, their family name would always stay constant. In this case, it was only males who tattooed their last names on their body. Regarding the decision to have his last name tattooed on his body, one male said,

> It is my last name and obviously it is my first tattoo and you can't go wrong with getting your last name because it will stick with you for the rest of your life (Male, 21).

For this interviewee, a certain sense of assurance and comfort came along with choosing his last name. Later during the interview, he said that "obviously with your first tattoo you are going to be worried that something bad might happen", but by choosing his last name, he felt that he would never regret it down the road (Male, 21).

Another male interviewee who has his last name tattooed on his back said that his last name is something that he is proud of. He said that, "it is my last name and I'm proud of it, proud of who I am" (Male, 21). His pride stemmed from the close relationship that he had with his family, which he illustrated through discussing the close relationship he shared with his siblings and parents.

A last example in which the family identity impacted an individual getting the particular image was a tattoo which a woman got in honor of her father who had died from cancer. The tattoo was a pair of Chinese symbols that stood for "father" and "daughter" with the years of his life and death placed below the images. She described how she decided on this image,

> I wanted something that meant something and I couldn't think of anything that was really symbolic to my dad. I looked really hard and tried to find something and so I just got something that meant father and daughter (Female, 18).

This interviewee said that she had contemplated getting a boat tattooed on her foot because her family had a cabin on a lake growing up and her father loved being on the water. The image of a boat that she thought about getting was the same image that was engraved on his headstone; however, she decided to go with the more straight-forward tattoo of a symbol for father and daughter.

The social identity of being part of a family impacted the images that individuals decided to have tattooed. Many males decided to get their last names tattooed on their body because it proved to be a safe choice that showed their pride in their family name and heritage. The recently discussed female chose an image that represented her relationship to her father as well as something which would commemorate and honor his life.

The last social identity that will be discussed is group membership. Individuals discussed being members of religious groups, a biker group, and the National Guard. The last example will be briefly discussed to illustrate how one's group membership can impact a tattoo image. This interviewee had a tattoo on his left pectoral muscle that represented his company. He described that "It is a tattoo that everyone in my company was getting. It [is] a brother in arms tattoo" (Male, 21). When describing the meaning behind the tattoo he said that,

> Because we put our heart into it, going overseas you put blood, sweat and tears [in] going over there. So it is kind of imbedded in your heart, that or it took heart to go over there because not many people can do the job that you are doing (Male, 21).

In describing the meaning behind the tattoo, the interviewee said that it is tattooed over the heart and that "the placement would have meaning too" (Male, 21).

As this section illustrates, deciding what image an individual was going to get tattooed was determined through wanting to highlight an individual's personal or social identity. It was through these identities that individuals chose the images that they did, such as images that conveyed certain attributes about one's personal identity or their relationship to others through a social identity. Examples discussed here were that of astrological and inspirational tattoos, as well as friendship, family, and membership marker tattoos.

Actual and Expected Interaction

While the decision of what image they were going to get proved to be an important one for those I interviewed, the choice of location proved to be a more negotiated and thought out decision. One key factor that helped individuals to decide where they would get the tattoo on their body as well as how big or small it would be was determined through actual interaction with others (discussion with friends and family) combined with expected interactions they foresaw themselves having down the road (with potential employers and family). Another main process that impacted individuals' decision as to where on their body they would get the tattoo was witnessing other individual's location choices and being able to determine that that was something that they either liked or disliked.

Overall, individuals looked for input from others more when deciding tattoo location than when deciding tattoo image. The decision of what the image would be was often reached through personal introspection, but the choice of location was more dependent upon and constructed through interaction processes. A number of interviewees discussed how they

received feedback from friends and family when it came to where they should get the tattoo on their body. This feedback often entailed parents or friends cautioning the prospective tattooer from getting their tattoo in a location that could hinder their future career goals. For example, one interviewee discussed how she had thought about getting her tattoo in a few different places, but after discussing through the options with her mother that she decided to get her tattoo on her shoulder blade.

> I was thinking about at first getting it on my ankle and I had talked to my mom about it, and I kind of just decided to put it on my shoulder because you know, if I end up going more business type then it would be easier to cover up. I wouldn't have to wear pants all the time. I can still wear short sleeve stuff and cover it. So I decided to get it there because of you know, the people that I might end up being around for a job (Female, 18).

For this interviewee, incorporating her mother's input as well as taking into account interactions she may have in the future helped her to reach the decision of where on her body she would get the tattoo.

The majority of individuals recounted similar stories of receiving input from relatives cautioning against them getting tattoos in visible places that may in some way impact their future goals. While a majority of interviewees discussed receiving their mother's input, the following interviewee discussed with me the conversation she had with her stepfather. In telling me of their interaction about tattoos she said, "I'm a theatre student here so I'm an aspiring actress, so he thinks the more I put on me the less I am likely to maybe get a job somewhere considering I have them" (Female, 19).

While actual interaction with family members helped to shape some individuals' decisions as to where they would get their tattoo, expected interactions played a much more significant role. Nearly every interviewee mentioned having chosen the location they did

because they wanted it in a place that would not hinder their future career goals. Repeatedly

the interviewees said that they chose the tattoo location because it could easily get covered

up if it needed to be. According to one interviewee,

> I wanted it somewhere where if I wanted people to see it they could. Or if I didn't want people to see it I could cover it up because I don't know, like there is the whole thing about being professional (Female, 18).

Many interviewees shared this perspective when it came to future expected interactions.

Another interviewee accurately summarized how the majority of interviewees viewed

tattooing and potential careers when she stated, "I had to think about locations because I do

want, you know, a respectable career" (Female, 20). While not many interviewees know

what type of career they wanted to have after finishing college, the majority seemed to share

the opinion that having tattoos in too visible places could possibly hinder them from getting a

good job someday.

> I put it on my shoulder blade because I didn't want it on my arms yet, until I know exactly what I'm going to do like as a career because jobs are kind of funny about that sort of thing and if I wanted to wear short sleeves I might want to take that into consideration. I was going to get it on my wrist and decided the same thing about the job thing and then I just figured on my shoulder blade (Female, 18).

Overwhelmingly, individuals chose their tattoo locations in spots that stayed relatively

hidden under clothing. Except for one interviewee who was heavily tattooed on his arms and

working toward getting full sleeve tattoos, interviewees had their tattoos in relatively

inconspicuous locations (See Table 3).

Table Three: Tattoo Location by Sex

Variable	# of Tattoos	Location*
Sex of Respondent		
Male		
Male 01	9	Forearms, triceps, chest
Male 02	2	Upper back, chest
Male 03	1	Ribcage
Male 04	1	Shoulder blade
Male 05	1	Upper back
Male 06	1	Upper back
Female		
Female 01	1	Shoulder blade
Female 02	2	Hip, Foot
Female 03	2	Lower back, hip
Female 04	1	Outside shin
Female 05	3	Buttocks, hip, lower back
Female 06	3	Hand, Lower back, Hips
Female 07	2	Lower back, shoulder blade
Female 08	1	Foot
Female 09	1	Shoulder blade
Female 10	1	Behind ear
Female 11	1	Hip
Female 12	1	Inside ankle
Female 13	1	Inside ankle
Female 14	1	Lower back
Female 15	1	Hip
Female 16	2	Side of stomach, hip
Female 17	1	Foot

*These are listed in the order that the individuals got the tattoos

This leads to the next factor which impacted how individuals chose the location that they did to get the tattoo. Beyond receiving input from family and taking into account potential interactions they may have down the road, interviewees also decided on their tattoo location through witnessing where other people had tattoos. By being able to view where

other people had their tattoos, the interviewees were able to decide whether they liked or

disliked the location that other people had their tattoos, and therefore used this information to

help them make decisions as to where they would get theirs.

One of the key findings which came about while discussing how individuals chose

the location that they did for their tattoo was that they wanted it to be in a "unique" spot on

their body. Many individuals discussed how they didn't want the typical tattoo, especially

with regards to their gender. Take for example the following quote,

> I always wanted it to be relatively small and I kind of wanted it on a different place than everyone else had it. I didn't want it on my back because all girls have *tramp stamps*[19] (voice louder) so called and I didn't want to put it on my ankle or my legs because I didn't like how that looked. I didn't want it on my back and I thought about putting it on the back of my neck but I started thinking about later in life like if I have shorter hair and I'm older how is that going to look (Female, 18)?

This particular interviewee thought through a variety of locations before finally committing

to a location.

> That was my big thing; I didn't want to be like everyone else. I didn't want to be like the girl that got the tattoo on her back or the girl that got a heart on her hip, I wanted something that was special [and] that just stood out (Female, 18).

Hers ended up being unusual in that it was located behind her ear. Although I've seen this

location on other women, she was the only interviewee to have a tattoo in that location.

Other interviewees shared a similar sentiment about wanting to get a tattoo in a

"unique" or different location. One male interviewee decided to get a tattoo on his ribcage

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[19] A *tramp stamp* is a tattoo located on one's lower back. It was described to me as often being something that a female would have and that the connotation of the name coincides with the types of tattoos that women would get there as being colorful and attention grabbing. There was an alternate meaning attached to the term, that of one which was sexual in nature. An alternate and comparable slang for a tramp stamp was a *bull's eye*.

extending from his hip bone to right below his armpit because he had not seen many individuals who had a tattoo in that location before.

> I don't even know why I got it there. A lot of people look at peoples' tattoos and they want to get something different so I never saw anybody with a tattoo on their side like that and usually people get something on their back like that, at least guys do (Male, 21).

For many individuals, seeing where others had their tattoo helped them to determine where they wanted to get theirs. Often, it was the idea of getting a tattoo in a unique or different location which motivated them to commit to the location that they did. As was the case with the two individuals discussed above, they didn't want their tattoos to be in the typical location that many other individuals have their tattoos, especially with regard to gendered tattoos.

The process of adopting a tattooed identity is one which is highly contingent upon interacting with others. Through deciding to adopt a tattooed identity an individual not only becomes exposed to tattooing (which furthers their decision to get a tattoo) but also learns that getting a tattoo is desirable. Through taking into account their pre-existing personal and social identities combined with the feedback that they gather from family and peers regarding what image to get and where on their body, an individual makes the decision to get the tattoo. This process is further determined through actual and expected interactions the individual anticipates having in the future such as interactions with family members or potential employers. Combining all of these elements allows us to focus in on how an individual chooses to adopt as well as develops a tattooed identity in relation to the interaction processes with others.

Managing a Tattooed Identity

While interaction was a significant component of individuals developing a tattooed identity, interaction was nowhere more apparent than through the managing of a tattooed identity. As was illustrated through the process of deciding to adopt a tattooed identity, tattooing is something that was highly negotiated for those I interviewed. The choices they made relating to the tattoo further exemplified how getting a tattoo can situate a person as possessing a potentially discrediting attribute. In order to minimize negative consequences that may arise from their deciding to become tattooed, individuals engaged in a variety of mechanisms that allowed them to control the interaction experience to ensure that it was a positive one. Through *managing a tattooed identity*, individuals were able to alter aspects of an interaction with others to ensure that it was as favorable of an interaction as possible.

Tattooed individuals used three types of identity work to manage their tattooed identity: (1) deciding to hide or expose their tattoo, (2) story telling about their tattoo, and (3) responding to audience reactions.

With the ability to predict how certain audiences may react to their getting a tattoo, those I interviewed were able to influence the interaction experience though altering the visibility of their tattoo as well as how they talked about their tattoo with others. This process of talking about one's tattoo (the meaning and the story behind getting the tattoo) is comparable to Snow and Anderson's concept of *identity talk* (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Many students I interviewed mentioned how tattooing was viewed as unacceptable (or less acceptable) in certain contexts and around certain audiences. While they were often able to control the visibility of the tattoo and how they talked about it with others, they could not

control how the audience would react. Through managing a tattooed identity, an individual

engages in a variety of mechanisms in an attempt to influence how the audience perceives

them.

Visibility of the Tattoo

Aware that a tattoo can be potentially discrediting, individuals went to great lengths

to manage who saw their tattoos. While the majority of those interviewed had their tattoos in

locations which were easily concealable they still decided whether or not they would expose

or hide their tattoo based on certain interactional situations. The choice of one or the other is

dependent upon their audience and its anticipated reaction. Predicting how audiences may

react allowed for individuals to control the interaction process as much as possible.

Expose Tattoo

It was the case that the majority of those I interviewed had their tattoos in locations

which could easily be hidden under clothing or their hair[20]. Therefore individuals often had

to go out of their way to expose their tattoo to others. There are certain social contexts in

which exposing a tattoo is viewed as normal as well as desired. This was often the case when

a tattooed individual had either gotten fresh ink, was in the company of other tattooed

individuals or close friends, or was in a cultural setting in which tattoos are frequently visible

and viewed as normative.

After getting the tattoo, individuals wanted to go show it off to people to see how

they would react. As one interviewee who had a relatively new tattoo discussed the issue,

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[20] This was not the case however for one female interviewee who had a tattoo on the top of her hand between her thumb and pointer finger. She discussed that no jewelry she wears will cover it and that the only way to fully cover it is to put on a large bandage.

"Well lately I have to show my new one off to all of my friends of course. Everyone, you get a new tattoo you have to show it off" (Female, 20). Other interviewees shared this viewpoint as many discussed that when they got a new tattoo that they felt the need to show it off to people close to them. Another interviewee discussed wanting to show her tattoo off initially but that it was something which passed with time. According to her,

> I mean I probably did at first when I first got it because I wanted people to be like 'Oh hey, cool tattoo' almost as reassurance or something. But not so much anymore, I kind of forget I have it sometimes (Female, 19).

Interviewees felt most comfortable exposing their tattoos around close friends or other individuals who had tattoos. Many shared the sentiment that they liked to show their tattoos to other people who also had tattoos because they would be more understanding. One interviewee referred to it as a "tattoo bond", mentioning the fact that individuals often liked to share their tattoo stories with other individuals who also had tattoos (Female, 19). A different interviewee liked to expose her tattoos around younger individuals who also had tattoos because, "A lot of times with other people who have them, it is easier" to show them because they tend to react positively (Female, 18). Many individuals discussed how their having a tattoo was a good conversation starter and a way to get people to notice them. The following dialogue illustrates how some individuals went out of their way to expose their tattoos around other tattooed individuals almost as a way to "get props" or to "earn respect" from their peer culture for having a tattoo. The following interviewee said that she felt like exposing her tattoo.

Respondent:
> When I go out I guess it really just depends on my mood and if I'm like 'Hey lets have fun' or I feel like being kind of more out there than I normally am like I'll do something to show it off so that people ask me questions about it.

I've noticed that when people ask me about it that it makes me feel better, like it makes me feel good about myself. It is a good conversation starter too. And I guess I like seeing other people's tattoos and asking them 'Oh, what does that mean to you, when did you get that or why did you get that?' and then they ask the same questions back. It seems like their reactions are like, 'That is really interesting and I've never seen that before' (Female, 18)!

Interviewer:

Especially from other people that have tattoos?

Respondent:

Yeah, it kind of is a compliment from them, something that my family probably wouldn't give me because they probably wouldn't think about it like that (Female, 18).

Although individuals had different motivations for exposing their tattoo, they often converged on the fact that there were certain settings in which exposing their tattoo was viewed as more acceptable. For example, many interviewees said that they liked to expose their tattoos in bar or club settings, where having and displaying tattoos was normal. One interviewee discussed how when she went out dancing that she tried to show it off because tattoos were more prevalent and acceptable in that type of setting. She likes to show it off, "when [she goes] out dancing…that is more acceptable in that type of a culture" (Female, 18). Others interviewed shared a similar view regarding the cultural appropriateness of tattoos. One interviewee liked to expose her tattoo at the bar to get attention, primarily from the opposite sex.

Well a lot of times when I go out and, like, if I wear a little tight pair of jeans you can see the top of it, it gets more attention I think when I go out…it kind of is a way to get attention I guess by leaving it out (Female, 19).

This interviewee also said that her tattoo is only half visible under her pant line and that when she has people ask to see the rest of it that she doesn't mind showing them because she "is pretty outgoing and [doesn't mind] flirting with people" (Female, 19). She liked the attention that she received from people, especially men, because of her tattoo.

Overall, individuals felt the most comfortable exposing their tattoo to those who shared a similar background as they did and were less likely to be opposed to tattooing because they often had a tattoo as well. One of the main reasons that individuals felt the desire to expose their tattoo was to gain attention from other individuals who also had tattoos. One interviewee claimed that individuals who have tattoos share a type of "tattoo bond" in which it is customary to share one's tattoo story with another tattooed individual. Individuals also felt compelled to expose their tattoos in certain subcultures where it is acceptable and viewed as normative such as at a bar or a club type setting. This often also involved wanting to expose one's tattoo to receive positive feedback.

Hide Tattoo

While individuals liked to expose their tattoos around others who shared similar viewpoints as they did, they often found themselves feeling the need to hide their tattoos around individuals who disliked the practice of tattooing (or who were perceived to). Individuals discussed feeling the need to hide their tattoos around disapproving family members and older individuals. They also foresaw that in the future they may need to attempt to hide their tattoos when they come into contact with potential employers down the road. As one male interviewee discussed it,

> I don't care if my friends see it. I don't care if random people see it. I would just prefer if an employer or a parent wouldn't see it. But other than that I could give a, I could care less about what everybody else thinks (Male, 19).

This quote illustrates how a majority of those interviewed discussed their view; they were generally only concerned about hiding their tattoo(s) around audiences that they thought would disapprove of their having a tattoo.

For some interviewees, they felt the need to hide their tattoo around both their parents as well as their grandparents because they felt that they would disapprove of their decision to get a tattoo. Many individuals had not had a conversation with their family regarding tattooing and just simply thought that their family would not accept their decision to get a tattoo. A male interviewee said that he never talked about getting a tattoo ahead of time with either his parents or grandparents but just assumed that they would not approve because they are more "religious" and "conservative" (Male, 20).

Another male decided not to reveal his tattoo to his parents or tell them about it because he knew they wouldn't approve.

Respondent:
> They don't know about it first of all, neither my mom nor my dad so they don't need to know because I don't think they would be too happy (Male, 20).

Interviewer:
> What makes you think that they wouldn't be too happy?

Respondent:
> Because my mom always used to tell me 'Don't get a tattoo when you are older' and I think she is more worried about the total arm paintings and things like that, but I don't know I'll just tell her when she is in a good mood sometime. And my dad would probably be upset but he wouldn't say anything about it. I don't know it is just like why bother them with it if they don't need to know. If it gets infected or something then I will talk to them about it, but otherwise they don't need to know (Male, 20).

The previous quotes help to illustrate how many tattooed individuals felt about tattooing in relation to their parents. Knowing how their parents felt about tattoos (either through their parents vocalizing it or the students simply assuming they would not approve) impacted their decision to hide their tattoo. It should be noted that some interviewees' parents were either neutral or supportive of their children getting a tattoo. Parents with this type of reaction were

the minority and often reacted in such a way because they usually had tattoos themselves as well.

Many other individuals shared a similar opinion about feeling the need to hide their tattoos from their family members, especially grandparents. One interviewee went into great detail about how she feels the need to hide her tattoos around her grandparents: "Well, they are very religious and very strong in their religious views and they viewed that as something bad or taboo so I wanted it to be as hidden as possible" (Female, 28). This particular interviewee was very concerned with what her grandparents thought about her. She mentioned that she only feels the need to hide her tattoos,

> From my grandparents and the stigma that they had given me because I'd let them down previously for other things. And I just, I didn't want them to see me as rebelling again (Female, 28).

This interviewee had perhaps more of a history or track record with her grandparents than most interviewees had, but the story is similar to others in that she assumed they would look down on her if they found out about her tattoo.

Individuals also discussed how their grandparents were simply from a different generation and just didn't get it. "They kind of did the whole 'why would you do that? That is gross, that is permanent, you can get sick from needles and all that stuff'" (Female,18). It appears that this interviewee's grandparents still held on to the antiquated views that getting a tattoo can result in diseases.

The previous quotes help to illustrate how individuals often attempted to actively conceal their tattoos around family members or at the bare minimum, not discuss it with them. Along with not wanting to expose one's tattoos around family members, many

individuals said that they attempted to hide their tattoos around individuals who were from a different generation. According to one female student, "it seems like the younger people are like 'oh, that is cool' and the older people are kind of like 'Why would you do that to your body it is permanent?'" (Female, 18) Another interviewee said that "all the young people like it; it is just a majority of the older people that don't like tattoos" (Female, 19). Those who discussed feeling the need to hide their tattoos around older individuals did so because they associated an older generation with more conservative views.

Some interviewees said that older individuals may judge a tattooed individual negatively simply because they have a tattoo. For example, one female discussed how she was very cognizant of how older generations may view tattoos, and therefore, consciously tried to conceal her tattoos around older individuals.

> I definitely try to hide it from older people, because I know that they are just going to be like 'Oh she is one of those you know, trouble makers' which is not me at all. I try not to care about what other people think about me, but you know deep down everyone does (Female, 20).

Her words are very powerful. She does not want to be viewed negatively by others, and confesses that as much as she doesn't want to let other peoples' opinions affect her, that they matter to her. She goes on to say,

> And so that is why I said if I'm seeing like an old lady or something I try to pull off this 'Oh she is a good little girl' so like I hide them then because I just, I don't like the fact of having like you know my grandma or someone else's grandma thinking I'm a bad kid (Female, 20).

While this interviewee never encountered any negative interactions with older generations, she simply assumed that they would look at her differently because she had a tattoo.

Thus far, the focus has been on how interviewees actively attempted to or at least felt

as though they should attempt to hide their tattoos from family members who did not approve

of tattoos. Many also said they might attempt to hide their tattoos from future employers.

Interviewees rarely discussed feeling the need to hide their tattoos around current employers

(as many of them did not have jobs or did not have professional jobs). For example, one

interviewee said, "When I'm at work obviously I want to be professional and they don't need

to be seen through my work shirt" (Female, 28). That having a visible tattoo in the work

place could be viewed as not professional was a reoccurring theme among interviewees.

According to one female, tattoos may come across as unprofessional in the work place. As

she discussed the issue of when she would feel the need to hide her tattoo she stated,

> I would say when I have to deal with careers mostly for jobs and stuff because
> a lot of people are tolerant of them and they don't really care but you know
> sometimes they say it is unprofessional and especially for where it is [for me].
> If I am wearing pants so low that you can see it or my shirt is so short that you
> can see it I think it gives off kind of a not professional look and I don't want
> that to be the reason that I don't get a position or something like that (Female,
> 19).

Beyond viewing tattoos as perhaps unacceptable in the work place, many individuals

discussed how they would be sure they dressed the part for a job interview, which would

mean no visible tattoos. For one male interviewee who was heavily tattooed on both forearms

and biceps, he acknowledged the fact that he will attempt to actively conceal his tattoos once

he goes on the job market. What was interesting about this interviewee's life story was that

he had held a different job for a number of years in which tattoos were an acceptable part of

the work culture (he worked in a manufacturing plant). Upon his getting laid off though, he

went back to college to pursue his business degree. He discussed how he does not currently

go out of his way to hide his tattoos but that he foresees having to down the road. According to this interviewee,

> I don't as of this point [feel the need to hide my tattoos], but you know I'm a business major and once I start interviewing and probably or possibly once I get to working, I know that I'll probably have to wear long sleeves all the time (Male, 44).

He went onto discuss how he hopes that he can cover up his brightly colored tattoos and that they do not show through a white dress shirt. This interviewee was very aware of the issues he may encounter in the near future.

Aware of the stigma that is still associated with tattooing in certain contexts, individuals attempted to control the visibility of their tattoo based on perceived audience reactions. Individuals discussed how they felt more comfortable exposing their tattoos in certain situational contexts, such as in a culture where tattooing is accepted (e.g., the bar) or when in the company of other tattooed individuals. Individuals felt less comfortable and therefore actively tried to hide their tattoos when in the presence of audience members whose opinions mattered to them (and they assumed would disapprove) or when around individuals who could exert power over them (such as employers). Therefore altering the visibility of one's tattoos allowed the tattooed individual to control who saw their tattoo as well as when, impacting and molding the interaction process with others.

Story of the Tattoo

Through managing the interaction process, individuals attempted to control the circumstances of who saw their tattoo and therefore decided under what conditions they would expose or hide their tattoo. Another way in which individuals attempted to control the

interaction process and to steer it in a favorable direction was to tell a particular story about their tattoo to those who inquired about it. Telling the appropriate story of what the tattoo means as well as why they got it is very important to the individual controlling the interaction process.

Meaning of Tattoo

Beyond altering the visibility of one's tattoo, an individual can also alter the way that they talk about their tattoo. The story then can alter depending upon who the audience is as well as what they are inquiring about. Regardless of who the audience is, the two main questions which individuals often ask about a tattoo is what does it mean, and why did you get it? I was amazed that many interviewees responded to the open-ended question, "Could you tell me a little bit about your tattoo?" with a long detailed and descriptive answer about the meaning behind their tattoo(s). The meaning then, seemed to be a very integral part to telling the story about one's tattoo. For example,

> Ah yeah it says "hope established in 1987," which would be my birth year. The reason why I got it is I knew I wanted something some place where it couldn't be seen if I didn't want anybody to see it so I got it on my back just not a very original placement but it is some place where an interviewer a job interviewer or my kids wouldn't have to see it unless I didn't care. "Hope" meant to me something my dad always said [which] is there are three things that a guy needs to live. That is his heart, his pride and hope. And so if you take away his heart and you take away his pride, at least he has hope to hang onto. And so physically now hope can never be taken away from me because it will always be behind me and so that is kind of the significance behind why I chose the word hope. And the established in 1987 part, my birth year I thought looked cool first of all and it was like hope was established for everyone else, it is kind of a joke kind of thing, like everyone else has hope if I have hope (Male, 19).

This lengthy answer to my simple question illustrates how integral the meaning behind a tattoo is when individuals discuss their tattoos. A female interviewee's answered the above question,

> The first one I got three or four years ago, I think it's been that long ago. It was right after my ex-fiancée and I broke up and he had always said no tattoos for you, you will not do that if you are dating me! So, I went and got one as soon as we were done (Female, 28).

After hearing this I asked her whether or not she got the tattoo to rebel against her ex-fiancée to which she replied, "I think so, and since we were done it wasn't like I was going back to him so it was something I could do for myself" (Female, 28). For this interviewee, her response to, "Could you tell me a little bit about your tattoo?" resulted in a detailed and rather personal story.

These responses illustrate that many individuals had tattoos which were meaningful to them.

Other comments made in passing helped to support this point such as "it does have meaning behind it, I didn't just get it to get it. It means because…" or "all of mine are meaningful to me" (Female, 18; Female, 18). Meaning was very closely linked to having a "proper" tattoo story to tell. It almost seemed that for some individuals, they knew that their tattoo was not extremely meaningful which left them hesitant to tell the story behind their tattoo. For example, one interviewee discussed how she felt as though people wouldn't want to listen to the story of her tattoo because there was not some deeper symbolic meaning behind it. When discussing the prospect of getting a second tattoo along with her friend (same tattoo) she said,

> We planned on those and we kept looking for something that would be, that would actually have meaning to it because neither of our first ones had any

meaning which when people ask me about them I feel kind of dumb because I don't have it for any reason other than I had a sudden urge to go get a tattoo so I went and did it (Female, 19).

From this interviewee's perspective, her story was not worth listening to because she did not get a very meaningful or thought out tattoo. She also said that the story of how she got the tattoo and what she got was not an interesting enough story, especially compared to other, more meaningful tattoos that individuals had.

> After I went to [high] school and people asked me about it and I didn't really have a story to tell them they were just like I'm not interested anymore, why did you get it type of thing? Because a lot of other people had crosses for people that had died that they knew or like something to do with their family and I had nothing (Female, 19).

She later discussed how she was embarrassed to tell her story. She discussed that she didn't like to tell people about the story of getting her tattoo because "They'll ask me about it [and] I'm like 'Yeah, I got it done in a basement when I was 17' and they're like 'Oh that's not very cool' (Female, 19). She regrets her decision to get her tattoo because she did not get something meaningful and the story was not a very good one. She states, "And that's like the story about that tattoo, it's not that it means anything to me it is a really dumb way that it happened which I regret, but there is nothing I can do about it now" (Female, 19).

This interviewee touched on two key factors which impacted the story of one's tattoo: the need to have a meaningful tattoo and telling an appropriate story. Another female interviewee told me that the version of the story I heard was significantly different from the version that she would tell everyone else.

Respondent:
> Actually I don't even ever tell anyone about the story I told you, just because it is like I'm actually going to say that my friend went to rehab. I just don't

think I should get into it so I'm just like 'Yeah it is a heart, it was a crazy night' and I just say 'And then I did something crazy' (Female, 19).

Interviewer:

And they just leave it at that?

Respondent:

Yeah but I should actually probably tell the other story because that kind of makes me sound bad. Like what do you do when you get crazy, you get tattoos!

For this interviewee, her lack of wanting to go into the whole story (either because it is personal or for the sake of giving individuals a quicker story) meant that she was telling a different version of the story. After she discussed with me the disparity between the truth of the story and the version that she told others, the interviewee mentioned upon reflection how that version of the story could reflect poorly upon her. Therefore the previous quotes help to illustrate that there is an appropriate tattoo "script" to follow: that their tattoo was meaningful and that they had an appropriate story as to why they got the tattoo.

Comparative Legitimacy

While telling the right "type" of story behind their tattoo was important for managing the interaction experience, individuals also justified their having a tattoo by using a technique which I have referred to as *comparative legitimacy.* By using comparative legitimacy, individuals defend their tattoo choice (image and location), by comparing it to other individual's tattoos. This often dealt with individuals defending their tattoo choice through the course of conversing with me, but others used this verbal technique while interacting with friends and family about their tattoo choice. While analyzing the data, two comparative legitimacy claims become prominent. They were that the tattoo choice was not too "extreme" and that they didn't pick something "stupid" to get tattooed on their body.

The first comparative legitimacy technique which will be discussed is that of choosing a tattoo which is not too "extreme". One way in which tattooed individuals used this comparative legitimacy technique to defend their tattoo choice was through comparing it to other, more extreme forms of tattooing. For example, an interviewee discussed with me how she finds heavily tattooed people "scary" (Female, 19). When describing the tattoo artist who did her second tattoo, the interviewee described him as,

> He was just kind of creepy because he is, you know, the kind that has the long hair and like, you can barely see him because he is covered in tattoos which *I'm not like* [raises voice] but so I'm kind of scared of people like that but I knew that he was a nice guy because that is his job he loves to do that (Female, 19).

For this interviewee, she went out of her way to differentiate herself from her tattoo artist who was heavily covered, had long hair, and, according to her, was creepy. At a later point in the interview she told me another story about a woman who came into the bridal shop where she works, looking to buy a wedding dress.

> She had those dreads and they were down to here and she had tattoos everywhere like her arms were covered, on her neck I think, and then maybe right on her ears and like on her face kind of thing. And I was immediately shocked (Female, 19).

She also said that she has seen some, "pretty bad, bad things [where she works] which have made me not get tattoos that I've wanted because I don't want to look like that when I walk down the aisle" (Female, 19). This interviewee's story highlights how she views heavily tattooed individuals in relation to herself: they are scary and look bad and she does not want to be equated with that.

One of the ways that individuals could defend their tattoo choice was through comparing their tattoo to more extreme forms of tattooing, as was illustrated above. Another

way that individual's defended their tattoo choice was through highlighting the conventionality of the images that they chose. For example, interviewees often used the language of their tattoo choice as that of being tasteful or not tacky. According to one interviewee, her tattoo is "in pretty Christmas writing you know kind of tasteful" (Female, 18). Another interviewee described how her tattoo, "is not some big obnoxious thing. I don't have a skull on my arm I have a little 76 looking thing behind my ear, so I don't think [people] care that much" (Female, 18). This quote highlights two important points. First, her tattoo is small, and therefore should not draw a lot of attention. Second, that the image she chose is not something offensive like a skull. These quotes help to illustrate that individuals used comparative legitimacy to defend themselves as well as their tattoo choices by showing that they did not engage in too "extreme" forms of tattooing.

The second comparative legitimacy technique which will be discussed is that of having a tattoo that would not be considered "stupid." Stupid tattoos were often described as tattoos that were either not thought out, or that had an image and associated meaning that was not very original. The opinion as to whether or not a tattoo was considered stupid was often raised by the individual getting the tattoo, although others (audience members) discussed what they thought about the subject as well.

Take for example the following discussion. This interviewee's mother liked the image that her daughter got for a tattoo because she was thankful that it was something that her daughter had thought through. When talking with me, this interviewee discussed a conversation she had with her mother about the tattoo that she was considering getting before she actually got it. Her mother said, "At least I know you are not going and getting one that

you might regret later on and it's not stupid" (Female, 18). She later said that she and her mother had a discussion about some of her friend's tattoos which "meant nothing" (Female, 18). As these quotes help to illustrate, the mother had the opinion that some of the interviewee's friends had stupid tattoos because they had not fully thought them through and that she was thankful that her daughter was not going to get something that she would regret.

A tattoo can also be considered stupid when the image is not well thought out or is something which does not carry a lot of meaning behind it. One female interviewee illustrates both of these points when she states,

> I know some people who have like butterflies on their ankle, which is cute, totally cute, and if that means something to them, then that is cool. But if it doesn't, that is kind of pointless and by the time they are like 75 they will be like 'Well back in college I got a butterfly on my ankle and yeah' (Female, 18).

This interviewee highlights how some tattoos are more meaningful than others. Getting a butterfly just for the sake of getting a butterfly seems pointless to this interviewee, and further, is something that individuals might end up regretting down the road. According to this student,

> There is like no story behind it! I don't know I just think that is cool if that is their thing I'm not going to judge them for it. But as far as on myself, I wouldn't want something like that. But if they do, then that is their thing (Female, 18).

Again, the idea of having a good story and reason for getting the tattoo that one did comes up. This interviewee alludes to the fact that an un-original type of tattoo such as a butterfly is not something which she would consider getting, further differentiating her tattoo choice from a stupid tattoo choice.

Through telling the story of their tattoo as well as using comparative legitimacy techniques to justify getting the tattoo that they did, individuals were able to control the interaction situation and re-cast it into a positive light if and when they were challenged. Telling an appropriate story is essential to defending one's tattoo choices. This story included describing the meaning behind one's tattoo while indicating that it was something that an individual had clearly thought through. When there was not a legitimate story to be told, tattooed individuals felt uncomfortable and therefore, often altered the story they told others about their tattoo. Another mechanism that individuals used to tell a certain type of story and further legitimize their decision to get the tattoo that they did was through using comparative legitimacy techniques. This was often done through defending their tattoo choice because it was something which was not too "extreme" or "stupid."

Response to Audience

As has been shown thus far an individual navigates their having a tattooed identity through social interaction with others. This negotiation process often involved the tattooed individuals attempting to control the interaction experience through a variety of mechanisms, such as manipulating the visibility of their tattoos as well as how they talked about and told their tattoo stories to others. A last way in which interaction impacted an individual's tattooed identity was in the reflection and self-evaluation process. An essential part of the self-evaluation process was interpreting and internalizing feedback gathered during the interaction process. This feedback often helped to shape how the tattooed individual felt about their decision to get their tattoo as well as what the appropriate reactive action to take.

Audience reactions were essential in helping shape how individuals viewed their decision to get a tattoo. While some interviewees had a tough exterior and didn't care what people thought about their tattoos, the majority of those interviewed discussed caring what people thought about their decision. Depending upon how the audience reacted to their tattoo, individuals felt more likely to embrace or regret their decision to get the tattoo that they did. The more negative feedback that they received (in quantity and quality) the more likely they were to regret their decision while the more positive feedback that they received (in quantity and quality) the more likely they were to embrace their decision. The type of feedback one received shaped how and if they reacted to that feedback.

Positive Feedback

Individuals who received positive feedback (or often times even neutral feedback) were more likely to be pleased with their decision to get their tattoo(s). When they received positive feedback, this information conveyed to the individuals that their audience accepted their having a tattoo. Many individuals liked the attention that came along with having a tattoo, especially when that attention was positive and reaffirming (cf. Sanders, 1988). Take for example the following quote,

> It makes me kind of happy that I have it because it is something that is interesting and that kind of draws people in, so it makes me feel better about getting it, I would say (Female, 19).

Other interviewees also reported that they liked attention they received because of their tattoo. This attention could have come from members of the opposite sex, or from sharing and hearing others' tattoo stories. For example, one male interviewee discussed how women found his tattoo sexually appealing because "they [women] would say things like, 'Oh, that is

hot!'" (Male, 21). Along these same lines, another interviewee discussed how the positive feedback that she received indicated to her that her audience approved of her decision. She said, "Well, obviously when people are like 'oh it is really cool' it makes me feel like they approve" (Female, 18). These individuals then tended to embrace their decision to get a tattoo when they received positive feedback. This positive feedback could take the form of receiving attention from the opposite sex or from feeling that others approved of their decision based on that positive feedback.

Negative Feedback

While individuals tended to embrace their decisions upon receiving positive feedback, negative feedback had the opposite impact. Individuals who received negative feedback tended to fall into one of two responsive categories. The first was responding defensively and the second was to internalize the negative feedback which could cause them to regret their decision. Because the majority of interviewees responded defensively to negative feedback, I will focus my attention on this point first.

For many individuals, feeling defensive often didn't involve coming to vocal altercations with those who were doling out the negative feedback; however, this happened to a few of the interviewees. For example, a female interviewee had a religious tattoo on her shin that caused a stir at the church where she was a youth minister. She discussed with me a few different occasions when she felt the need to defend herself. She didn't see what the big deal was nor did she follow the logic of those who questioned her for getting her tattoo. She stated, "I guess I sometimes get defensive but then I can back it up so then it gets worked out. But yeah, I do tend to get defensive, like 'You don't know me, stop it!'" (Female, 20).

Many individuals responded with verbally defensive language upon receiving

negative feedback. For example, one interviewee's mother questioned how her daughter had

changed since being away at college. The mother compared tattooing to other forms of an

extreme living. According to the interviewee, her mother's response to hearing that her

daughter got a tattoo was as follows,

> 'You know, I raised you as a wholesome girl and I send you off to college and
> you become a vegetarian and you get this tattoo and you pierce your nose.
> What is next Lydia, you going to become a hippy and join a commune? Or are
> you going to join the Peace Corps and go to Ethiopia?' And I was like 'What is
> wrong with these things, what is your problem?' And I think initially she was
> just [pause] then she asked me if that was like a demonstration of me having a
> bad childhood or rebelling against her and I think she just gets upset about the
> initial Lydia being independent once again (Female, 20).

While individuals often defended their decision to get a tattoo, they may have also

internalized the negative feedback that they received, which led them to regret their decision

to get the tattoo. This regret could be directed toward specifics of the tattoo such as the

location or the image as well as toward the decision to get a tattoo in general. The following

dialogue illustrates how an individual can be both defensive as well as regretful at the same

time. In this interviewee's case, she discussed how over time she grew to regret her tattoo

decision because it drew so much negative attention. Her tattoo was in a very visible spot, the

top of her hand between her pointer and thumb finger, and there was virtually no easy way to

cover it up.

Interviewer:
    Do you ever not want to tell your story behind the tattoo?
Respondent:
    Kind of, just because some people actually, like one lady got defensive about
    it because she really hated tattoos. [She said] 'I don't understand why you

would ever do that because it is permanent?' And it just struck me the wrong way because I was [thinking] like 'Who are you to come to this restaurant and tell me where I can have my tattoos you know?' (Female, 19)

Interviewer:

How does it make you feel when people react so negatively to the fact that you have something right there?

Respondent:

It kind of makes me regret it a little bit just because, I do regret it sometimes because it is such a noticeable place, but it is growing on me.

For this interviewee she first felt defensive about people judging her followed by internalizing the negative feedback and eventually regretting getting the tattoo. Another interviewee received negative feedback from her parents regarding her tattoo; however, in this instance she did not defend her decision to get the tattoo that she did. For a variety of reasons (although primarily because her parents did not approve), this student ended up regretting having ever gotten the tattoo. Upon the tattoo peaking out of the interviewee's jeans her mother inquired,

'Is that a tattoo?' and I was like 'Yeah' you know kind of avoiding eye-contact with her and she was like 'Is it real?' and I was like 'Yeah'. And she didn't say anything but my dad just looked me in the eyes and said 'I'm really disappointed in you'. I didn't know what to say; there is nothing I could do at that point, but I kind of avoided them because I was, you know, ashamed of myself for disappointing my parents I guess (Female, 19).

This interviewee didn't have to infer how her parents felt about her getting a tattoo. They were vocal about not liking that she got the tattoo. To manage the situation as best as this interviewee could, she avoided her parents. Throughout the course of the interview, she discussed numerous times how she regretted the decision and wished she hadn't upset her parents, but that there was nothing she could do at this point about it.

Audience reactions were very helpful in allowing individuals to know how those that they came into contact felt about their having a tattoo. When the interviewees received

positive feedback, they had to do little to alter the interaction process as this feedback signaled to them that their audience accepted their having a tattoo and in turn accepted their tattooed identity. It was upon receiving negative feedback, both verbal and nonverbal, when individuals had to work to manage the situation. These management strategies were structured in such as way so as to reframe the interaction experience while managing the impressions that others formed of them during the process. When the feedback was negative, individuals often responded in one of two ways: by standing up to the resistance or accepting the negative feedback and internalizing it, often leading to regretting the decision to have ever gotten the tattoo in the first place.

The process of managing a tattooed identity is one which is dependent upon interaction with others. Once tattooed, an individual must go through a variety of techniques to manage having a tattooed identity. Individuals do so because they want to shape the interaction process through giving off impressions that will allow them to receive positive feedback.

Anticipating Future Tattooed Identities

As has been shown thus far, interaction is very influential in shaping an individual's tattooed identity. It is through interaction that an individual learns the motivations of tattooing, decides on the image and location of the tattoo, and manipulates different interactional cues relating to that tattooed identity. A last way in which interaction helps to shape an individual's tattooed identity, is through a forward-looking process. Through anticipating future interactions an individual is able to determine what their tattooed identity may look like in the future. By discussing a future tattooed identity, I am referring to how

individuals anticipated feeling toward their tattoo down the road. Taking into consideration their experience with managing a tattooed identity, another significant component of a future tattooed identity is advice that a tattooed individual would offer up to future tattooes. When offering up advice for potential future tattooees, nearly all interviewees offered up advice for their hypothetical children that they foresaw having in the future.

Tattooed individuals *anticipated future tattooed identities* through: (1) speculating on their future opinion about their tattoo and (2) describing advice they would give to other people thinking about getting a tattoo.

Future Views of Tattoos

When individuals reflected upon their tattooing experience, they often reflected on two main concerns in relation to having a tattoo in their future. The first concern many individuals had was that the meaning behind their tattoo may change over time (or had already changed). Many individuals discussed wondering whether or not the meaning behind their tattoo would stay constant or change as they aged. The main concern here that individuals had was that if the meaning changed, that they might regret ever getting it. Although it was not always the case, many individuals said that they were concerned about this issue with respect to a friendship tattoo. The second concern many individuals had was that they may simply age out of tattoos and not like the fact that they had one down the road. This aging out factor usually coincided with potential life changes they may encounter down the road in which their having a tattoo may no longer seem appropriate. Others discussed the aesthetic aspect of having tattoos as they aged and that they were concerned with how the tattoo may look as their bodies changed.

Meaning of Tattoo

Many individuals said that they had thought about the potential that the meaning behind their tattoo might change. While some individuals admitted that the meaning behind their tattoo could change over time, they discussed how the meaning would not entirely change but would instead change its form. For example, having only had his tattoo for a few short years one interviewee said the initial meaning behind his tattoo has changed but he simply applies the meaning to other aspects of his life. His tattoo is a Chinese symbol which stands for determination which he got to help him set and reach swimming goals. After injuring himself permanently and never being able to competitively swim again, the interviewee said that the meaning behind his tattoo has changed because of his recent life change. When I asked him if his tattoo was meaningful, he said, "Well, it was," "It was?" I asked.

Respondent:
     Yeah, now I don't really know what I am determined to do.
Interviewer:
     So do you think the meaning changed?
Respondent:
     Its, I don't know, still with whatever I do I am determined to do my best, but it
     is not the same thing I had intended it to mean I guess.
Interviewer:
     And when you first got it what did you intend it to mean?
Respondent:
     [That I was] determined, to have some goals for swimming.
Interviewer:
     So it was to the swimming aspect but now you can kind of
Respondent:
     Twist it to others.

As this conversation illustrates, the meaning behind his initial reasoning for getting the tattoo had changed, yet he was able to apply it to other aspects of his life. Other interviewees shared this sentiment. Even if they foresaw the meaning changing individuals discussed how the original meaning would remain in some form. For example, many interviewees who had Chinese letters inked on their body admitted that they couldn't confirm that the tattoo meant what they had thought it did. Although individuals admitted that they may one day learn a different meaning, they would still hold on to what the tattoo was intended to mean. One female interviewee who had a Chinese symbol on her hip which she had been told stood for "forever young" said that if the true meaning was different than what she thought it stood for that,

> I would probably be a little upset but it wouldn't bother me too much because it would still have the meaning to me and it wouldn't be too embarrassing because hopefully not everyone would figure out that I tattooed the wrong thing on me (Female, 19).

Others, primarily those who shared friendship tattoos, said that they were slightly nervous that they may one day lose touch with their friend and therefore the meaning behind their tattoo might change. While some were willing to admit that this was a possibility, others didn't think that was an option. For example, one interviewee discussed how she had been friends with one girl for nine or ten years and that "We've had falling outs a couple of times but we've always managed to come back and be friends again" (Female, 28). Another interviewee discussed how her friend went away to a different college after high school, yet they still remained close friends.

For those interviewees who discussed the possibility of losing touch with their friends, many discussed how the tattoo could just take on a new meaning at that point

because the meaning behind the symbol that they shared with their friend was not easy to decipher at first glance. For example, one interviewee discussed how the symbol that she shared with her friends had meaning to her circle of friends but to others, most likely looked like three interlocked hearts. She said that,

> The tattoo I did get is something where like by looking at it you don't know what it is, like no one knows the meaning behind it so it could just be three hearts and like so in that way I am not [going to regret it later] but also we've had a good friendship so I don't regret our friendship at all. I could never see us getting in a big blow-out and not being friends. I could see us drifting off or whatever to different states but I don't see us just not being friends anymore. So I don't think I will ever regret it because I know it is something I wanted at this point in my life really bad, so (Female, 19).

Others shared this sentiment as well, but with respect to their tattoo having a dual meaning. For example, one interviewee who had his last name tattooed on his back at the same time as his brother did. They got the tattoo to share a brotherly bonding experience, but this interviewee recounts, "Yeah, well even if we become mortal enemies, I'm not going to get it tattooed over because it is my last name and even if him and I are fighting, my last name is still my last name" (Male, 21).

As these examples illustrate, even if individuals foresaw the meaning behind their tattoo changing, they still wanted to ensure that it had meaning to them, even if that meant that it took on a new form. In a sense, one can infer that these individuals are engaging in impression management while reflecting upon future meanings. As was discussed earlier, meaning is such an essential component to establishing a legitimate tattooed identity that this may also carry over to anticipating a future tattooed identity

Aging out of Tattoo

While reflecting upon what the meaning behind ones tattoo may indicate in the future,

interviewees were also very cognizant that they may simply age out of tattooing and not like

the fact that they have a tattoo they got when they were younger. This idea was briefly

touched upon early when interviewees discussed that it is more acceptable for younger

generations to get tattoos. As one stated,

> I think along certain age groups it is really acceptable. Among younger
> people, my age or our age, I think it is really acceptable and that people don't
> see anything wrong with it. And then I think as people age it is less and less
> acceptable to them (Female, 19).

Knowing that tattooing is much more acceptable for people in their age range, individuals

discussed how it might no longer be acceptable that they have a tattoo as they age. One

interviewee light-heartedly addresses the issue:

> I will only fit in for you know how many years until they are not cool
> anymore or until my skin is wrinkly and you can't tell what it is because it is a
> tattoo on my foot that is going to become a big black dot (Female, 19).

Other interviewees shared the belief that tattooing is acceptable for younger people. Many

interviewees, especially women, said that they would not be displaying their tattoo to anyone

when they got older. According to one female,

> I guess that eventually I'll be the only one that knows they are there because
> I won't wear clothes that show it and I won't wear jeans that are low-rise
> when I'm 80 [years old] and I won't probably wear sandals or flip-flops when
> I'm 80 [years old] (Female, 19).

Another female interviewee said that when she was older, she would not be showing off her

tattoo and that in fact, only she would have to know that she had it. She said that, "It will

probably look kind of funny when I'm old but by then I probably won't be showing my stomach off too much" (Female, 19).

Through discussing how individuals foresaw the meaning of their tattoo(s) changing (or not changing) as well as discussing how they might feel toward their tattoos as they aged, individuals were reflecting upon their future views of tattooing. It can be assumed that these future views would impact an individual's decision as to whether or not they would be getting more tattoos in the future, but there were no discernable patterns between one's future views of tattooing and their likelihood of getting more tattoos. However, individuals tended to view the meanings of their tattoos as staying constant as time passed. Also, individuals said that they were aware that their having a tattoo would only be acceptable for a short time of their life. They discussed how when they aged, that their having a tattoo would most likely become less of an important factor in their life as it currently is. Therefore, individuals foresaw the excitement of their tattoo wearing off as they aged.

Advice for Future Tattooees

Through developing, managing, and reflecting upon a tattooed identity, interviewees had a wealth of knowledge that they could share with potential tattooees. Most interviewees foresaw giving their children advice similar to the type that they received from their parents[21]. The main interactions they saw having with anticipated children was having their young children inquire about their tattoo, and when older, perhaps wanting to get one themselves.

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[21] None of those interviewed had children at the time of the interview; therefore, questions relating to children and tattoos were phrased as a hypothetical.

Future Tattoo Story

Similarly to when an individual used identity talk to tell an appropriate story of their having and getting the tattoo during the managing a tattooed identity phase, individuals anticipated having to tell a certain type of story down the road during expected interactions with children. Many individuals said that it was something that they had previously thought about. For example:

> I've actually thought a lot about that because I had a teacher in high school that had talked to me about that after I had gotten the first one. He said his little kids come up and ask him what it [his] is and why it is there (Female, 20).

She said that she couldn't be "hypocritical" and simply say it is a tattoo and that, 'No you can't get one' (Female, 20). Others said that they would tell their children that they got their tattoo when they were in college and what it meant to them. According to one interviewee, her children may not fully understand, but she would try to explain the reasoning behind her getting the tattoo as well as what it means.

> I think I'll probably say well they are not going to really understand, but to simplify the idea as much as possible, like 'Mommy got this done when she was older than you'. If they are younger I probably would just say 'Mommy got a picture to put behind her ear when she was an adult because she liked it'. But if they could grasp the concept of what it was maybe I would go explain a little more of what a horoscope is and why I like it (Female, 18).

Many individuals thought about hypothetical situations in which their younger children may ask about tattoos, but the majority of interviewees discussed how they would address their children's curiosity in getting tattoos when they were older and nearing the legal age limit to get them. The interviewees mentioned that when they crossed this bridge with their children

that they would try to more adamantly persuade and influence their children's' decisions regarding tattooing choices.

Children and Tattoos

When tattooed individuals reflected upon how they would handle the hypothetical situation of their children wanting to get a tattoo, interestingly enough, many individuals said they would give similar advice to their children that they had received from their parents. As one said, "Right now I have the 'Oh I wouldn't care attitude' but I know that once I actually have kids I'm going to be the same way that my parents were" (Female, 19). She is referring to her parents resisting the idea of her getting a tattoo and vocalizing it, but she also recognizes that her children might not heed her advice and that "I guess at that point in time I can't get mad at them because I did the same thing [to my parents]" (Female, 19).

Other interviewees discussed how they would offer tattoo advice to their children regarding things that they thought through prior to getting their tattoo. For example one female interviewee mentioned, "I would obviously never say that I think it is a terrible idea because I don't and I would never say no. But I would probably mention the same things that I thought about" (Female, 19). Others mentioned that they would offer advice to their children and probe them with questions. As one male said,

> I would just ask them questions like 'What do you want to get?' 'Why do you want to get that?' 'Why does this mean a lot to you?' stuff like that. And whatever they say I would tell them that it was a good or a bad idea and then be like 'Well why don't you get this, give them advice'. And then maybe they might think twice about getting something (Male, 21).

These interviewees took more of a general guidance approach, but other individuals said they would offer more specific advice in regards to their children getting a tattoo. For example, some interviewees mentioned that they would caution against their children being sure they did their research so that they would not regret getting the tattoo for health and/or permanency reasons. For example, one interviewee addresses both health concerns and the permanency issue when he cautions that he would tell his children to "do their homework" (Male, 21).

> The main thing is obviously you know you want to make sure the place you go to is certified and all that and make sure they know what they are doing, you don't want to have just anybody do it you know. Do a background check and really think about what you want because it is going to be there for the rest of your life (Male, 21).

Other interviewees discuss how they would make sure that their child thought through having and getting a tattoo through asking them questions like, 'Have you thought about it being permanent and regardless of what you do in life you are going to have this there'. And 'are you sure that is something that you want to do' (Female, 18).

While some interviewees thought they might have been primarily concerned with the permanency factor, others discussed their concern for their child's safety. According to one interviewee she would emphasize, "Get it done safely! Like if you are going to get it done, don't go to one of your friends who has a tattoo gun" (Female, 18). Another interviewee discusses how she would caution against her child getting a tattoo "in a trailer outside of a State Fair" because "the drunks come out after the fair and get tattoos there" and "Why would you get a tattoo there that is so gross. I would warn them not to do it there" (Female, 18).

When reflecting upon their own decision to have and get tattoos, many individuals discussed being concerned about getting their tattoos in inconspicuous locations so as to not inhibit them from getting a good job. This was a less frequented response, but individuals discussed that if during the course of their life and prior to having children they ran into negative experiences that they might feel more strongly inclined to caution their child against getting a tattoo. According to one interviewee,

> Well if he or she asks me, I'm pretty sure I'd be okay with it considering I had them. Probably just tell them, well by then I might have more experiences and maybe I will be rejected from a really good job because of this one [points to wrist] and maybe I will actually have a really good story to tell them not to. But I don't know if by then I'm having kids and maybe me loving them and stuff will make me think differently about them actually getting it because they are my kid (Female, 20).

According to this interviewee, she would most likely not try to steer her children away from getting tattoos based on her experiences that she has had to date, but perhaps would feel differently about tattoos in the future based on her life experiences.

Through anticipating future tattooed identities, tattooed individuals were engaging in a forward looking process in which they reflected upon what theirs as well as others future tattooed identities might look like. Through looking at the future views that they may associate with tattooing, individuals reflected on the meaning associated with their tattoo as well as how they would feel about tattooing as they aged. When reflecting on their tattooing experience, individuals anticipated their children inquiring about what their tattoo was and what it meant. Similar to telling the appropriate story mentioned earlier, individuals discussed telling the meaning behind their tattoo as well as the reasoning for getting it. As their children aged and perhaps sought out a tattoo of their own, the interviewees discussed

how they would offer up advice at that point similar to what they heard when they were

deciding to get a tattoo. This process highlights the way in which interaction, even

anticipated interaction, can help to shape an individual's tattooed identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The practice of tattooing as well as the views associated with those who get tattoos has significantly changed over time. It used to be the case that tattooing was associated with those in the "social underbelly" of society whereas now there is no easily discernable pattern or type of person who gets tattooed as it varies by "demographic categories of age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status" (Kosut, 2006; Atkinson & Young, 2001: 118). Researchers attribute this change to both the tattoo renaissance as well as the increasing diversity of clientele engaged with tattooing, namely the middle-class (Schildkrout, 2004; DeMello, 1995). It is argued that these changes have helped to reduce and remove the stigma associated with tattooing (Irwin, 2001).

Although views toward tattooing have become much more acceptable and mainstream as time has passed, there are those who argue that tattooing is something which situates an individual as possessing a potentially discrediting attribute (Sanders, 1988). This in turn can have significant impact on the interaction process with others as permanently marking one's body "changes the tattooee's experience of his or her physical self and has significant potential for altering social interaction" (Sanders, 1988:397). My research supports the claim that tattooing situates a person as having a potentially discrediting attribute.

My research contributes to the current tattoo literature in that it highlights and supports many findings that have previously been discussed in relation to tattooing. Through focusing on the relationship between interaction and one's tattoo, this research shows that an individual's tattooed identity is one which develops over time and in relation to audience

expectations, audience input, and the interaction process with others. Interestingly enough, my findings closely parallel those of Sanders research on tattooed individuals from 30 years prior.

Sanders extensive research on tattooing showed that individuals became involved with tattooing because others close to them had tattoos which impacted their decision to get one (Sanders, 1988). Similarly, the majority of my interviewees had not seriously thought about getting a tattoo until it was brought to their attention by people close to them. Another way in which our research findings are similar is that those who Sanders interviewed chose the image for their tattoo based on "the person's connection to other people" or on how well the tattoo "fit his or her definition of self" (Sanders, 1988:409). This closely reflects what I found, in that interviewees chose the image that they did because it reflected their personal and social identities.

Another way in which our findings are similar is that my research supports Sanders' claim that tattooing situates a person as possessing a potentially discrediting attribute. Interestingly enough, those I interviewed discussed how over time tattoos have become less stigmatized; however, within certain limits. According to one interviewee, "they are accepted in certain ways. Too many is too much but a small amount on certain areas on your body, I think people accept that more" (Female, 20). While individuals discussed the changing views toward tattoos, their lived experiences illustrate that tattooing is still a stigmatizing attribute within certain situations and contexts. For example, interviewees used a variety of identity work techniques to convey positive images of themselves, such as identity talk, altering the visibility of their tattoos, and avoiding individuals and situations which would bring about

negative feedback. This helps to support the claim that although tattooing is becoming ever more popular and accepted there are particular situational instances in which tattooing is looked down upon.

This research also highlights how interaction is vital and a significant component of an individual's identity, namely a tattooed identity. It has been argued that a tattooed identity is one which forms over time and is managed through interaction with others. Through taking into account anticipated audience reactions, an individual is engaging in various mechanisms of impression management. The concept of identity work has been used to help explain how an individual attempts to control the interaction process and to frame it positively. Through my research we see that individuals engaged in identity work through altering the visibility of their tattoo as well how they talk about it. They also did so through avoiding particular individuals and situations in which they expected that they might receive negative repercussions for having a tattoo. Although there are a variety of ways in which individuals can use identity work to help shape the interaction process, the two primary types that have dominated the literature are through talk and appearance.

While there have been significant strides in recent literature as it relates to identity work, the primarily focus has been how individuals engage in identity work through using identity talk (Hunt & Benford, 1994; Snow & Machalek 1983; Hunt et al., 1994; Hunt & Miller, 1997). However, studies have begun to shift their focus to how individuals can use identity work through the altering of appearances (Phelean & Hunt, 1997; Hunt & Miller, 1997). For example, Jessica Collett's recent work on how mothers construct the mother identity in relation to their child's appearance makes strides toward shifting the focus to

identity work through appearance. This research is fascinating in that Collett describes the

mothers using their child's appearance as of form of impression management in which they

reflect positive images of themselves through using their children as "props" and in turn,

conveying certain status about themselves to others (Collett, 2005).

Another interesting strand of research which moves us away from identity talk toward

identity work through appearance is research done by Samuel D. Gosling and colleagues.

This research focuses on how an individual's environment can send cues or impressions

about oneself to others. Their research is focusing primarily on physical environments such

as offices or bedrooms but their more recent works are beginning to include the virtual world

(i.e. the Web) (Gosling et al., 2002) One of the primary ways in which individuals can

convey meaning through their environment is through adorning their rooms with identity

claims; "symbolic statements made by occupants for their own benefit, intended to reinforce

their self views" (Gosling et al., 2002:380). Further, these identity claims can be self-directed

or other-directed in that the meanings are intended for the individual or for others to interpret

information about an individual (Gosling et al., 2002).

I view my research approach and findings as contributing to research on identity work

that individual's undergo through the altering of their appearance. Similar to Gosling and

other researchers focused on appearance, a tattoo can be situated as a way for an individual to

make an identity claim about oneself. While their research focused on claims made through

one's surrounding spatial environment, tattooing could exemplify an identity claim being

made through the altering of one's physical appearance. I argue that this research has just

begun to scratch the surface and that further research needs to be done in the area of identity

work through the altering of appearances.

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APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Good Morning (Good Afternoon),

Dr. (_____, _____) has invited me to come and talk to you today to tell you a little bit about my research project. My name is Molly Sween and I am a graduate student in the sociology department here at Iowa State University.

My study will be looking at those individuals that currently have one or more tattoos on their body. My interest in researching tattooed individuals has sparked from my desire to understand questions such as: What do your tattoo(s) mean to you? How do others perceive your tattoo(s)? Have you ever experienced negative reactions because of your tattoo(s)? And if so, how do you reconcile these negative reactions?

I will be conducting face-to-face interviews that should last anywhere between an hour to an hour and a half in length. At the time of the interview, I will be asking for your permission to take pictures of your tattoos. Photographs will only be taken upon your approval and according to your specifications. Therefore, if I have your permission to photograph some, but not others, please let me know at that time. If you are 18 years of age and are interested in taking part in my study, please contact me at my Iowa State e-mail address so that we can set up a time, date, and location to hold an interview. My e-mail address is moll15@iastate.edu.

Thanks for your attention!

APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: **Managing a tattooed identity**

Investigator: Molly Sween, Masters Student, Sociology

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand how tattooed individuals perceive themselves and their identity in relation to others perceptions (i.e. family, friends, and co-workers) of them. I also hope to discover whether or not individuals have been stigmatized because of their tattoo(s), and if so, the ways in which individuals cope with this stigma. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a college student, and your age reflects the population of those who are currently getting tattooed in the largest numbers.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last anywhere between an hour to an hour and a half in length. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: Upon your signing of this informed consent document, the interview process will begin. Upon the interviews completion, you will not be contacted at a later time, unless clarification of data is required at that point.

If your permission is granted, I will be tape recording the interview. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable. Also, if permission is granted, I would like to take pictures of your tattoos to help me match up the tattoo with its story. If you do not agree to either of these aspects of the study, please let me know ahead of time. Similarly, if permission is granted to only photograph certain tattoos throughout the interview and not others, please indicate that to me prior to the start of the interview. The tape recorded interview will be transcribed and then destroyed within three weeks of the interview.

RISKS

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: Discomfort talking about tattoos that are too personal or bring up discomforting thoughts. If you do experience this, please feel free to not talk about those issues that will bring you discomfort.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping provide an understanding of how individual's deal with managing a stigmatized identity.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. If the course requirements for this class include credit for participating in research projects, you will receive course credit for participation as outlined in your class syllabus. Other options for receiving course credit are explained in the syllabus.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: You will be given an identifying code which will be used in the place of your name on audio tapes, transcriptions, and photographs. Only myself, the sole investigator will have access to the tape recorded interviews, transcriptions, and photographs. All of this data will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office for which I only have the key. Similarly, any electronic data will be stored on my personal laptop for which I have a locked system accessible only through a password I know. Upon the researches completion, the electronic versions will be destroyed. Within three weeks of the initial interview, the data will be transcribed and at that time all identifiers will be omitted or replaced with non-identifying information such as pseudonyms. Upon completion of the transcription, the tape recorded interview will be destroyed. All transcribed data and subsequent data which has been stored in my locked cabinet and personal laptop will be destroyed upon completion of this project. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the <u>study</u> contact Molly Sween at (moll15@iastate.edu) or (515-450-3922).

- The supervising faculty member for this project is Dr. David Schweingruber. If you have and questions or concerns about this study, feel free to contact him at (dschwein@iastate.edu) or (515-294-4079).

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

_____   _____

(Participant's Signature)   (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

_____   _____

(Signature of Person Obtaining   (Date)

Informed Consent)

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Can you tell me about each tattoo that you have starting with the first one that you got?

2. What does each tattoo mean to you?

3. Of the tattoos you have, which is the most significant to you?
   • Why?

4. Do other people you know that are close to you, such as family and friends have tattoo(s)?

(For this next set of questions, I want you to think back to your first tattoo…)

5. Can you tell me about how you decided to get your first tattoo?
   • What type of things did you take into consideration before getting your first tattoo?
   • Did you discuss with others prior to getting your tattoo?
       • What were some things you talked about with this person?
   • How did you decide where on your body to get the tattoo?
   • How did you decide what picture or image to get tattooed?
   • Who was the first person to see your tattoo?
       • How did they see it?
       • How did they react to the tattoo?

(Probe with similar questions for each tattoo beyond the first one)

(For this next set of questions, I want you to think of your tattoos as a whole…)

6. Do you feel you need to hide your tattoo(s) around certain people or groups?
   • If so why?
7. Do you make an attempt to expose your tattoo(s) around certain people or groups?
   • If so why?

8. What do you think your tattoo(s) mean to others when they see it/them?

9. How do others react to your tattoos?
   • Why do you think they react the way they do?
   • How does it make you feel when people react as they do?

10. Where do you foresee yourself in the future, once you've finished college?

- Do you feel that your tattoo(s) will in any way prohibit you from reaching your future goals?

11. Will you get more tattoos in the future?
    - What and why?

12. When you have children and they are getting about the age of 18 and they approach you wanting a tattoo, what would you say to them?
    - Why would you tell them that?

13. May I see them (photograph them)?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

APPENDIX 4: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Information _____

1. Current Age: _____
2. Age when you got 1st tattoo: _____

3. Gender (place check next to):

    _____ Male

    _____ Female

4. Race:

    _____ Caucasian

    _____ African American

    _____ American Indian or Alaskan Native

    _____ Asian

    _____ Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander

    _____ Other race. Please specify _____

5. Parents (or primary care providers) combined income:

    _____ Less than $10,000

    _____ $10,000 to $14,999

    _____ $15,000 to $19,999

    _____ $20,000 to $34,999

    _____ $35,000 to $49,999

    _____ $50,000 to $74,999

    _____ $75,000 to $99,999

    _____ $100,000 to $144,999

_____ $150,000 to $199,999

_____ $200,000 or more

6. Parents (or primary care providers) occupations:

Mother: _____

Father: _____

Care Provider 1 (if not parent) _____

Care Provider 2 (if not parent) _____

7. Student Classification at Iowa State University:

_____ Freshman

_____ Sophomore

_____ Junior

_____ Senior

8. Current Major(s) at Iowa State University
    _____

Thank You for Your Time!

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my major professor, David Schweingruber, for all of your guidance throughout this process. Our numerous meetings, e-mails, phone calls, and pep-talks are what helped me to make it through. Thank you for your support! I am also grateful to have had two wonderfully insightful sociologists on my committee who brought diverse perspectives and knowledge to the project. Thank you for always making time for me and allowing me to springboard ideas off of you. My sincere thanks go out to Brian Monahan and Anastasia Prokos.

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