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MORE THAN ZERO: VARIATION IN THE TATTOOED POPULATION

By

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B.A. Sociology, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 2010

Thesis

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More Than Zero: Variation in the Tattooed Population

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Sociological research on treat all individuals with more than zero tattoos as being part of the tattooed population. This type of categorization fails to capture the significant differences between tattooed individuals. For example, a gang member with a criminal insignia tattooed on his or her neck would be part of the same research population as long term tattoo artists with their entire body covered in tattoos or even a middle aged man with a single tattoo on his bicep. By interviewing tattoo artists, this thesis details the unique nature of tattooing as an occupation, the changing nature of the modern tattooing world, and how tattoo artists describe the variation within their clientele. The most significant variation described by interviewees was how the clients interacted with the tattoo artists and how that interaction affected their tattooing process. Two main types of clients emerged: core clients and casual clients. Core clients interact with the tattooing process in a more involved and long-term way, whereas casual clients are less involved and more likely to consume tattoos as a commodity rather than involve the tattooing process as an ongoing part of their life. Due to the increasing acceptance of tattooing by the mainstream and the increasing professionalization of tattoo shops, both core clients and casual clients are likely to receive high quality tattoos and a positive experience with tattoo artists though casual clients are at a slightly higher risk to receive the opposite. This difference in interaction with the tattooing process highlights one significant difference between individuals with more than zero tattoos. Such variation should be considered when conducting research on tattooed individuals.

## Introduction

Since first getting tattooed several years ago, I've experienced several situations where my tattoos land me in awkward situations. During my first week on the job as a short order cook at a local restaurant, a co-worker said to me, "What are you in for?"

"What do you mean?" I asked him

"Look at yourself," he said, pointing to my tattoos, "You're in here for something. Everyone in a kitchen is in trouble, just got out of trouble, or is about to get into trouble." He happened to be incorrect in my case, but I could hardly fault his logic. Every other individual that worked in the kitchen had at least two tattoos, and each one of the had been charged with at least one felony at some point in their life. I was the exception in this case, not the rule.

Later that same day, while still at work, another co-worker and I were taking a break outside. Soon-to-be customers stared at us as they walked towards the entrance of the restaurant. I made a quip, off-hand, about how oddly stereotypical the whole moment felt to me--two sweaty cooks standing by the backdoor to a restaurant, choking down cigarettes between orders and getting looked at sideways by customers. I thought it was hilarious. He felt judged. "Yeah, I got ink," he said, "who cares? It's not your business or your problem." I didn't feel like we had been getting dirty looks because of our tattoos. I told him so. He told me that he often felt judged by others in his day to day life because of his tattoos. "Other people, they just don't understand, you know?" he said.

I wasn't entirely sure what he meant. I'd never had a problem with people giving me funny looks, negative or otherwise, for any reason. I always figured if someone saw that I have tattoos and assumed that I was some ex-criminal that could only get a job working in a kitchen

because I have little education and few job skills, then that's their mistake. No big deal to me. Those assumptions would apply entirely to my co-worker. On the other hand, being actively discriminated against for having tattoos has happened to me before and upset me in a way that tacit looks of disapproval have not (ex: not getting hired at a job that I was over qualified for because I had visible tattoos). Both my co-worker and I had tattoos and worked in a kitchen, but aside from that, we were very different people. Someone would be very wrong to lump us into the same population based only on our tattoos.

After this brief discussion with my co-worker, I was reminded of another tattoo-related experience I had several weeks earlier. I was out shopping for groceries when I heard a voice behind me say something like, "Hey, I like your tattoos." I turned around to see a woman staring intently at my left arm. "How long have you been working on those?"

"Uh...a couple of years," I said to her.

"I just got my first one, like, two years ago," she said pulling up her sleeve to reveal a small black and gray butterfly, "and I just can't stop now. I'm addicted to ink." She pulled up one of her pant legs a few inches to show me a few more small tattoos.

I nodded a few times and mumbled something, hoping that she wouldn't start rolling up more clothing in the middle of the bread aisle. One of her children pulled her away and she gave me a little wave and walked off.

I thought her handful of tattoos looked like they'd been traced out of pictures in a tattoo magazine and applied in someone's basement. I could have been mistaken, and I hoped no one would ever make that error about me after seeing my tattoos.

Almost a year ago, months or years after the events described above took place, I began a

research project that focused on body modifications for a qualitative methods class. These two previously mentioned events, and a handful of others that I can't remember well enough to accurately describe, kept popping up in my head while I was working on my project for class. The main question in the project concerned the differences in social acceptance between commonly accepted body modifications (ear piercings for females, hair dyeing, makeup, haircuts, etc) and more stigmatized ones (body piercings, tattoos, scarification, etc). While delving briefly into some academic literature on body modification, mostly about tattooing, I began to get concerned about how most everything I read considered anyone with more than zero tattoos to be a 'tattooed person.' Regardless of the methodology or the goal of the studies, all individuals with more than zero tattoos were treated as being basically the same, and the conclusions of the study's usually attempted to generalize to the target population of 'tattooed people.' Some studies had different categories to which they assigned tattooed people, but these generally were delineated by the number of tattoos a person had. Even the small amount of qualitative research I read, which mainly focused on the personal reasons individuals give for getting tattooed, seemed to consider anyone with a tattoo as being part of some unified group whose only criteria for membership is having more than zero tattoos.

The research wasn't considering factors that I felt are important to note when considering anybody's tattoos for study: things like the size, location, design, how often they got tattooed, where they went to get them, how they chose an artist, etc. Why were researchers making conclusions about a group where the only thing the members have in common was more than zero tattoos?

I started thinking about myself in comparison to the two people mentioned earlier—a co-

worker of mine and the woman at the grocery store. Aside from all of us having at least one tattoo, I'd imagine that we were all more different than alike—not only in non-tattoo related things like job experience, marital and parental status, age, education, interests, etc—but also different in how we engaged in the tattoo process. My co-worker had spent time getting tattooed over decades with several different artists across several states. I had only ever been to one artist and had only been getting tattooed for a few years. There are other factors as well, such as the designs people choose to get tattooed, the different reasons that particular artists are sought after, the general rapport between the client and the shop, etc.

The way people go about participating in their own tattoo experience, at the ground level, differentiates them not only from each other in simple aspects such as how they choose a shop, artist or design, but it also affects the way their tattoos are interpreted by others. A former prison inmate sporting self-administered gang symbols will likely be viewed differently than a lifelong client of traditional Japanese artist with a vibrant backsuit of tattoos that took decades to complete. The way that those two individuals participated in their tattoo experience is, more than likely, quite different.

All this led me to ask myself “does such a thing as this 'tattooed population' really exist?” The question itself is a bit ambiguous, but from it I have found several interesting questions that I hope to address in this project. Who are the different types of people getting tattooed? What are different about the ways people start getting tattooed? How has the commodification and popularity of tattooing affected the ways people engage in the practice?

## **Literature Review**

“Deviant or not, tattooing is a deeply historical and unique form of human representation” (Atkinson 2003:x).

Putting ink into one's skin is not a recent development. Tattooing has been practiced across the globe for thousands of years. Since “ancient times, the body has been a canvas for adornment” (quoted in Kosut 2006:1044). Until recently, most academia considered tattooing in the western world almost exclusively as being a hallmark of deviant, marginalized sub-cultures such as sailors, criminals, gangs, and circus freaks, to name just a few (Silver et al 2009; Orend and Gagne 2009; Adams 2009; Koch et al. 2010; Kosut 2000; Kang and Jones 2007). The history of tattoos and tattooing in the West is, in fact, more complicated.

Tattooing, rather than being solely practiced by deviant subcultures throughout the previous three centuries in North America has, according to Atkinson (2003:30), gone through six specific social eras, the first beginning in the 1760s. In his history of tattoos in the Western world, Atkinson makes it clear that although tattooing has always held some sort of socially deviant charm, the general cultural attitude towards the practice has continuously shifted back and forth in the past three centuries. The reigning stereotype linking tattoos and tattooing with social/legal deviance, both in the popular conscience and in the academic realm, is a relic of what Atkinson (2003:38) termed *the Rebel Era*. See appendix A for a table summarizing the main eras of tattooing in North America.

Most of the literature I read makes mention of the common stereotype linking tattooing with deviance before going on to say that the tattooed population of contemporary society is no longer accurately represented this way. The present population of individuals with more than zero tattoos is not made up primarily of old salts, biker-gang members, and social/legal deviants.



Today, tattoos are owned by individuals across the spectrum of gender, age, occupation and socio-economic status (Kang & Jones 2007:42).

Much of the contemporary research on tattooing and tattooed individuals falls into three broad areas—tattoos as indicators of deviance, personal meanings behind tattoos, and the commodification of tattoos. Investigating the link between owning tattoos and engaging in legal/social deviance, specifically targeting adolescents, college aged individuals and young adults, seems to be the most common approach of recent articles and thought about tattoos, and contains the largest area of research into tattoos.

### ***Body Art and Deviance***

“Regardless of the complexity and expansion of tattoo culture and its overlap into popular culture (*vis-à-vis* film stars, rock stars, athletes, etc), most members of the social mainstream will invariably relegate people with tattoos to the status of the Other” (Kosut 2000:85).

“A recent study supports parents' concerns that...tattooing can be correlated with antisocial behavior, anxiety, criminal activities, unsafe sexual practices, eating disorders and self-mutilation” (quoted in Adams 2009:116).

In the west, there is a prominent “association between the practice [of tattooing] and social deviance” (Atkinson 2003:23). Whether or not such an attitude reflects reality, this correlation is at the very least mentioned in virtually all research about tattoos and is the main focus for a majority of it. As mentioned earlier, this wasn't always the case in the western world,

as tattooing and the cultural acceptance of it has fluctuated throughout the last three hundred years in North America. (Atkinson 2003:30-50).

For most of the history of tattooing in the United States, tattoos were thought of as identifying marks signaling membership in various groups. Some of these groups could be considered deviant or socially marginalized, but this was not universally the case and tattoos were mostly seen amongst accepted social groups. It wasn't until the "Rebel Era" (Atkinson 2003:38) that spanned the decades from 1950 – 1970 that tattoos were no longer seen as marks of pride or affiliation used mostly by respected groups (soldiers, sailors, firemen, blue-collar workers) and started to become synonymous with deviance. It was during these years that the practice of tattooing was adopted, and aggressively displayed (which had the most impact) by "prisoners, motorcycle gangs, deviant youth subcultures, and political protesters" (Atkinson 2003:41) in an effort to challenge mainstream society.

Even today, in the "Super Market Era" (Atkinson 2003:46) of tattoos, characterized by medical regulation, customer service, customizable design, and commodification, society at large and academia still treat the practice as having some stigma, though less than in the past. Even with its rising popularity, tattooing may never be a "completely normative social practice" (Atkinson 2003:49) and thus the correlation between tattooing and social deviance may never get out from under the microscope of academic research.

### *Quantitative Approaches*

Getting tattooed is legal for adults in the United States. For minors, under the age of 18, getting a tattoo is illegal, thus simply acquiring one is considered by researchers as an act of legal

deviance. Some states do allow minors to receive tattoos but only with parent/guardian approval. An abundance of research is available that investigates the factors that motivate young adults and minors to get tattooed. Youth with tattoos are seen as being at risk for negative consequences resulting from their tattoos, including barriers “...limiting adolescents' exploration of conventional social roles and identities during the transition to adulthood” (Silver et al. 2009:532). Most quantitative research into the correlation between social deviance and tattoo ownership focus on college-aged populations (Armstrong et al. 1999, Koch et al 2010) or adolescent populations in middle or high school (Silver et al. 2009).

Under investigation are mostly demographic and behavioral characteristics of individuals with more than zero tattoos. Behavioral histories before acquiring a tattoo are given focus first. These include previous run-ins with the justice system, drug use, sex, drinking, tobacco use and other negatively-viewed behaviors. School achievement, family life and other demographic characteristics are also measured. Most of this research is conducted by surveys. These factors are then compared to those of other individuals of the same demographic range with no tattoos, in an attempt to find what type of individual is most likely to get one or more tattoos, and how having a tattoo is an indicator of their behavior in society at large (Silver et al. 2009, Drews et al. 2000, Nathanson et al 2005).

General findings for research targeting adolescents and young adults finds that individuals who are tattooed are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior. Risk-taking behavior is defined differently by different authors, but usually involves the following: recreational drug use, binge drinking, high number of sexual partners, and frequent tobacco use (Silver et al. 2009, Armstrong 1991). Though these studies focused mostly on younger

populations, the deviant behaviors being measured reflect the perceived activities of the stereotypical tattooed deviant of any age, such as drug use, petty crime and excessive drinking (Irwin 2001:58).

Irwin (2001) approached tattooing and links to deviance in a unique way. In a study based on in-depth interviews, rather than quantitative data, she applied Sykes and Matzas (1957) techniques of neutralization to analyze how tattoo individuals legitimated getting their first tattoo. She concluded that the methods which individuals use to legitimate their tattoos to family/friends/employers directly resemble the ways that criminals attempt to shirk responsibility for committing acts of crime.

#### *Limitations of the Deviance Approach to Tattoo Research*

One problem with research of this type is that the number, visual design, purposes, and location of an individual's tattoos, if measured at all, are usually not analyzed in the final results, and every person with more than zero tattoos is lumped together in the same population. If distinctions are drawn among the so-called tattooed populations being researched, it is only to reinforce the idea that more tattoos correlates to increased levels of social deviance.

This problem is identified by Silver et al (2009:534), who explain that, since they did not ascertain the "size or location" of the tattoo, nor "what image the tattoo depicted," the results of their study may be limited, since "[a] small rose tattooed on the ankle may signify quite a different orientation toward conventionality than a gang emblem tattooed on a neck." Like Silver's study, most other quantitative research I read exhibited this same lack of specificity. The raw statistical results of such studies, that individuals with more than zero tattoos engage in

social deviance at a higher rate than those with zero tattoos, are difficult to argue against. The problem I find here is that such research fails to properly address the variability of the population being used to draw such conclusions. The example given earlier of a rose tattoo on an ankle compared to a gang insignia on a neck only hints at the depths of variability of the population being studied. What kind of suggestions addressing tattooing's relation to deviance can be offered when the research population is almost as varied as the population in general? Even if tattooed individuals have higher deviance rates than non-tattooed, of what use is this fact when just about any given individual may have a tattoo(s)? Also, what new information about tattooing is gained?

Further unsettling is that this type of research is not an artifact of the pervasive conservative sentiment regarding bodily appearance that was widespread in past decades. This research is continually being carried out and published. It seems that “sociologists, psychologists, and the majority of cultural anthropologists” are committed to “classifying tattooing processes within the broad category of social deviance or personal pathology” (Atkinson 2003:vii), even in an era when the tattoo is more popular than ever.

### *Personal Meanings*

“[R]esearchers find that people use tattoos to express who they are, what they have lived through, and how they see themselves in relation to others and their social worlds” (Kang & Jones 2007:42).

“[T]he tattoo [is] a conceptual latchkey—a tool that may enable researchers to begin to

unlock the complicated relationship between the body, self-identity and society” (Kosut 2000:79).

Symbolically, tattoos are a form of non-verbal communication. These messages may “...address specific individuals or communities of people” (Kosut 2000:85). Some individuals plan on participating in this exchange, like one individual interviewed by Kosut, saying her tattoos served to show that she is “...not your typical whatever” (2000:85), but others may attempt to distance themselves from that mentality by placing their tattoos on intimate or easily-covered areas of the body.

The reasons for choosing where on the body someone decides to tattoo themselves, the design of the tattoo, and its size are probably as varied as the reasons individuals would give as to *why* they have tattoos. Atkinson writes of one tattoo researcher who compiled a comprehensive list of the “twenty-eight different reasons why individuals purport to redesign their bodies through tattooing” (2003:158). These twenty-eight reasons were not the only ones respondents ever mentioned, but represented the final categories their reasons were ascribed to. With so many possible reasons for getting tattooed, interview based research tends to be the method of choice for researchers interested in the personal narratives behind tattoos and how those narratives affect a person's self-perception and their perception by society—how they will express themselves (Kosut 2000).

### *Self-Expression*

Though the term self-expression may seem overly-broad, the different personal meanings that individuals ascribe to their tattoos, or the reasons they give for acquiring those tattoos, can

be boiled down to a desire to express themselves--to outwardly make a physical statement about who they are. This expression can be directed towards themselves, towards others, or both. One interviewee from Atkinsons's research (2003:152) says it thusly, “[i]nstead of hiding who we are, and celebrating how different we are from one another, we've hidden under drab and uninspired clothes...I don't want to look completely like everyone else, and I don't want them to look like me exactly.” Generally this self-expression through one's tattoos is intended to separate the individual from the masses—they are a “...rejection of mainstream categories and ideologies...” (Kosut 2000:87). One doesn't have to read far into most qualitative research on tattoos to find this attitude--that by getting tattooed an individual is somehow rejecting the culture-at-large (whatever that is). One example of this attitude is given by an individual in Kosut's (2000) study, “I don't prescribe to the mentality of generations before me, of my parents' generation where you have to be clean-cut. I still plan on being a productive member of society, but I don't have to look like I am...” (87-88).

Clearly, if the culture at large still thinks of tattoos as being marks of deviance, many people who get tattooed have the same feeling and engage in the practice almost specifically because it is a way to count themselves out of the mainstream. This is a bit paradoxical, since the popularity of tattooing has been, and continues to increase across the country (Armstrong et al 1999). With so many people choosing to get tattooed thinking the act will take them out of the mainstream, how long will it take—how many people doing that same thing—before it no longer achieves this effect? This idea will be brought up again later.

### *Gender and Self-Expression*

Tattooing, usually associated with men (Kang and Jones 2007:42) is increasingly being practiced by women as well; roughly half of “tattooed people are women, according to various sources” (43). Women are increasingly participating in a practice that has historically been dominated by men. Research targeting women with tattoos finds that women often give different reasons for getting tattoos than men and offer distinct viewpoints on their own experiences with the practice (Kang and Jones 2007). The best articles I found on self-expression through tattooing focused mainly on women (Kang and Jones 2007, Kosut 2000). This isn't surprising considering that it was only in recent decades that tattooed women have been written about as anything other than deviant, if written about at all (Armstrong et al 1999). Now, rather than being viewed as intrinsically deviant for getting tattooed, women are using tattooing to celebrate empowerment and “to reclaim their bodies from traumatic experiences, including disease and abuse” (Kang and Jones 2007:44).

Men, when addressed about their tattoos in these articles, are queried in a more specific manner than women. For example, Kosut interviewed men, but the specific reasoning was to find out about their tattoos that reflected brand-name images. Some men are quoted, talking specifically about being 'neo-primitive' or about how they deal with their tattoos in the workplace. Kang and Jones (2007:44) write that “...men are more likely to use tattoos to reinforce traditional notions of masculinity...” which rings true with the conclusions of the previously mentioned quantitative research into tattoo ownership—equating tattoo ownership with increased legal deviance, physical violence, substance abuse, etc.



### *Commodification and Loss of Meaning*

“More recently, tattoos have filtered into mainstream culture through a process of commodification and mediation. In addition to members of the working class and groups typically relegated to societies fringe, sports heroes, super-models and sorority girls are 'sporting ink'” (Kosut 2008:81).

The general consensus of the deviance approach to researching tattoos is that tattoo ownership is significantly linked with social and legal deviance. Qualitative research on tattooing is less obsessed with tattooing's relationship to deviance and seeks more to illustrate the personal reasons and meanings individuals ascribe to their tattoos. Almost ubiquitously, the reasons people give for getting tattooed can be traced back to a desire to stand out from the mainstream—to be different and unique in a way that other people are not.

Writing that focuses on the current state of the practice—on its evolution and commodification—presents a somewhat paradoxical approach to tattoos and tattooing. Rather than focus on tattooing's past ties to deviance or the subjective reasons that individuals proffer for participating in the practice, the subset of academia that is interested in the commodification of tattoos attempt to situate the tattoo as having been all but accepted by the mainstream. In this vein, links between deviance are cast aside as being based on historical stereotypes (Kosut 2006, Adams 2009) and personal agency in all aspects of tattooing—the decision to first become tattooed, where on the body to place it, choosing a design, choosing a shop—is threatened to be subsumed by media and economy's influence on the practice. Tattoos may no longer be subcultural. They now “often signify trendiness and conformity, rather than rebellion and transgression” (Kosut 2006:1038).

### *Tattoos as commodities*

According to Atkinson, we are in what he calls the “Super Market Era” (2003:46) of tattoos. This era is characterized not only by a high number of tattoo shops across North America, but also by increasing social acceptance of the practice and tattoos being treated like a commodity in capitalist-style market economy.

With increasing medicalization and professionalization, tattooing has received increasing amounts of attention in the mass media over the past three decades (Adams 2009:103). After analyzing a large number of popular and academic articles specifically concerning tattoos and/or tattooing, Adams (2009) found that “...these pieces represent tattooing as a practice that is a mostly harmless expression of taste and fashion, rather than deviant affiliations” (112). Clearly, “[P]opular print discourses have contributed to the erasure of early images and meanings of tattoo by recreating tattoo as a middle-class cultural practice with inherent aesthetic value, distancing modern tattooing from its working-class history” (Kosut 2006: 1043). As the media perpetuates negative stereotypes about tattoos less and less, the practice, with its increasing recognition, is free to head towards the mainstream, to become acceptable to populations that once abhorred it. It becomes “...differentiated from the deviant 'bad old days' when tattooing was still in the closet...” (Kosut 2006:1044).

Now, being seen as fashionable and increasingly acceptable, tattoos can be bought and sold more freely than ever—they have become commodified. No longer does one have to search out a tattoo shop in a seedy area of town; they have become a staple in most average-sized American cities (Atkinson 2003). Neither do they have to risk plunging themselves into the

depths of some subcultural stigma. If the general public wants to emulate what they see from the “...media outlets that shape the terrain of mass culture” (Kosut 2006:1037), they can just go to a local tattoo studio and charge it on their credit cards, as VISA once advertised, regarding tattoo shops, “...you can charge *everything* on your credit card, including body modifications” (Kosut 2006:1039). Kosut later says, though, that even with the current commodification of the tattoo it “...cannot be compared with the act of purchasing a pair sneakers” (2006:1041).

Upwards of 15% of adults in the U.S. have tattoos, and “the figure rises to 28 percent for adults younger than 25” (Kang and Jones 2007:42). Purchasing a tattoo is more bit more involved than something like shopping for clothes. It requires choosing a shop, choosing an artist, the pain of application, and a lengthy healing process (Kosut 2006:1041-1042). Still, increasing visibility, acceptability, and the number of people involved prove that tattooing is rising out of its past deviant associations and becoming a commodity in mainstream North America. Even if some researchers are considering tattooing to have fully left subculture and gone mainstream, the wealth of writings discussed earlier indicate that tattooing still has some journey left if it is to ever leave all its stereotypes behind. Even then, Atkinson may be correct in saying “...though cultural attitudes about tattooing are clearly shifting, it would be fallacious to assume that enthusiasts themselves seek a widespread cultural acceptance of tattoos” (Atkinson 2003:183).

### *Tattoos as advertising*

After being pillaged by mainstream society and turned into a commodity, the next logical step was for tattoos to be used as advertisements (Adams 2009, Kosut 2006, Orend and Gagne

2009). Even with increasing mainstream acceptance, tattoos still have an air of “coolness” and are being used to “assist in selling products—from vodka to cars” (Kosut 2006:1039).

Advertising executives have even considered using professional sports stars adorned with temporary tattoos during televised games to advertise their company and products, against the rules of most professional sports (Kosut 2006:1039).

Orend and Gagne (2009) interviewed a small sample of individuals who had corporate logo tattoos, attempting to address whether these individuals were “...passive agents succumbing to commodification and social pressures to conform or whether those who modify their bodies are active agents in an exercise of power” (494). Though their sample was small, consisting of twenty-one subjects, several tattoo artists they spoke with informed them that corporate logo tattoos were becoming more and more common.

They found that most of their subjects believed that, in the past, having a few tattoos represented some sort of cultural rebellion, but in present times this is no longer the case. The respondents held that mainstream society had taken away the power of normal tattoos, and their use of corporate logo tattoos was an exercise of power to reinvent the meanings of a capitalist symbol (Orend and Gagne 2009:502). In contrast to what their informants claimed, during interviews the researchers found that most subjects reproduced the discourse of whatever company their logo tattoo belonged to. The respondents with Apple tattoos “...believed that users of that computer brand were inherently more creative and 'hip' than PC users...” (Orend and Gagnes 2009:504). Even though “[i]dividuals who acquire corporate logo tattoos” are attempting to make the logo into something more than an advertisement, “it must be noted...that [the] power” to use and change that symbol “is created by the culture industry and supported by

corporate capitalism” (Orend and Gagne 2009:512). The respondents, whether they intended to or not, are basically walking billboards, advertising products to whomever can see their tattoos.

### *Loss of Meaning*

“...I'm going on to the next step and becoming heavily tattooed because havin' one or two tattoos is pretty normal now” (Orend and Gagne 2009:502).

Across the literature regarding tattoos and tattooing, it is clear that the practice is incredibly varied, not only in who does it and how they do it, but in how it is regarded by mainstream society. Every article used for this review made some mention of tattooing's current or past associations with deviant stereotypes. It appears that some, like the respondent quoted in the start of this section, feel that mainstream acceptance of tattooing is watering down the subcultural meanings that it once had. The commodification of tattoos and their use in (or as) advertising (Kosut 2006, Adams 2009, Orend and Gagne 2009) show that tattoos are definitely more acceptable in mainstream society and not just for “bikers and other low-lives, but educated professionals” (DeMello 1995:38), movie stars, athletes, and other pop-culture icons (Kang and Jones 2007). On the other hand, the wealth of writing that attempts to link tattooing with deviance, and the constant mentioning of stereotypes, is evidence that tattoos have not fully migrated out from marginalized subculture to full acceptance by the mainstream.

Tattooing's status is “...destined to weaken as subcultural signs eventually exhaust their potential to provoke” (Kosut 2006:1038). As such, individuals still seeking to use tattoos as a sign of uniqueness or rebellion need to up “...the ante...” if they wish to continue using “...tattoos

as a form of resistance” (Orend and Gagne 2009:502). In the case of Orend and Gagne's respondents (2009), they felt that this upping of the ante could be done by receiving a high number of tattoos, tattooing the face, neck, and hands, or by attempting to pirate a logo from a corporation. Yamada writes that “[i]n traditional society, the meaning of tattoos was social and collective, projecting certain images such as criminality and tribal traditions, whereas in contemporary society social linkages are no longer as important. Rather, the purpose of being tattooed becomes more personalized and individualized” (2009:325). Considering the growing influence of western-style tattooing in Japan, a country with a deep, unique tattoo history of its own, Yamada (2009) found that traditional Japanese tattoo artists are upset with the ways that Western society has popularized tattooing and stripped it of meaning. This meaning loss can be considered the result of the real—traditional tattooing—being replaced with simulation—western style tattooing born out of Japanese tattooing (Baudrillard 1994, 2009). Japanese tattooing first began influencing Western styles, but the process has come back full circle as western style tattoos now dominate the Japanese tattoo market, pushing the traditional styles and methods to the shadows (Yamada 2009). What was once a spiritual, highly regimented cultural tradition has—through its growing popularity in both mainstream Japan and North America—forced traditional tattoo artists in Japan to either “preserve or lose their tradition” (Yamada 2009:336).

Western society does not have the rich history of tattooing that cultures like Japan do (Yamada 2009). The meanings individuals attributed to their tattoos during Atkinson's 'Rebel Era' likely differed greatly from the meanings tattoos held previously in North America and around the globe. Individuals lamenting the co-opting of tattoos by mainstream society here in

North America are not the first group of tattooed people to feel that their experience is losing its meaning. Traditional tattoo artists in Japan have been experiencing the same meaning-loss as the popularity of tattoos rises.

The idea proffered here by traditional tattoo artists (Yamada 2009), tattooed individuals who see their tattoos as an exercise of their own agency (Orend and Gagnes 2009), and tattooed individuals attempting to be different or unique (Kosut 2000; Kosut 2006; DeMello 1995; Kang and Jones 2007), is that any change which *increases* acceptance or exposure of tattoos and tattooing is a negative one. Any change regarding the practice is seen as an insidious one that further erodes whatever legitimacy or validity the practice once held for them. Have tattoos and the practice of tattooing really lost meaning or has its meaning simply been changing over time? To answer that question it would have to be established that tattoos, in the past and present, held some sort of intrinsic meaning apart from the person they were on, the context in which they were applied, the culture, and so on. This is obviously impossible because tattoos would then have *no* meaning if removed from the context surrounding them. But, finding whatever meaning they *do* have seems to be just as improbable, as the plethora of factors surrounding any tattoo are so varied—who is getting the tattoo, why they are getting it, the design of the tattoo, the size, the location on the body, and the rest of an inexhaustible list of reasons for why anyone does *anything* to their bodies or otherwise.

### *The client-artist interaction*

The relationship between an artist and a client, and the act of tattooing itself, is unique in the service industry. Similar to the hairstylists described by Sheane (2011), tattooing is one of

the few business transactions where the service provider has a “license to touch” (147). During such an intimate act, the artist must appear attentive to the clients needs and “manage their clients emotional state” to provide the best service possible. Providing a high level of service increases the likelihood that a first time customer will become a repeat customer, a relationship beneficial for both parties involved.

At the same time, through the interaction, modern artists attempt to communicate that their work is a special, creative type of service. This emphasis on the artistic and creative nature of being a tattoo artist attempts to move tattooing out of it's previous roots in deviant subcultures. No longer is the artist a “low status service occupation,” instead it is presented as a “respected profession with intrinsic rewards and significant levels of creativity” (Ocejo 2010:180). Like the bartenders interviewed by Ocejo (2010), tattoo artists take pride in working closely with their clients and making use of their own “aesthetic sensibilities” to create a unique experience with a client, an in depth one, that “separates their own brand from those more common versions of it” (184).

### ***What is Missing From Current Research***

While there is a wealth of academic literature that focuses on tattoos and tattooing, there are some ideas that are passed over entirely and some that don't receive adequate attention. Even with this large body of articles and several in-depth books covering almost every aspect of tattooing, specifically Atkinson's 2003 book *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*, I couldn't find adequate discussion regarding a few things I argue should be better understood. What follows here is a brief discussion of four areas that deserve more focus in future research.



## *Permanence*

“Tattoos invite a level of engagement because they become a permanent addition to the body/self” (Kosut 2006: 1042).

Human bodies and their characteristics give off signs that others react to (Kosut 2000:79). Rather than use their bodies to display signs of a temporary nature, some individuals, as Kosut puts it, “...choose sign vehicles of a permanent nature, such as tattooing” (2007:79). Some individuals enjoy and desire the idea of permanence and the symbolic importance of that concept. One individual interviewed by Kang & Jones (2007:43) told them that she and her fiancé planned to be tattooed on the day they get married, saying that it would symbolize “...permanence, something long lasting, but also a journey” (43). One woman, describing how her tattoos challenge traditional gender norms (Kang & Jones 2007:44), referenced how the permanence of her tattoo(s) “...demonstrate[d] a deep and tangible commitment to alternative gender definitions” (Kang& Jones 2007:44). She states that other attempts to challenge the norms of feminine physical appearance are simply superficial, unlike her tattoos.

Historically, a tattoo's permanence may also dissuade an individual from participating in the practice, according to the traditional Japanese tattoo artists interviewed by Yamada (2009), especially in Japan's feudal era when tattoos were only openly displayed by convicts and criminals. With modern technology, though, the fear of permanence is less of an issue. Using specifically designed medical lasers, tattoo removal is not only entirely possible (Yamada 2009, Kosut 2000, Adatto 2004) but also a booming business all on its own (Adams 2009). It is expensive, painful, takes several treatments and may never *totally* erase thick, dark tattoos, but

who knows where the technology will go in the future. The effectiveness of tattoo removal lasers has increased greatly in just the past few decades (Armstrong et al 1999). The results are not entirely perfect, but they are close enough that considering a tattoo indisputably permanent is becoming increasingly questionable.

Traditional Japanese tattoo artists feel that tattoos are not permanent, but for entirely different reasons. As one artist interviewed by Yamada stated, “[a tattoo] will be burned to ashes if one dies. Tattoos are not permanent. The chances that tattoos are paid attention to are only limited to a life” (2009:330).

#### *Tattoos Today: What are they?*

“The new tattooees are not exotic or deviant others—they are everyday people with aesthetic sensibility” (Kosut 2006:1044).

Some sort of breakdown, a fracturing, has happened. Do tattoos today have the same meaning as tattoos did in the past? It's difficult to delineate the myriad reasons that tattoos *used* to carry from the meanings they carry *now*, as several categories overlap. In the past, just because soldiers, sailors and policemen got tattoos to signify in-group solidarity (Atkinson 2003) before tattoos were adopted by criminals, convicts, and biker-gangs for the same purpose doesn't mean that these people were utilizing tattoos for different reasons. The way society treats the two groups is different, but their tattoos end up meaning the same thing. Also, just because in-group solidarity was a past use of tattoos doesn't mean that they can't, or aren't, being used the same way today.

Today, unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, a person with a tattoo is not commonly stereotyped as being some sort of career deviant. However, the attitude still exists in academic writing that there is some significant correlation between tattoo ownership and deviance. Even if the writing isn't focused on probing this relationship, virtually any writing on the subject includes a mention of it. On one side is the view that tattoos have gone mainstream, been commodified, and are on their way to becoming nothing more than a common, fashionable body modification. On the other side is writing that still seeks to place tattooing into a subculture more likely to engage in deviance.

Respondents in Orend and Ganges' (2009) study believed that tattooing's increasing mainstream acceptance is bad for the practice. Individuals interviewed by Kang and Jones (2007) celebrated tattoos as marks of individualism, spirituality and agency on the part of their owners, regardless of whether or not they are accepted by the mainstream. With just these two interpretations of what tattoos mean, and the unimaginable amount of various personal reasons individuals have for their tattoos, the idea that tattoos can be pinned down as meaning any one thing in particular becomes a shaky one.

The tattoo seems to be caught in some sort of flux, used and sported by both mainstream society and marginalized groups.

*More than zero: What is this tattooed population?*

The most significant problem in existing research on tattoos is that they treat any individual with more than zero tattoos as generally being part of the same group. This tendency is easy to find across all three areas that have been reviewed above. This idea was mentioned in

the introduction, but becomes more disquieting here, after seeing the paradoxical nature of how the mainstream views tattoos, how respondents view tattoos and the conclusions of academic research on tattoos.

I use the word paradoxical because it best describes how the ideas, concepts and insights found throughout the literature are in conflict with one another. If a higher number and more varied types of individuals are getting tattooed (Kosut 2000; 2007, Kang and Jones 2007, Atkinson 2003, Adams 2009) how much longer can researchers attempt to draw conclusions from, and make generalizations about, a group that is united only by one factor? This uniting factor, having more than zero tattoos, is becoming less powerful as the popularity of tattooing increases. Quantitative researchers are attempting to tease out a significant correlation between deviance and tattoo ownership (Koch et al 2010, Nathenson et al 2006, Silver et al 2009), oblivious to the differentiating factors involved in that tattoo ownership, while other researchers are heralding tattoos' acceptance by the mainstream, becoming something like a fashion choice rather than a part of some marginalized subculture (Orend and Gagne 2009, Kosut 2000; 2006, Kang and Jones 2007, Adams 2009). There is also exploratory research, mainly focused on the personal motivations for tattoo acquisition.

### ***Conclusion***

When the differences among tattooed individuals are not taken into consideration by researchers, it becomes possible to lump individuals together that may have no business being considered similar in any way. As noted earlier, in research where tattoos are not differentiated, someone with single, small rose tattoo can be assigned to the same population as someone with a

large insignia emblazoned on their neck (Silver et al. 2009). This should be of some concern, as the two individuals likely vary in significant ways regardless of both of them having more than zero tattoos.

This project investigates the different ways clients and artists interacted and how those varying interactions *significantly* affect the tattooing process. I refer to this variation as *significant* because the multitude of differences among tattooed people needs to be considered when doing research on tattooed individuals. Delineating groups based on these differences is not necessary. What's necessary is to illustrate and understand that there are significant differences among tattooed people—significant enough that these differences must be considered and applied whenever researching tattooed populations.

The idea of the client-artist interaction encompasses a range of factors. The client-artist interaction begins with how the client ended up at a particular shop and chose a particular artist. Did the client look at other shops first? Did they look at several artists' portfolios containing previous work? The client-artist interaction continues based around what image the client wants to get tattooed and what the artist thinks about it (whether or not they make these thoughts known to the client.) The friendliness of the shop environment and the tattoo artists are influencing factors on the client-artist interaction. Are all clients treated equally by the artists? More factors are involved in this interaction, including whether or not this is the client's first tattoo, whether the client wants a custom piece of artwork, a premade design, or a modification of a premade design.

The tattoo process is harder to describe clearly than the client-artist interaction because the process includes several of the same factors. The *tattooing process* is primarily

conceptualized by the application of the tattoo and a client's continuing (or not continuing) participation in the tattoo project. Will the client come back to a specific artist? What kind of impact did the shop make on the client? Are the client's tattoos part of a cohesive project, or more spur-of-the-moment? There is also reciprocal relationship between the two parts of the research question. For example, if a client is a regular customer of a particular artist, such a factor is part of both the client-artist interaction and also of the tattooing process.

The client-interaction consists of all factors that influence and characterize how the client and the artist come together for a tattoo. The tattooing process is the overarching whole that surrounds the interaction from then on and may be influenced by some of the same factors that were part of the initial client-artist interaction. The first client-artist interaction begins the tattoo process and from then on, there is a reciprocal relationship between the two.

A second goal for this project is to provide a brief ethnography of tattoo artists in Montana and investigate their attitudes in regards to the issues in tattooing discussed previously—the relationship between tattoo ownership and social/legal deviance, personal meanings behind tattoos, the commodification of tattooing and its changing meanings, and also their thoughts on what is missing from common discourse involving tattoos. In addition to understanding the client-artist interaction and how it affects the tattooing process, this second aim of the project will use the tenets of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990) to allow data that is “pertaining to the phenomenon and...relevant to the specific area of study” to emerge and be analyzed without a preconceived theoretical bias.

## **Data and Methods**

### *A brief note on issues of access*

One could think that, since I myself have tattoos, entree into the research setting would be fairly easy. Such an assumption reflects one of the issues I'm hoping to address with this project—the assumption that, in general, simply owning a tattoo(s) is enough for full membership in some group. As hinted in the introduction, I am usually hesitant to openly show and/or discuss my tattoos with strangers. Often this hesitance is even greater if the other individual is tattooed, specifically if they are *more heavily and/or visibly* tattooed than I am. My past experience has shown me that judging other people's tattoos or making assumptions about the person based on their tattoos is common in conversational exchanges between tattooed individuals. Due to this, I believed that having tattoos myself would either do nothing to help my access to data or possibly even hinder it. I didn't want to be judged and passed off as someone not worth the artists' time simply because of how they felt about my tattoos.

When I first started getting tattooed several years ago, the most awkward visits to my tattoo shop were when the tattoos on my arm didn't quite yet make a cohesive whole. Here I was, not even halfway done with the goal I had in mind, and I was surrounded by people who not only had *more* of the kinds of tattoos I wanted, they also were in the direct position to judge the idea(s) I had for my tattoo project. As my visits to the shop became more frequent and I became more familiar with my artists and the other workers at the shop, my unease all but disappeared. I was expecting to experience that sense of awkwardness and unease all over again.

Luckily, by the time I finished data gathering for this project, walking into a tattoo shop for the first time and marching up to the front counter to ask about observing and interviewing an

artist or two didn't faze me at all. The early phases of data gathering were much different though. As I live hundreds of miles from the shop where I go to get tattooed, I decided to start collecting data in Missoula, MT and visit shops in Billings, MT later on in the process. The first shop I visited in Missoula, which I'll refer to by the pseudonym Patriot Tattoo, left me so frustrated that it took several weeks before I was able to continue collecting data again. I had been to the shop two times before with a friend while he was getting some work done and had mentioned to the artist that I was planning on writing my thesis on tattoo artists. "Is that like an article for the school paper or something?" he said to me. I informed him that it was in fact the defining factor of receiving a Master's degree and he shrugged his shoulders. He told me I should come back the next day and talk to the owner, who wasn't present at the time. I went back the next day and was told by the receptionist that the owner wouldn't be coming in and that I should come back, yet again, the next day. She also informed me that lots of the artists at this shop, including the owner, were getting tired of "kids from the school coming around, asking to take pictures, annoying customers, and asking dumb questions for class projects."

I went back the next day, hoping that the hesitance I had encountered may have just been the result of a bad day and not directly cause by too much attempted research going on in the shop. The owner was there this time and I explained to him that I was hoping to interview an artist or two and maybe spend some time just hanging out at the shop. "As far as the interviews go," he said "...we're all really busy so I don't know about that. And the hanging out? Go for it, just don't bug us." I told him not to worry about it and left the shop. Looking back, it would have been entirely possible, and probably beneficial, to have done more observation at Patriot. The owner did give me some limited access and maybe I could have spent enough time there to



get a better understanding of the 'research fatigue' the shop was experiencing.

This failed attempt at data collection seemed to confirm my thoughts that the issue of access was going to be the most difficult part of my project. Weeks later I conducted a few interviews and some observation at shops in Billings that I had visited several times over the years. The research there went so well that it re-energized me to jump back into the less familiar shops in Missoula. At the next shop I went to in Missoula, I was received with some hesitance (more on that in a moment) but with at least superficial enthusiasm and friendliness. That visit garnered a good deal of talking about my project with the artist working the front counter and we scheduled a time for me to come back and conduct an interview.

When I used the word hesitance earlier, I'm referring to the reserved air with which artists and secretaries/receptionists spoke to me with when I would first visit a shop. It often took several minutes to explain things to them: No, I don't want a tattoo. I'm not writing a newspaper article. This isn't a class project. No, the interview doesn't need to be today, etc. Once those issues were cleared up and they began to understand the non-invasive style of observation I planned on doing and the open-ended nature that would characterize the interviews, things usually went very smoothly.

### *Data*

The data for this project consists of ten in-depth interviews with tattoo artists and roughly thirty hours of observation-based field notes. Time spent visiting the shop, asking to set up interviews, and time spent at the shops before and after the interviews was counted towards total observation time. It would often take three or four visits to a shop before an actual interview was

conducted. It was during these preparation visits, as well as the visits that ended with an interview, that I was able to spend time sitting around in the shop's common area watching customers come and go, make appointments with artists, have brief chats about their ideas for a tattoo, etc. Five of the ten interviews took place in lobby or waiting area of the shops and I was able to watch the shop activity and make mental notes of things to record in my field notes after the interview. See appendix B for the questions used during the interviews.

Interviewees were selected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling procedures. Three of the artists were sampled by convenience. Two of those three I had known personally through previous involvement at their respective tattoo shops. Not having any connections in Missoula, the third convenience interview was the result of entering the nearest local tattoo shop and asking to set up an interview with an artist. The remaining artists I interviewed were found using the snowball method, where my previous interviewees suggested and pointed me in the direction of certain individuals that were likely to participate in my research.

The thirty hours of observation were not evenly spread across the six shops I visited during data collection. More field notes were recorded at shops where I interviewed multiple artists. Six interviews took place in Billings, MT. Those six interviews spanned three shops. The interviews in Missoula spanned three shops—two of the artists interviewed in Missoula worked in the same shop. Seven of the artists were male and three were female.

### ***Methods***

My interviews employed an active interviewing style (Atkinson 2003:83). In active

interviewing “both the interviewer and the interviewee play interdependent and equally complicit roles” (Atkinson 2003:83). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and the interview schedule was used more as a loose guide to keep the conversation on track while keeping the interview casual and conversational. This was done to avoid an “artificial and conciliatory style of questioning” and “extend everyday talk and mutual exchange into the data collection process” (Atkinson 2003:87). With higher equity than is found in traditional interviews, active interviewing “heighten[s] trust between [the interviewer] and research participants” (Atkinson 2003:86).

Unlike Atkinson I used an audio recorder to capture the interview, rather than writing notes during and after the interview. Although given the option, none of the artists I interviewed declined to have our conversations recorded. Interviewees were asked what level of confidentiality they desired (ex: pseudonym). None of the artists wished themselves or their shops to remain confidential, but in the interest of confidentiality I will refer to each artist and their respective shops using pseudonyms. Nothing directly inflammatory was necessarily said by any of the artists. But, since talk about his or her clientele and quips/feelings/stories about other artists and shops were commonly mentioned, I feel it would be most appropriate to exclude names. I have used these same techniques for interviewing and observation in a semester-long project for a graduate qualitative methods course and was highly satisfied with the results.

Each interview was transcribed promptly after the interview took place. The transcriptions include most of the grammatical inaccuracies the artists used—run on sentences, repetition of words, improper word or grammar use, etc. In order to preserve the voice of my interviewees, I have attempted to keep quoted excerpts as true to life as what I heard during my

interviews. In certain cases, the need for clarity and conciseness called for minimal editing such as taking out excessive uses of the words 'like' or 'you know' or fitting together a sentence that was halted in the middle by excessive pausing and rephrasing. The spelling of words such as gonna, kinda, ya know, etc have also been preserved to more accurately represent the interviewees style of speaking.

The interview transcriptions and my field notes were loaded into Nvivo 8, a qualitative software suite, to find and organize different significant themes. I would search for words and themes that were commonly present across interviews such as art, business, apprenticeship, change, etc. After grouping larger themes such as these I could find the smaller factors that connected larger themes like how commodification was a part of both the artistic side of tattooing and the increasing professionalization of the practice.

I chose to interview tattoo artists specifically, rather than just tattooed individuals, or a mix of the two groups. The main reason for this decision was an effort to avoid too much discussion about the meanings of a particular person's tattoos. In a previous project I did on body modification, when talking to tattooed individuals I found it difficult to keep the conversation focused on the research questions—the conversations often degraded into a story about what their tattoos mean to them. For this project, I was not interested in investigating the personal meanings behind tattoos. The second reason for focusing on tattoo artists is that I believed they would offer better insights on the main queries of this project: what kind of significant variations are there among individuals with more than zero tattoos.

Tattoo artists work with, around, and on tattoos every day. At least for the time being, they have chosen to tattoo other people as an occupation. A majority of tattoos are likely applied

by tattoo artists in tattoo shops. Even a new artist that hasn't been in the business for long has likely worked on a large variety of individuals. It has been my experience that a lack of communication between the artist and a client immediately prior to and during the tattooing process is rare. Some sort of conversation, even if entirely superficial, usually takes place throughout the application of the tattoo. As a result, artists were able to describe the range of people that get tattoos, the different styles and designs that people get, the different ways clients approach the process, and offered their thoughts as to the differences and commonalities among people who get tattoos. Artists were able to provide much information on *how* his or her clients engaged in the tattoo process—things like how they choose their artist, if they research the shop, had they looked at previous work by the artist. Since they are involved in the industry, they also offered insider views on how the practice has been changing, the different stereotypes that abound, and how the clientele has changed.

In the interviews, I was looking for information from the artists to help understand their view of the clients they worked on. Through participant observation I was able to get a bit of data on the customers themselves without doing formal interviews with customers. Watching their body language, tone of voice and the amount they spoke with the artists, I was able to estimate their relative level of comfort in the shop and the rapport they had with the workers. Through this observation I got a look at a few of the different ways that customers involved themselves in the tattoo process, as described by artists during the interviews. For example, have they come in before? Are they choosing a design off the pictures on the wall, or did they bring in their own custom image? Is this his or her first tattoo? Why did they choose this shop and not another one? What is the image being tattooed?

Using both observation and interviews, I was able to compare the information artists provided about their clients to the way I saw clients acting in the shops. Though my data ended up being more heavily weighted to the side of the tattoo artist, those interviews, together with the observations I made highlighted a few significant variations among individuals getting tattooed. There was a number of ways artists characterized their clients and interactions with clients. The goal here is to identify and analyze the *significant* differences among individuals engaged in the act of tattooing, including differences in *how* they engaged in the tattooing process.

### ***Grounded Theory***

Rather than approach this project with a specific theoretical paradigm to guide inquiry—figurational-sociology (Atkinson 2003) or symbolic interactionism (Kosut 2000)—or provide only ethnographic description (DeMello 2000), I approached the project and data collection in its entirety following the basic guidelines of grounded theory. Grounded theory, as described by Strauss and Corbin is “inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents” and is characterized by “data collection, analysis, and theory stand[ing] in [a] reciprocal relationship with one another. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area to study, and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (1990:23). During the early stages of this project, I often had trouble articulating a coherent research question, especially one that could line up with a particular theoretical methodology. When using grounded theory, though, having an open-ended research question is encouraged early on in the data process. Without beginning with a specific hypothesis to prove or disprove, “the research question begins

as a broad one. ...[t]he research question in grounded theory is a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied” (Strauss and Corbin 1990:38). Through this approach, and after analyzing my findings, I can accurately say that the main research question in this project concerns how to differentiate the tattooed population—describing differences between individuals with more than zero tattoos.

### ***Limitations***

The generalization of my results is limited in applicability by the small population my sample represents. My study is mainly limited to a convenience/snowball sample of tattoo artists, customers, and shops operating in Montana's two largest cities, Billings and Missoula, respectively. With grounded theory, though, this project offers more than just the sliding of new data into a pre-existing theoretical frame work or simply describing the phenomenon I was studying. I can begin to tease out theories about how the tattooed population varies and identify which of these variations is significant.

### **Findings**

First, I will discuss some of the reoccurring topics and issues that came up while interviewing the artists. These data, while not pertaining *directly* to variation in the tattooed population are necessary for understanding the day to day experiences of the artists—the places they work, what they had to say, how they said it—all these parts of the phenomenon are vital to be exposed to an analyze.

The contents of the following pages are meant to provide an introductory background to

those unfamiliar with the basics of being a working tattoo artist, ala Becker (1953). Discussion will focus on how a person becomes a tattoo artist, how tattoo shops function, how artists work from day to day, and various other themes that reoccurred across the interviews and observation. This overview will appear overly simplified to anyone familiar with western-style tattoo shops but has been simplified purposefully in order to easily frame the environment that is being discussed.

### *Day to day worklife*

Six out of the ten artists I interviewed started out as apprentices. Three of those six were technically still apprentices, but far enough along in the process that they were steadily employed and regularly tattooing clients. This is in contrast to the early stages of apprenticeship where the job is less than glamorous. Leona, an artist at Robot Tattoo in Missoula, said:

The first year, you basically pay to clean the toilets. Fortunately for me, having already done a one year apprenticeship, I got rid of a lot of the bitch work that you have to do around the shop. You start low. I remember one time somebody puked in the lobby and one of the apprentices had to clean it. It was awesome.

Landing a job as a tattoo artist without previous experience is basically unheard of. Artistic skill of some level is required to become a tattoo artist. Having a strong portfolio<sup>1</sup> is the biggest factor to getting an apprenticeship. The process of getting the apprenticeship usually goes the way Nikka, an artist at Flesh Tattoo in Missoula, described when talking about getting hers, saying “I took my portfolio around and asked the shops if anyone was willing to apprentice me. And let them take a look at my stuff and I ended up here.” Isaac, another artist at Flesh, landed his apprenticeship the same way: “I started drawing. Got a good portfolio together, showed it to

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<sup>1</sup> Collection of original artwork drawn by the aspiring apprentice



Dave [the shop owner] and started the apprenticeship. Then I started answering phones and basically cleaned my way to the back.” The better the prospective applicant is at drawing, tracing, coloring and creating their own original artwork, the more likely they are to be accepted into an apprenticeship.

How long the apprenticeship lasts and how long it takes before the apprentice can stop cleaning toilets and start tattooing customers varies from shop to shop. However, it largely depends on the skill of the apprentice. The general range that it took my interviewees to stop apprenticing and begin tattooing clients was somewhere between six months and two years.

### *Artistic Skill*

Most of the artists had some sort of basic post-high school education in art, or as Isaac told me, chose to pursue tattooing because “It’s like art school. It really is.” Amy, the owner of City Tattoo, had received a college degree in K-12 art education but couldn’t find a steady job. Years later, while managing a restaurant, a quip from a hostess sparked her interest in tattooing:

In 1999, my hostess—I had painted the windows and did a bunch of artistic things—she said “Why haven’t you done anything with your art?” And I said “What do you do with art? What do you do?” I had a good job, benefits, [I was a] General Manager. And she said, “Well my son just started tattooing about a year ago and he loves it. He’s like you, he’s artistic, but he’s tattooing now. Would you ever think to do tattoos?” I got my apprenticeship in 1999 and started tattooing in 2000. And one of the most exciting things about it to me was that the skills that I had, my skills from my art, had this huge avenue now.

Jordan, an artist at White Sparrow Tattoo in Missoula, echoed this sentiment saying “He [the shop owner at Robot Tattoo] asked me if I’d ever be interested in tattooing. At the time I was studying literature at the university to be a teacher. I thought about it. I thought it might be

kinda a cool thing to do, to make a living being an artist.” As individuals already interested in art, becoming a tattoo artist situates someone in an occupation that is surrounded, influenced, and—literally—defined by art. Nikka from *Flesh* put it this way: “If you want to be a tattoo artist, you can be a tattoo artist and not have any artistic skills, but you can't do any custom pieces or anything like that. Being artistic [like me], tattooing was definitely a good medium to learn. It's definitely a profession that I love...” Since the actual process of giving someone a tattoo is akin to tracing, albeit on a different medium than paper, actually applying a tattoo doesn't require any abstract artistic skill. But, since there is more involved in being a tattoo artist than just applying the tattoo, it's important that the tattoo artist have some level of artistic skill. Also, as mentioned earlier, it would be difficult to find an apprenticeship without having a strong portfolio.

### *Shop Business*

The relationships between artists at a shop play a large role in the quality of the artists' workday and have a direct effect on how long an artist works at a particular shop. Once an artist has acquired the skills and equipment necessary to tattoo they have a large amount of freedom to quit a particular shop whenever they want. Tattoo artists are not paid by the owners of the shop—they receive payment directly from their clients. Some shop owners charge a monthly fee for the privilege to continue using the space to tattoo. More often though, the artist is expected to give the owner a certain percentage of what they earn from each tattoo or what they earn each week depending on whatever agreement the owner and artist have worked out. The fluid nature of this style of employment not only provides for, but almost encourages high rates

of turnover. This freedom doesn't exist in most other occupations. When asked if he always had to do what the shop owner wanted, Josh, an artist at City Tattoo in Billings, explained that “We have the ability to say no, or to quit whenever we want, cause we work for ourselves, and go find another job.” Aside from apprentices who are still learning to tattoo or under some sort of financial contract with the owner, the artists make most of the rules for themselves. Steve, another artist at City Tattoo said “...you aren't really accountable to anything. There's no overseeing body, you know?”

For the most part, the tattoo artists I interviewed had loose schedules. They were expected to be at the shop a little bit before their first appointment would arrive, and on days they didn't have any appointments scheduled they weren't required to show up. Steve, at City Tattoo, was absent for a week or more at a time during three of my four visits to the shop while collecting data (and several other times before I started collecting data for this project) due to his heavy participation in semi-professional Folfing. I asked him how he could afford to lose out on so much work and he replied “I'm as busy as I want to be. Doing stuff other than work. It helps.” Steve can continue to work at the shop even as he takes long breaks and vacations as long as he still pays the monthly fee for his space there.

During my data collection I witnessed firsthand the high turnover rate at tattoo shops. For example, during the five week span I spent trying to get an interview at Patriot Tattoo, two of the four artists working there quit. Jordan, the artist I interviewed at White Sparrow tattoo, had actually quit Robot Tattoo just a few days before I spoke to him. In fact, all the artists at White Sparrow had previously worked at Robot Tattoo. City Tattoo, unlike the other shops where I conducted research, has experienced almost no turnover since it opened in 2008. One factor for

high turnover is the amount of independence tattoo artists have to make decisions about how they want to do their job. I asked Steve at City Tattoo why it's so common for tattoo shops to experience high rates of turnover. He told me:

It's due to the nature of the business. The business attracts that type of person. Typically, traveling people. You don't find a whole lot of people that are willing to stick around and plant their roots down in the tattoo business. That's kinda just the nature of it you know. I think it has to do with the opportunities that a tattooer has. You're able to just go and do anything, wherever. You can just travel around and do it.

Leona at Robot put it this way, saying, "One of the biggest problems in this industry is people being super flaky. Like, tattoo artists, they run on their own schedules. Like... 'I don't get up till noon', like it's a big party, they stay out late..." Most studios have relatively easily fulfilled requirements for continued employment. As long as they are making money for the shop, artists are free to enjoy the benefits of an occupation few of the requirements of cliché nine to five workday. Sometimes they take advantage of that freedom, like staying out too late and missing morning appointments, for example, or quitting a shop on with little to no notice to the owner, knowing that they can tattoo just about anywhere they want.

I asked Josh at City Tattoo why there seemed to be such high turnover in the industry and why so often shops were founded by artists who had split from another shop. He said, "It's kinda how this business goes. It's a bunch of people that work for themselves and a lot of them have big huge inflated heads that don't fit in the same room. That's the hardest thing about working in this industry is finding someone to work with that's not going to drive you crazy." Sean, a former artist at Tattoo Art in Billings, put it this way:

It's such a competitive field and people are always trying to be better than the people that they are working with. That's how you make money. But anyway, it comes down to having lots of artists in one space. Big heads. Conflict.

In an occupation with so few formal rules, it's no wonder that there is such a high turnover rate in most of the shops I visited. Having a job that gives them so much flexibility—especially the ease of getting a different job—allows the artists to develop self-centered egos and attitudes. If an artist doesn't like a shop they are working at, they can simply quit and move on to the next one.

If a shop owner wants to minimize turnover, it's important that the artists in a shop get along. It's during the apprenticeship period that the owner and current artists see if the apprentice will be a good fit for the shop. Leona pointed out the importance of a good relationship among artists being paramount, saying “If we like you, if you like us, it's gonna work—if we all jive. If we don't, then, it's not going to work.” The level of camaraderie between artists at a shop, as shown here, is important for the quality of day to day work life for the artists.

Artist turnover also impacts the clients of a shop. If an artist is constantly quitting or changing shops, how much effort will a client who liked his or her work give to track that artist down? According to Steve, such a situation happens often: “People get burned you know. People start something and they like their artist and he just books it. It happens a lot. I'm glad that...it makes it more comfortable working around the same four people.” Steve has been one of the same four artists at City Tattoo since the shop opened in 2008. The friendliness between artists there helps prevent high turnover, which in turn makes for a more welcoming environment for clients since they won't have to wonder whether or not an artist they like will still be working at a shop if the client wants more work done in the future.

On the flip side, the shop owner can dismiss an artist at any time as well, which may limit

the large amount of behavioral freedom an artist has. Never during my research did an artist mention being fired from a shop or an owner mention having to fire someone. It is always a possibility though, as Josh told me, “If Amy wanted me to do something I didn't want to do, I could just say no and then walk out and leave. But...she'd have the choice of not letting me come back.” The owner allows the artist to use their space, so if an artist begins to develop a poor attitude or cannot/will not get along with the other artists they can be easily dismissed. It must be during the apprenticeship that the owner and current artists determine if the apprentice will fit in with the crew in order to avoid these kinds of problems.

### *Preferred Images*

The notion of having a unique tattoo was directly mentioned by six of the artists I interviewed. Leona at Robot told me that “Everything is pretty custom. I would say there is a ton, mostly 85 percent is custom.” White Sparrow was so centered on custom artwork that the studio lacked any flash art—premade tattoo images/designs usually printed on framed posters placed together in a large rack. Jordan told me “We definitely push the idea of custom artwork, we try as much as we can to say ‘bring us any ideas you have, but we're going to draw something for you.’ 90% of everything we do is custom. Which is why we don't have any flash.” I asked Jordan if such an attitude might upset a potential client who was dead set on a particular design or image. He replied:

Well, no, I think we sort of cater more to what they want. We make it known that, okay since you brought me this image that you got from the internet—which I have no problem with doing—if you want me to do it exactly like this, I can totally do that. Or, if you want, we can make something unique to you. We can customize it in some way, shape, or form. We're not here to make anybody feel stupid. If that's what they want to get, then that's what they want to get.

Jordan's behavior before I interviewed him backed up what he says in this quote. Just as I showed up for my interview with Jordan he had been setting up an appointment for a client. I watched as the young woman he was talking with showed him a picture of a tree tattoo that she wanted. He asked her a few questions, and she said that she was looking to get something similar to the picture or just recreate the picture. Jordan told her to leave the picture with him so he could draw something original based on the picture and that she should come back later in the afternoon to see if she liked what he drew. "Why don't you let me draw something for, if you like what I draw better we'll do that, if you don't we'll just do the other one," he said.

The idea of the custom tattoo is becoming more appealing to customers in recent years. DeMello writes that "contemporary tattooists prefer to do custom work...rather than using the flash taken directly off the wall" (2000:92). According to Amy at City Tattoo, "The trend, if I could say there is a trend, is that I [the clients] want something that no one else has. That's awesome." The push towards custom artwork described by Jordan and Amy is at odds with what I observed during my research. Most potential clients I saw coming into the shops asked for no changes to be done on the picture or drawing they brought in. Two times during my observation I was spending time with an artist while they were actively tattooing a customer, and both of those times the design was not customized. In one case it was a piece of flash art, and the other it was a reproduction of a man's family crest.

Although custom work is on the rise, several of the artists expressed discontent that so many people are still shying away from custom tattoos. Jordan had the most to say on custom tattoos out of all the artists, feeling that a non-custom tattoo didn't fit his definition of art. He

said “We want to give that idea of tattooing as an art form. We're not just tracers. We're not just tracing images out of a book that someone else has drawn.” Later in the interview though, he somewhat rescinded his fervent backing of custom tattoos, saying “If that's what they want to get, I have no problem doing it. It makes my job a lot easier. All I have to do is trace something out and put it on their skin.” Jordan's sentiment was echoed by Steve at City Tattoo:

If he likes it, he likes it. If he doesn't like it, he doesn't like it. And that's kinda the thing, I think that a lot of people assume that we're photocopyers. ‘This is what I want, and this is how it is.’ And it's just like...what they want is us to be a copy machine.

No artist actually laid out the requirements for a tattoo to be considered custom. DeMello (2000:92) considers custom tattoos to be “created by [the artist], usually with the help of the client.” This definition is overly broad, and doesn't accurately address the different levels of customization. Across the artists I interviewed, three main categories of tattoos that can be considered custom emerged. The first one consists of a completely original image created by the artist or by the client. This was Jordan's preferred style of custom tattoo. He said:

Every once in a while I'll just do a drawing for the hell of it and throw it up on Facebook and I'll be like...I really want to do this. Whoever wants to get this done gets it for a hundred bucks. Which works out really well for me, because I get to something I really want. Then I got a pretty cool tattoo running around town.

Even though the tattoo wasn't customized for the client, its uniqueness qualifies it as being a custom tattoo. A tattoo doesn't need to be specifically tailored for an individual client to be considered custom.

The second type of custom tattoo begins with an image—a client's artwork, a picture of the image they want tattooed, a picture of a unique tattoo, etc—that is then modified by the artist with or without the help of the client. This type of custom tattoo is what was in the works during



the previous description of Jordan's interaction with his future client. Custom tattoos of this style—modifications of mostly unique images—occupy the space between the original custom tattoo and the third category, the modified flash art tattoo.

Small changes to flash images, while technically custom by definition, least fit the motivation behind custom tattooing since the artist and/or client have such a small involvement in the creation of the image. This type of tattoo is the most common, according to Steve at City Tattoo. He told me that “Even now we don't do a lot of exact flash. What we get most often is flash designs with some small modification...” Commonly seen designs can be changed by the artist or the client to make this third type of custom tattoo. While not being as inherently custom as the first two categories—just small step away from being exact flash—these types of tattoos can still be artistically enjoyable for the artist. During my interview with Isaac from Flesh Tattoo, I asked him to describe who and what he tattooed most often. While he answered, he pulled down a stack of small, round pieces of paper tacked to the wall. The whole stack contained stencils of different styles of treble clefs. He told me “Anybody who likes music has to have a treble clef,” with a bit of humor in his tone. I asked if doing so many of the same tattoos became boring. He didn't respond directly to the question and instead started flipping through the stack of images. “I did this one on a girl who wanted both the treble and the bass clef” he said, showing me a stencil that contained a cluster of both the bass and treble clefs that formed a star. “And while I was showing her the stencils, she pushed them all together in a circle and came up with this. Every once in a while we have a cool idea that keeps the boredom away,” he said. The modification to the flash image was small, but created a tattoo that, according to Isaac was not only custom, but also enjoyable to tattoo.

Certain shops pushed the idea of customization more than others. At both Robot Tattoo and Flesh, walking through the front door brings you directly to a waiting room containing large amounts of flash art for customers to look through. As mentioned earlier, White Sparrow has no flash, only select pieces of artwork drawn by artists working at the shop. City Tattoo makes flash art available to the customers, but has cleverly laid out the shop in way that keeps it in the background, out of sight of the tattoo booths and the waiting area. Amy, the owner, said “There's tattoo shops that would be like ‘I can't believe she has flash in her shop.’ But this is not anything but inspiration.” This focus on custom artwork, rather than the repetition of classic images, accurately reflects Atkinson's (2003) description of the current Supermarket Era of tattooing, characterized by a multitude of styles, options and customizations available to clients (See appendix A). This wasn't always the case though, and the artists had many thoughts to offer on how the practice of tattooing and its image in the public eye have changed.

### ***How things have changed***

“The skill involved is quite a bit further than it used to be. The people doing it now are actually artists and not just sailors and drug dealers...” (Josh, City Tattoo)

Both past and current sociological research has attempted to link the ownership of tattoos/the practice of tattooing to increased amounts of social or legal deviance. Academia's concern regarding this perceived relationship springs mostly out of the Rebel Era (Atkinson 2003, See appendix A) and now it is all but impossible to find something written about tattoos or tattooing that doesn't make mention of these stereotypes. Even writing that seeks to exemplify a

new, non-deviant view of tattooing, is often required to mention historical stereotypes of deviance before it moves on to describe those very stereotypes as incorrect. This paper itself is now guilty of doing the same thing. More things have changed in the world of tattooing since the Rebel Era than just the stereotype of the tattooed deviant. The artists I talked with, even with the small range of just two years (at the lowest) to twelve years (the highest) spent in the industry, spoke of many changes to the practice they have noticed. The changes to factors such as stereotypes, technology, and trends directly influence the ways that clients go about involving themselves in the tattooing process.

### *Stereotypes*

I asked Isaac at Flesh what he thought of the stereotypes circling the tattoo culture and he nearly echoed the title of DeMello's (1995) article "Not Just For Bikers Anymore" by saying "it's a biker culture in its roots." Josh at City Tattoo had a similar disposition, commenting on how things were in the past: "It was more like you went to a fucking biker shop where they're fixing bikes and asked the guy and he goes in the back and comes out with something...needles or whatever." Tattooing's association with outlaw biker gangs was established, again, during the Rebel Era (see appendix A) and is discussed at length by Atkinson (2003) and DeMello (1995, 2000). The general population still considers tattoo ownership to indicate drug use, criminal history, promiscuous sexuality and various other negative life choices and behaviors (Armstrong et al 1999, Irwin 2001, Nathenson et al 2006, Silver et al 2009.) Whether or not such behaviors and choices are actually deviant is somewhat subjective, but even so, all the artists I talked to expressed disdain for the prevailing negative stereotypes that still surround tattooing, especially

in an era where they are more inaccurate than ever.

As I mentioned during the literature review, I consider the current state of tattoos and tattooing to be caught in some sort of flux. Tattooing “careened into the American mainstream in the 1990s” and has been becoming more popular ever since (Irwin 2001:49). Yet, as can be found in almost any writing about tattoos, negative stereotypes about tattoos and tattooed individuals still abound. For example, Swami and Furnham (2007) found that women with tattoos are more likely to be perceived as promiscuous and heavy drinkers. Leona at Robot had a particular experience where she felt was mistreated because of her tattoos:

I had to go to the emergency room like 4 years ago. I have my back done [tattooed]. I had a kidney infection and I was wearing a gown, but the back was open. The doctor came in and he would not touch me. He had me lay down and was like ‘feel your stomach and tell me if it hurts.’ I’m like ... ‘isn’t this your job?’ I mean kidney infections fucking hurt. I asked him what should I do for the pain, and he’s like ‘ibuprofen.’ I wrote a complaint to the hospital. He wouldn’t even touch me. God, I’m not like some drug addict in here you know.

Josh at City Tattoo talked of his distaste for the stereotypes he says get created by survey research on Tattoos. He said:

The problem with censuses and fucking things like that is they’re not concerned with anything but numbers. There’s people that come and they only ever get one tattoo. And I’m pretty sure they’ve never taken any kind of drug in their life, probably never drank. They go to church every Sunday.

Even given their increasing popularity, it seems that tattoos and tattooing still haven’t achieved full mainstream acceptance. Being stereotyped is one of the risks that may or may not keep an individual from participating in the tattooing process. Josh told me he’s “seen that a million times. People come in here with their families and they just pressure them into not doing something. You always get someone saying ‘how are you going to get a job with that?’ And the

only way to answer them is fuck you!” In Josh's case, it's easy to make such a statement. He's a tattoo artist. For other people who choose to get tattooed things aren't so simple, as owning tattoos can create serious risks to their occupational stability and family life (Atkinson 2003:221-228). The artist plays a pivotal role during that point in the client-artist interaction, especially when the client is considering his or her first tattoo. A good tattoo artist will help the client make an informed decision, either to get the tattoo or not.<sup>2</sup> Policies that don't allow for tattoos in the workplace and disdain for tattoos expressed by parents (Atkinson 2003: 212-217, Irwin 2001) are just two examples of how tattoos haven't actually been accepted by the mainstream. Getting a tattoo comes with the inherent risk of being stereotyped. Steve at City Tattoo put it this way:

You definitely have to take responsibility for that decision you are making. It's not like you were born in a wheel chair—you have a choice to get tattooed. People constantly complain that people are judging them based on their tattoos or whatever. Well, you did it to your damn self.

The stereotypes, while still around, are in decline. Evidence that tattooing isn't a practice engaged in mainly by social miscreants is easy to find. For example, four of the ten artists I spoke with had some sort of post-high school education, backing up Kang's assertion that the reputation of tattooing is moving from “that of criminals and laborers to that of artists and free thinkers” (2007:43). Artists are taking it upon themselves to help change the stereotypes. Josh spoke of what City Tattoo's owner, Amy, has done to this end:

I've seen so many people change their minds about tattoos because of meeting Amy. You're supposed to have a pleasant time here. She's taught us to make it a pleasant experience. If you walk into a shop and everyone's acting sketchy, you think they learned it in prison and are doing something trying to get back there. That's where Amy's turned it around and started to change the stereotype to where there's a lot more like...classy type people getting tattooed now than there used to be. So it's changing quite a bit. Within the next 10 years I see a pretty big turnaround. There's a lot of people that have

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<sup>2</sup> This point will be brought up later when directly considering the client-artist interaction, but is important to note here.

changed their mind. And mostly *for* tattoos, not changed to being against them.

Modern custom tattoo shops, with friendly service and environments, are helping to change stereotypes and creating a welcoming environment for the tattooing process to take place. This is unlike the tattoo shop of yesteryear—custom shops today “don't keep a bat behind the counter for protection” (DeMello 2000:20).

### *Trends, Technology, and loss of meaning*

As noted earlier in the section on customization, there has been a push towards original, custom tattoos as opposed to pre-made flash designs. Now that tattoo artists are less likely to be bikers or drug dealers and more likely to be *artists*, this is understandable. The desire for custom artwork, in Montana at least, has increased even in the last decade. Amy describes how things were when she first started tattooing in 2000:

I was doing 4 or 5 tattoos a day, 20 tattoos a week. That's a lot. They weren't the huge things that people are getting now. They were more isolated. Women got lower back...tramp stamps as they have been dubbed. I did at least 5 of those a week. Guys got armbands. And now armbands are like, “I got this stupid armband, now I want a sleeve, can you help me?” But there still is a trendy part. I don't like the trendy part.

The current trend that she is talking about, among custom tattoos, is the possibility for what was once a custom tattoo—unique to one person—to be reproduced on several other people. What originally started as a response to the stale repetitiveness of flash art for tattoo artists has now come back around in an example of postmodern irony. Rather than want the old trend—the flash art—people now want custom art, but not necessarily their *own* custom art. As long as the image wasn't originally flash, clients will still consider their taking of someone else's custom image as being legitimate. Amy explained to me “That's why sometimes my portfolio is not updated.

Because I end up doing a beautiful custom important tattoo for someone. If I take a picture of it, someone else is like ‘Oh my god I want that!’” Rather than wanting to spend the time or effort to work with an artist to create their own tattoo, some clients simply want to take an image that someone else spent the time and effort on to create. And, since it's not flash, it doesn't come with the stigma of conforming to a bygone trend. But customization itself has become its own trend, and no longer asserts the same meanings it had originally. Such meaning-loss is evidenced in what Amy had to say about rarely updated her portfolio. The reality of customization is disappearing in Baudrillardian fashion:

The moment a thing is named, the moment representation and concepts take hold of it, is the moment when it begins to lose its energy. If there is so much talk about something, as obvious fact, that is perhaps because it is no longer at its height” (2009:12).

The ubiquitous nature of digital technology is one factor that assists the custom tattoo's descent into fashion and trendiness. One common experience that the artists told me about was having clients come into the shop with a picture of a tattoo they wanted saved on their cell phones. Sean, from Tattoo Art in Billings, told me “People will come with a picture on their cell phone and say ‘I want this.’ It's like, you want it that size? (laughs) How am I supposed to get that off your phone and onto your skin?” Often this picture will be off another tattoo and the client will want only a few changes done to it. The ease of digital photography allows for just about anybody to take a quick picture of their own tattoo or their friend's tattoo. The internet, where these pictures will likely end up, is another source of meaning-loss for custom tattoos. During my interview with Amy, she talked about how often she sees the same designs coming from the internet. She said, “I don't like it when somebody brings in a picture and is like ‘I saw this tattoo and I want it.’ I can show you five of them that we see all the time, that people keep

bringing in. And sometimes they say ‘I drew this.’” This sentiment was reflected by Steve at City Tattoo, who said that “A lot of times people aren't aware of what a good tattoo looks like. All they know is something they've seen on the internet.”

The recent popularity of television shows centered on tattooing has also affected both the clients and the artists. These programs show shops that fit the mold set forth by Atkinson for the Supermarket Era of tattooing. Aside from pre-scripted drama, the show's segments that focus on tattoos give the viewer a significantly stripped down and sanitized version of the tattooing experience. Leona at Robot described it this way:

It's like a double edged sword. Like, LA Ink and stuff, it's all this drama and bullshit. The people go to get a tattoo and in an hour it's like “I got a sleeve.” And people are like, “Hey I want to get a sleeve, how much does that cost?” We can't really give you an estimate on that. I think on the same note, though, it's making tattoos more visible to the public and making them look cooler.

Over the course of a one hour episode, a viewer can see the completion of a tattoo that would cost thousands of dollars and would normally take several visits to complete. Through the magic of television, though, what could in reality be at least a ten hour process, completed over several days, comes across as taking just a bit of time in an afternoon. And, there is never any talk of cost. This type of representation, while helping tattooing to give off a cleaner image, makes it more likely that clients will expect the same results from local shops, which is highly unlikely. This media representation of tattooing is reminiscent of Baudrillard's notion of hyper reality (1994), where the reality of an act or process disappears into expectations based off virtual examples—ironically, ‘reality’ television in this case.

Technology has directly impacted the way in which the tattooing process unfolds. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to speak to anyone who had worked in the industry for more than



twelve years. Still, a few artists had something to say about how the rising popularity of tattooing may be contributing to a sort of loss of meaning. The previously described factors—the internet, digital photography, television—all these are evidence that tattooing is being accepted by the mainstream in way that could dull down meaning of the practice. I asked Steve at City Tattoo if the practice was becoming lost in its increasing popularity. He said:

Obviously it has gotten watered down. When I got started tattooing, 2000, it was a little bit edgier, but I certainly don't...I didn't start doing this in the 70s and the 80s. Those people are the people that actually have something to bitch about. If you were tattooing in 1984 and have seen the transition between tattooing going from a biker, freak show oriented thing to having several tattoo shows on TV and the popularity of it all...you've seen that transition. There's still some raciness to it, but there's way too many people to be original anymore. I've accepted that. But when it gets to the point that it's just as common as getting a stick-on tattoo, I don't know what I'm going to do.

The changes tattooing has undergone, even in recent years, has had a large influence on both the client-artist interaction and the tattooing process. Clients must deal with the paradox of tattooing's increased popularity and its continuing stigma. Artists are affected more than clients, as the artists are the ones who must deal with the ever changing trends in what clients want, the desire for custom artwork that may or may not have been created with them in mind, and the expectations clients have of them based on virtual sources that may not accurately reflect reality.

The imagery people choose to get tattooed, the changes in the trends of tattooing in the supermarket era, and trends toward custom tattoos are factors brought up by all the artists I interviewed. When taken together as a whole, these factors directly influence what I found to be most significant characteristic of differentiation within the tattooed population—varying and shifting levels of the relationship between the tattoo artist and the client—the client-artist interaction.

## **The client-artist interaction**

During my interviews, I would take my time asking a few background questions about the artist and try to develop a small rapport before directly asking them to talk about their clients. Usually, the things they said at first about their clients were fairly innocuous—business like and objective. The longer the conversations went though, the more openly they spoke about the clients in a more informal way—vividly describing the various types of people that filtered through their shops, what they thought of these different types of clients and telling stories about them. I assume their initial hesitance to talk directly about the customers was in order to remain professional and avoid sounding judgmental or elitist. This was rarely the case though, even after they began to speak more openly. The first thing that the artists would talk about regarding their clients was how the client had found them in the first place.

### *Finding a Shop*

The tattoo shop itself is the starting point of the client-artist interaction. For the first time client, going in to get a tattoo can be a stressful experience. Issac at flesh said, “People are uncomfortable when they come in, unless they've already gotten a bunch of stuff. They're intimidated by the sign in the parking lot. I always try to be easy going.” A shop with a welcoming environment and staff is more likely to keep the client at ease. The shops I went to varied a bit in how friendly the initial environment was, but every artist told me that they do their best to make clients feel at ease. Also, every artist I talked to said they openly welcomed (just about) any tattoo idea a client would bring to them. Several artists told me that this was not

universally the case, and that there are several shops, both in Montana and in general, where all customers are not necessary treated equally.

Most frequently, the shops and artists that were described as being less-than friendly specialized in traditional tattooing. According to Jordan at White Sparrow, traditional tattooing “consists of of basic, classic tattoo images. Roses, sparrows, hearts, that shit. Drawn with thick outlines, only a few colors and not a whole lot of depth.” I asked Steve at City Tattoo how often he ran across artists that would turn down clients based on the client's tattoo idea. The exchange went:

Me: Are there people that don't have that same mentality of “yeah I'll still do it, I'll do the best I can on it” but people that will just straight up be like “that sucks, your stupid, get out?”

Steve: Oh yeah. Definitely.

M: Are there shops like that in Billings?

S: Yeah. They don't stay very busy. I guess, specifically, traditional tattooing is kinda like that. For the most part, traditional tattooers are going to be the ones that will refuse work because they think it's stupid. Subscribing to some high standards of how ‘things should be done’. Usually that person is going to be a traditional tattooer. And so, traditional tattooing is big in places like Seattle, Portland...just any larger city, where you're going to have enough clientele to support that.

M: Where you can tell people...

S: Exactly, “well, fuck off. Next in line”

Amy echoed Steve's sentiment, saying that elitist shops tend to tattoo in the traditional style. She told me “They'll make fun of you. They are extremists who take it so far. They can have that style, I think it's awesome. I'll send people who want it that way...but they are not treated very nice.” Rather than express the welcoming attitude towards client's ideas, there are shops in both Billings and Missoula that focus more on adhering to their particular style than catering to a variety of clients.

The alternative to this, as mentioned before, is highlighted by something Leona, at Robot

Tattoo, said to me: “I really think that we try to pride ourselves on not being the cool guys. Catering to any clientele.” This type of welcoming attitude was what Amy wanted to push when she opened City Tattoo in Billings. She wanted to have a shop that would be more welcoming to clients than any shop she had worked in previously. She told me “I have a two word motto— Nice matters. We're sitting in nice matters,” she said, referring to her tattoo shop. She continued, “I think tattoos are for everyone. I think that's why we're so busy.” The attitude expressed by Amy, and all the other artists I spoke with, is that tattoo shops should have a friendly, welcoming environment for clients. With tattooing becoming an increasingly middle-class practice (DeMello 2000), it follows that shops will become more professional, businesslike, and friendly. Shops that adhere strictly to a specific style or view on what tattooing is and how should be tattooed will be less likely to attract customers as the client base continues to include more individuals from the mainstream.

The shop environment, especially on the first visit, is one of the first steps in the client-artist interaction. How the client is made to feel in those first few moments depends on how the artists have chosen to run their shops. A welcoming environment isn't just desirable, it is necessary to maintain current clients and attract new ones. Amy at City Tattoo put it directly to me, saying “If you're not making the customer happy, they are not going to come back.” No longer can shops get away with playing the ‘cool guys,’ as Leona put it, without losing out on the new clientele that is becoming tattooed.

### *The first time tattoo customer*

The artists I interviewed described two types of ways that clients go about choosing a

shop and artist. This choice, according to Amy is “[t]he hardest thing about getting a tattoo—deciding where and who you want it from.” The two basic types of first time clients they spoke of were core clients and casual clients. Core clients were more likely to do research when choosing a shop. This consists of visiting several shops, looking at artist's portfolios and meeting the artists. Nikka, from Flesh, put it this way: “I always tell people the first step of getting a tattoo is going around and figuring out what shop you want and what artists you want. You figure out their style, you go in and talk to them and like their personality.” A core customer will find a shop that they enjoy being in and pair up with an artist whose style most matches the image they want tattooed. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that clients who do this type of research are relatively rare, especially regarding the first tattoo. More common is an casual customer.

The casual first-time client was usually either described as being naïve or simply not caring. Amy told me some client's “...are like ‘what's a portfolio?’ and some of them, fuck, don't care. They assume that they are walking into a tattoo shop and they are going to get what they want.” This lack of care is reflected in what Steve told me about finding an artist that most suits the style of what the client wants tattooed. He said, “There's no real attention paid to going to an artist specifically for a certain style.” The current era of professionalization among tattoo shops and the influx of more mainstream clients are creating the expectation that the tattooing process is as slick and easy as it looks on TV. “There's people that spend the time and money to get good tattoos,” Josh at City Tattoo told me, “and then there's the people that don't care. That don't want to spend the time or money for that.”

First-time client-artist interactions where the client is naïve or casual do not necessarily

lead to a poor tattoo or a poor experience in the tattooing process. The shops I visited were open to any type of customer and all did their best to accommodate a client who didn't seem to know exactly what they wanted. Steve at City Tattoo put it this way, "Whether people know it or not, they're coming to you with their idea and you're going to make it. I kinda see half my job as saving people from themselves. But, that's the thing about tattooing, it's not like you can do a bad tattoo just because you don't like it. You gotta make it look good. It's not your tattoo. It's their tattoo." This attitude is in direct contrast to the one the artists talked about finding in the more traditional shops. Rather than turn away an casual first-time client, the artists I talked to would make every effort to help educate that client in order to help his or her continued participation in the tattooing process. Nikka told me about a tattoo she had done recently for a first time customer:

I don't care what you get. You should just take it seriously. I had a customer come in yesterday, she just turned 16 and wanted a tattoo so she came in with her dad and I asked her what she wanted and she just shrugged her shoulders "I don't know" then she just picked something off the wall and I just slapped it on her forearm. Which sucks. I don't like doing that. But if somebody comes in and I may personally think it's stupid, but they are serious about it, then I'm going to do it. It's their body, it's their choice. I try let people know with certain tattoos it's important to think some more...[to] be sure.

For the most part, the artists took it upon themselves either to help educate the client in order to make a better first time decision, or at least do their best to pull off the best tattoo they could if the client refused their help. Regardless of how involved the client is though, the interaction is usually still enjoyable for the artist. As Isaac put it, "The client's what really makes this job fun though," he said after I asked him if it got tedious when dealing with casual clients or first time clients that wanted simple designs. He continued, "I've done the treble clef before and had fun, if it's the right person. You can be working on someone who knows more about tattooing than you,

but if the person's a dick, the situation is totally reversed.”

### *Getting tattooed: the image*

Once a client has chosen a shop and an artist, the next step is deciding what to get tattooed. In the shops I went to, this was entirely up to the client. A client could spend time working with an artist on a custom image, or could come in with a pre-existing image that they may or may not want modified. The artist's personal opinion, from what I was told, rarely mattered when it came down to applying the tattoo, but the artists still had much to say on what they thought about the images and ideas clients had. Steve at City Tattoo put it this way, saying “This clientele doesn't know what a *good* tattoo looks like. Most people don't have an eye for design and art, and what a good clean design looks like.” What he's referring to here is that, for the artist, matching a proper tattoo design with a particular location on the body is important. For example, he said “All they see is the swirlies and lines on 2D plane, it's not the swirl going in a natural way that would curve with three-dimensional object, like their foot.”

Steve's critique of client image choice rests mostly on technical concerns. Other things artists brought up about client's image choices were the meanings behind an image or just a negative opinion of the image itself. Using overt symbols as a tattoo image in order to convey meaning was one thing Jordan at White Sparrow refrained from. He told me, “Really, if you want a meaning behind your tattoo, you can use any image as a metaphor. Especially because they are so subjective. A lot of times people will be like ‘I need this kanji symbol because it means strength.’ Well, there's a whole lot of images that you could use that are gonna look a lot nicer and could still symbolize strength.” Jordan's shop, White Sparrow, focused almost

exclusively on custom tattooing so it's only appropriate that he would push for more interpretive designs for his customers. This relates back to his (and other tattoo artists) love of art as a motivation for working in the industry they do. The more flat, pre-designed, and aesthetically sanitized an image is for the artist—the less input the artists has on the image before the application—the less artistically involved an artists will be with the image.

Sometimes artists simply consider the desired image to be of poor quality. Steve describes how this is dealt with:

Here's an example of what I'm saying...Somebody's like 'I want this dolphin, and I want it fucking a panther. And that's what I want.' And they can bring their own design that their cousin drew on an envelope from prison and they'll be like 'this is what I want. Just like this.' It's drawn in pencil and it's got a bunch of crappy black and gray shading. Instead of asking, the trick is not asking too many questions. You can't just sit there and say 'alright, so well, do you like this about it? Or do you want it like this or that? Do you want stuff in the background' because that puts too much power in the hands of somebody that has no idea what they are doing, that does not tattoo, doesn't draw, obviously brought you some piece of crap thing. What you have to do is say 'listen buddy, I'm going to go clean this up, I'll be right back, we'll see if you like it.' And then you go downstairs, you draw something up that's tattooable. The subject matter—a dolphin fucking a panther—doesn't matter, but it can look better. You can ask a couple questions but pretty much, just do it. If he likes it, he likes it. If he doesn't like it, he doesn't like it.

Steve's attitude about image choice and subject matter were more or less repeated by all the artists I spoke with. Like the artists in Irwin's research (2001:57), the artists I spoke with more enjoyed tattooing images that they had large amounts of input on, were of their own creation, fell into their style, or that they enjoyed aesthetically.

Overall, whether or not an artist agreed with the reasons for a particular image or even enjoyed it themselves, the quality of the application and outcome of the tattoo was still important to them. Josh at City Tattoo told me:

Sometimes it's hard to care, or to act like you care. I don't always care about their idea,



or what it is actually. Don't always care for the art they give me. But, I always care about how it turns out. I care about their reaction to it. And I care what they are going to tell other people about it. Caring is a must...

Such an attitude has a large impact on the tattooing process. How a shop treats its customers, the level of respect for the client's wishes, the friendliness clients are treated with while getting their first tattoo and the synergy between client and artist all directly influence and shape a client's continued—or not continued—involvement in the tattooing process.

### ***Getting the tattoo and beyond: The Tattoo Process***

The tattoo process begins with the application of the tattoo, a client's first tattoo in most cases. The process continues when the client receives more tattoos in the future and is reciprocally involved in the client-artist interaction. The client-artist interaction defines the tattooing process, which then influences and affects future interactions. Also, the process can stop and start as clients go to new artists and begin new client-artist interactions.

### ***The Tattoo Application***

The application of tattoo—the first time ever for a client, or the first time with a particular artist—starts the tattoo process. The interaction that preceded the application has already determined several things such as what image is being tattooed, what shop the client is in, what artist they are working with, etc. During the actual tattooing application, especially the client's first one, it is important that the artist be in communication with the client and supportive of them. Isaac at Flesh told me “Sometimes people need a friend to keep themselves in a better state of mind. That's just part of the job. I had this girl the other day that just would not relax.

Gripping the table with a death grip. I just wanted to try everything...to help her get through it.” It's the artist's job to make the client as comfortable as possible. This can occur before the application of the tattoo as well, for example, attempting to inform a client on what kind of pain may be involved with the tattoo the client is about to receive. Not every client is prepared for the pain they will feel, and some don't want to listen to the artist's attempt at help. Nikka at Flesh told me about one client who failed to take her words seriously:

I got into a discussion with a customer that came in for her first tattoo. She wanted lettering on her whole side. I told her, it really hurts. And she's like, yeah I know. I looked her in the eye again and said, I'm repeating myself, I want you to pay attention—I don't have anything on my ribs cause it really fucking hurts. Halfway through the tattoo she was like ‘Can we stop? This really hurts.’ I stopped and was like, I wasn't trying to be a bitch earlier. I was trying to tell you that this would really hurt and that you should think about getting something somewhere else for your first tattoo. That happens all the time.

Nikka is heavily tattooed, but has still forgone getting anything on her side due to the pain involved. Her attempt to ease her client into a comfortable first time tattoo, in this case, was unsuccessful. In Nikka's usual experience though, first time tattoo applications go much smoother. She told me that “People's first tattoos are a lot of time a little bit nicer because they don't know what to expect. They usually expect the worse and then all of a sudden it's like, ‘oh that's not bad.’” This isn't so much the case when the first tattoo is on a particularly sensitive part of the body, such as the ribs, in which case the artist will do their best to accurately inform the client that they are about to receive a very painful tattoo.

The tone and mood of the application is also influenced by the client. As evidenced above, an artist can be supportive, respectful and friendly, but if the client does not reciprocate, the application may go less than smoothly. During my interview with Josh, he told me about the only client he's ever had to kick out of the shop:

She was just looking at every spot, wouldn't let me even finish filling an area and she would be like "oh, are you going to get that spot?" "Are you going to get that?" I'm like, does it fucking look like I'm done? I told her, if you say that one more time you're going to get the fuck out of my chair. And she was like "Oh, now I'm pissing him off. Oh now he's mad at me." She said this out loud, for the whole shop to hear. So, I raised the price and she didn't have that much with her. It wasn't one time of her doing that either. It was a full sleeve of...every time I tattooed her that's what she did. The last time I was like...no...I'm not doing this anymore.

Such a client is rare, but not unheard of. Josh was the only artist to directly tell me about his worst experience tattooing a client. The other artists, when asked, either said that they've never had a terrible experience, or that they simply didn't want to talk about it.

The relationship developed through communication while physically getting tattooed determines how much the artist and client will enjoy the application process and how likely the client is to return to a particular artist. Josh at City Tattoo said:

When I got into this business I didn't think about the social aspect of it. The fact that I was going to be getting into deep conversations with hundreds of different kinds of people. And every day. And have to talk to them. Otherwise they're not going to come back to me. If I just sit there not saying anything while I'm tattooing. They talk to me about those artists, the ones that don't talk to them. And they never go back to see 'em again. You know. You gotta sit there and be their friend otherwise it's just not the same.

Communicating with the client during the application of the tattoo reinforces the notion that the client has chosen the right artist for their tattoo. Even if the artist doesn't care for the tattoo they are doing, talking with the client shows that they are concerned with the quality of the application and the client's comfort. Isaac at Flesh told me "It makes your job a lot easier when someone is relaxed. Versus someone who is already on edge before you even start. Artists can cause that too—I've seen artists that treat it too much like work." A tattoo application characterized by an on-edge client and a dis-interested artist would indicate a poor client-artist interaction that led up to it. Something went wrong somewhere. Preferably, the tattoo

application is characterized by communication and procedural/technical quality.

### *Core and casual Processes*

There are a multitude of ways that clients interact with artists to begin their own tattoo process. A casual client will not spend the time and effort to find an artist and work on an image that fits the artist's particular style. Due to the business-like nature and friendliness of the shops I visited, casual clients still receive quality tattoos, but the longer they continue into their tattooing process in that way, the less cohesive their tattoo project will become and the more they will risk running across artists and shops that aren't characterized by professionalism like the shops I visited. According to Steve at City Tattoo, there are artists in Montana that don't care about the quality of the finished tattoo. He told me “When I see a shitty tattoo, and somebody that doesn't believe that it's a shitty tattoo, that tells me that some dude, some hack, has convinced people that they are good.” The less time a client puts into his or her interactions with artists—refusing to look at portfolios, not caring if their desired tattoo doesn't fit the style of the artist who will be doing it, jumping from shop to shop—the more likely they are to receive a tattoo of sub-standard quality and not know it.

Sean, from Tattoo Art in Billings, described why artists sometimes knowingly produce poor quality tattoos. He told me:

Sometimes people[artists] get tired of it. Nobody knows what's going on. They keep coming in with bad drawings and won't let you help make them better. So it's just like, fine, I could make this cool, but that would be more work for me and you wouldn't even notice.

A poor quality tattoo, the result of this artist fatigue, is less likely to happen to a core client due to a higher level of involvement in the relationship with an artist. A casual client likely won't

even notice that an artist doesn't care about the outcome of his or her tattoo.

A core client, one that has participated in the client-artist interaction in an informed way, is able to notice that type of artist fatigue and avoid it. Amy, owner of City Tattoo, told me about one client that exemplified an core interaction and process:

I had client—he's a friend now—that tested me out. He had a lot of work[tattoos] and he had me put his daughter's names on his wrist. It was really simple, but he was testing me out because he lost his artist. He said "If I walk into a shop and they don't think that my idea is the coolest idea and if they don't treat me...if I don't feel like they want to do my tattoo, I'll leave." I'll never forget that.

This client is an example of how the client-artist interaction and the tattooing process become cyclical if a client continues to get tattooed. This was not the client's first tattoo, but it was his first tattoo from Amy, so the two began a new client-artist interaction. Based off the client's previous interactions with artists, he knew what to look for to continue his tattoo process in a quality way. A core client-artist interaction increases the likelihood of an significant process—refusing to get tattooed (temporarily halting the tattooing process) if the artist isn't actively involved or interested (during the client-artist interaction).

### *Outcomes of the process*

Different processes within tattooing end up producing variation among tattooed people. Not only is the way they interact in the process different, but their individual tattoo project will be different. As Josh at City Tattoo told me, “If you we're going to categorize them, there would be many many many different categories. We're not all in one. Tattooed people are only the same in the fact that they are tattooed.” I'm not suggesting creating categories to differentiate tattooed people or draw lines that create exclusive subgroups. What I found was that visually, a

client's tattoo project can indicate at what level they involved themselves in the client-artist interaction and how they have continued in their own tattoo process.

A low involvement in the client-artist interaction often leads to what Leona at Robot Tattoo called sticker tattoos. She said “There's people who get sticker tattoos, like all over their body. You know, ‘I have fourteen tattoos’ but they are nowhere near each other and each one took like 45 minutes.” This type of person was relatively common according to most of the artists I spoke with. Such a client would come to a shop with a small design, or want a small flash design, and take an appointment with whatever artist was the next available. If the client continues a low level of client-artist interaction, it's likely that his or her sticker tattoo project will continue. Steve at City Tattoo told me some possible reasons for this. He said:

They're people that aren't really too concerned about the quality of tattoo, just more about the idea of the tattoo. There isn't a whole lot of personal, meaningful tattoos that they get. Mostly things that you would probably consider to be graphically much like a sticker, something you would slap on your car.

Even though—as mentioned before—the artists I spoke to were mostly unconcerned with the client's personal meaning behind the tattoo, they all took pride in producing a quality tattoo regardless of the client or source material. In the case of the client characterized by sticker tattoos, the client is as concerned with the meaning behind the tattoo as the artist is—not much at all.

Switching from artist to artist is another indicator of casual client-artist interaction. Nikka at Flesh told me that “There are a lot of people that are more random than finding a specific artist they like. A lot of people come in and are just like ‘this person did this tattoo, this other person did this one. Which is fine if they go to different artists because they've actually looked into it.” Searching out different artists in to obtain tattoos in styles that specific artists

specialize in is indicator of a core client-artist interaction and process. Every artist I spoke with emphasized the importance of finding the right artist for a tattoo, even if that meant going to several different artists. Receiving tattoos from a large amount of different artists for reasons of simple convenience or lack of care was a characteristic of clients that weren't interested in continuing in an in-depth tattoo process.

Developing a healthy, respectable interaction between a client and a specific artist results in the most desirable and cohesive outcome for both parties. Isaac at Flesh described it for me as "...a really family-like environment. I'm sure you go to whoever does your tattoos and are like 'What's up bud!' It's a good friend you've made. You get that energy connection with people if you work on them for a while...you have a pain bond (laughs)." The more a friendly rapport is developed between an artist and client, the more likely the client is to return to that artist for larger, long-term tattoo ideas. Jordan at White Sparrow told me:

That's why we get the bigger pieces. We do develop that rapport with our clients where most of the time people are going to leave our shop and remember who did their tattoo. As opposed to the guy who has no idea, they just wanted to come in and get the fifty cent beer logo. It's especially because tattooing is a pretty invasive thing. I think interaction is a huge part of that business and that industry especially. It's so personal. It's not like their just coming in and buying a stapler that they're gonna bring home and in a year it's going to break and they're going to have to buy a new stapler. You should have a pretty good rapport. At least I try to have a pretty good rapport with everybody I tattoo because they are definitely going to remember that experience, I think for their whole life.

Working closely with an artist over time an intrinsic part of the core process where a client has put in the time and effort to ensure that their desired tattoo project is of the highest quality it can be.

Varying levels of client-artist interaction influence a multitude of ways that clients involve themselves in the tattoo process. Generally, the more effort a client puts into finding the

right artist for the tattoos they want, the more likely the process is to be a constructive one for both the client and the artist. As shown here, the visual result of client's process, his or her actual tattoos, tends to reflect how a client went about the interaction and the process. The artist is involved in the quality of the final product as well, but as spoken of earlier, the artists I interviewed all claimed to work as hard on tattoos they didn't care for as they would on tattoos they enjoyed.

The different levels of interaction, the varying ways of being involved in the process, and the multitude of outcomes due to these two factors, highlight the diversity of modern tattooed individuals. As Jordan at White Sparrow said:

If you ask somebody 'Do you have a tattoo?' and they have a bunch of tattoos they got from their buddy in a basement with a guitar string, the answer is 'Yeah.' And if you ask somebody that has a giant back piece that they've spent \$25,000 dollars and ten years 'Do you have a tattoo?' the answer is also 'Yeah.' They are both tattoos, yeah, but there is a huge difference between them in every other aspect.

The differences among the tattooing process aren't always as large as what Jordan described. They can be more nuanced and subtle. The point here, though, is to realize myriad ways how the act of tattooing, and getting tattooed, occur.

Despite their increased popularity, tattooing is often still stereotyped as being deviant. This is the case even though most tattooing today is done by professional artists with formal training. As a result of this increased emphasis put on artistic aesthetics, customized, original tattoos are rising in popularity compared to the previous trend of flash art. Ironically though, increases in technology are turning custom tattooing into the type of trend it was meant to replace.

During my research, I noted several factors that show variation within the tattooed



population/people with more than zero tattoos. What I refer to as the client-artist interaction is the culmination of these factors illustrates the significance of these variations. The way the nature of the industry itself is also important in relation to the client-artist interaction. The artists I interviewed described the autonomy they had—the freedom to make their own decisions within the workplace. This freedom highlights the unique nature of the tattooing occupation. Outside of health and safety regulations, the workplace is run mostly without formal rules for the artists. While becoming more professionalized in service, friendliness and quality of product, tattooing is still characterized by traditional ideas as evidenced by the pervasiveness of the apprenticeship system. These factors are outside the direct client-artist interaction and process, but they lay the groundwork for it to take place.

The client artist interaction begins by choosing a shop and then an artist. Most shops in Montana are welcoming to any clients, but according to the artists I interviewed there is shops in both Missoula and Billings that are more exclusionary. A desirable client artist interaction is characterized by a core approach. An core approach consists of clients spending time finding a shop they feel comfortable in and an artist whose style and attitude match well with the client and the tattoos the client desires. The core approach continues with the artist and client working together, modifying the desired image specifically for the client. An casual approach to the client artist interaction is less involved than the core one, but still results in quality tattoos due to the level of professionalization that characterized the shops I visited.

The tattooing process begins once a client gets tattooed. The application starts the process which then consists of the client's continuing, or not continuing, involvement in tattooing. The process becomes cyclical with the interaction if the client continues to get tattoos.

Developing good rapport between artist and client during the application is a key step in the process continuing. An casual involvement in the client-artist interaction is likely to result in a casual involvement in the continuing tattoo process. How the process unfolds can influence the outcome of a client's tattoo project. A higher level of positive client artist interaction will lead to a tattoo process that results in a cohesive and meaningful tattoo project pursued by the client with one artist, or a small number of artists. Lower levels of interaction are likely to lead to a more fractured tattoo project, less rapport with artists, and possibly tattoos of lower quality.

Every artist I talked to expressed the need for clients to carefully choose their shop, artist and image, and to pursue a continuing relationship with an artist that most fits their tattoo project. The reality, though, the artists told me, is that most of their clients do not participate in tattooing in such a way, despite the artist's best efforts to educate them otherwise. These clients still receive quality tattoos though, as the artists I talked to all took pride in producing quality tattoos, regardless of the client or the image.

### **Discussion: The state of tattooing**

The shops I visited during the course of this research reflected some of the characteristics detailed by Atkinson (2003:48-50) for what he terms the current 'Supermarket Era' of tattooing. The factors that rang true included the professionalization of tattoo shops, the increased role of client choice when getting tattooed, widely available styles to choose from, and increasing social acceptance of tattoos and tattooing. Further, Atkinson agrees with DeMello's (2000) conclusion that the increasing level of tattooing's social acceptance and the rise of digital technology "brings together tattoo enthusiasts into an information-rich community of social actors that, regardless of

their diversity, forms a more cohesive social group” (Atkinson 2003: 48). Such a cohesive group of tattooed people is not what I observed during my research. The tattooed people I talked with, observed, and was told about by the artists were not just those who “actively embrace the notion of community and who pursue community oriented activities” (DeMello 2000: 3). Based off the literature and my own research, I contend that, at least in Montana, the tattoo community is anything but cohesive and the current era should be termed something like the post-supermarket era.

Rather than help create some sort of cohesive, meaningful whole, increases in the availability of tattoos and digital technology in general is creating a tattooed population that is just as varied as the population as a whole. Now that the tattoo has been commodified (Kosut 2006, Orend and Gagne 2009) getting one is easy to do for any individual on a whim. The tattoo community isn't made up solely of hardcore devotes. As Isaac at flesh told me “Yeah, I do a lot more tattoos on catholic girls wearing crosses than giant pieces on your stereotypical tattooed guy.” The main clientele seen by the artists I spoke to wasn't the type of tattooed individual focused on by DeMello (2000) and Atkinson (2003). They aren't individuals that read tattoo magazines, participate in online forums and attend tattoo conventions. They were everyday people adding a tattoo design to their body.

Hand in hand with commodification, increasing technology is changing the meaning and implication of tattoos and tattooing. As mentioned earlier, images of tattoos that were created for a specific individual can easily be found on the internet by a potential client and used to recreate the tattoo for themselves. Whatever meaning the image originally had is being diffused every time it is recreated.

Another example of a technology changing tattooing is the advent, and increasing effectiveness, of tattoo removal lasers. Josh at City Tattoo told me:

Those laser removal places, they've gotten pretty good now. It takes out the darker colors first—the laser hits the lighter colors different—but the sun can just take the lighter colors out after that. It takes a few sessions though. But, also, if you just want something new, you can just dim it down for a few sessions and get it re-covered. We end up sending quite a few people over to them now.

Josh's statements concur with the conclusion of Adatto (2004) regarding the effectiveness of laser treatments. Adatto contends, and I agree, that the increasing effectiveness of these lasers may affect the meaning of tattoos and “if in the near future any tattoo can be removed safely and easily, tattooing will lose a big part of its symbolism, by not being ‘for life’ anymore” (2004:183).

Is all this meaning loss, commodification and increasing popularity a bad thing? Not at all. Based on my research, individuals from all walks of life are participating in a practice that was once solely relegated to sub-cultures and the socially stigmatized. As a result of the professionalism that characterized the shops I visited, the client's comfort and satisfaction is the number one priority. Artists go out of their way to help clients make informed decision in order for the client to receive the best tattoo(s) possible.

While some overall greater meaning may be being lost due to the commodification of tattooing, the act is still rich for the client and artist. The myriad ways that clients interact with their artists, how the tattooing process unfolds, and the varying results of their tattoo projects imply that research on tattoos or tattooing in any aspect will be at a loss without taking these factors into consideration. Quantitative survey research like that from Silver et al (2009) and Armstrong et al (1999) that looks for correlation between tattoo ownership and legally

deviant/risky behaviors should involve components that at least attempt to measure something about how the individual has involved themselves in the tattoo act. The act of getting tattooed—finding an artist, the interaction, the ensuing process—is highly varied. Drawing conclusions based on groups created by measuring only the number of an individual's tattoos (Silver et al 2009) misses significant details about that person. The image(s) tattooed, how the individual went about getting the tattoo—factors like these are important to note. I recall here what Jordan at White Sparrow said, “When asked if they have tattoos, someone with tattoos done with a guitar string in a basement and someone with an ornate, expensive, time consuming back piece would both answer yes.” The differences there, which should be considered significant, are not measured in most quantitative survey research on tattoos. As such, the significance they hold cannot be reflected in the results of such research.

Qualitative research on the personal meanings and motivations behind tattoos would also benefit by taking into account the client-artist interaction and how it affects the tattooing process. Research such as that done by Kang and Jones (2007), is important because it helps illustrate the ways that different groups use tattoos. Yet, with the variation in how people enter into and engage in the tattoo process, the question of why someone gets tattooed likely has as many different answers as there are tattooed people. Jordan from White Sparrow had his own thoughts on the meanings and motivations behind tattoos. He said:

I don't necessarily like to discuss the meanings of tattoos. Lots of times people think that in order to get a tattoo you have to have a reason for it. Which just baffles me. Everyone is always trying to put meaning behind tattoos and make them something they aren't.

Jordan, and the other artists I interviewed, placed little significance on the reasons and meanings behind the tattoos they did for their clients. They were aware of the reasons and motivations, but

were more interested on producing a high quality tattoo regardless of the meanings and motivations the client had. Illustratively, research on the motivations and meanings behind tattoos is important, and could even inform and enhance quantitative survey research. By incorporating an awareness of the client-artist interaction, qualitative research could enhance the understanding of the motivations and meanings behind tattoos by utilizing information on how their subjects participated in the tattooing process. While still informative without taking into account the client-artist interaction, I question what exploratory research on meanings and motivations can conclude, especially in an era where tattooing is more commodified than ever, is being participated in by more people than ever, and the permanence of the act (already in question) is likely to become a complete remnant of the past.

### **Conclusion**

Tattooing is highly varied act involving an artist and a client. The unique nature of the industry, specifically the lack of formal rules tattoo artists must adhere too, set the stage for a rich interaction between potential clients and artists. Due to the commodification of tattooing and its increasing social acceptance, tattoo shops are becoming highly professionalized. The shops I visited were welcoming, friendly and staffed mostly by formally educated artists. According to the artists I interviewed, though, even though the majority of tattoo shops are run with a friendly, businesslike manner, there are still shops around the state that adhere to an older, less friendly attitude.

The tattoo shop itself is the starting point of the client-artist interaction. When a client first enters a tattoo shop, the way they are treated by the artist and the way the client interacts

with the artist will have a large effect on the tattooing process and possibly on the visual outcome of the client's tattoos. I found that clients fell into two main categories when it came to how they interacted with artists—core and casual. Core clients took more time to find a shop that they enjoyed, an artist that they got along with, and worked with the artist in developing images to be tattooed. Casual clients were less involved and were more likely to participate in the tattooing act as something similar to a common business transaction.

All the artists I spoke with took pride in creating quality tattoos, regardless of whether or not the client interacted in a core or casual way. Core clients were more desirable by artists due to a richer interaction and a higher likelihood of repeat business, but the artists still spent time attempting to inform the casual clients and develop a rapport with them.

Once the client artist interaction has been established, the tattoo process begins with the application of the first tattoo<sup>3</sup>. Friendly, engaging communication during the tattoo application increases the likelihood that a client will return to that artist in the future. The tattoo process, a client's continuing involvement in the practice, is heavily determined by how the client engaged in the client artist interaction. A core interaction usually leads to an in-depth process and a casual interaction leads to a casual process. High levels of interaction increase the likelihood of a quality process that leads to a cohesive tattoo project for the client. Lower levels of interaction lead to a more fragmented tattoo process, which can possibly result in tattoos of lower quality and a less rewarding client-artist interaction.

During the tattooing process, much like the interaction, the artists I spoke to attempted to provide their clients with high quality tattoos and information to enhance the client's future tattoo experience. Due to the business like nature of the shops I visited, clients of all types received

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<sup>3</sup> Either the client's first tattoo in general, or the first tattoo from a specific artist

high quality tattoos.

With the increasing popularity of tattoos and their commodification, the ease of getting a tattoo resembles a business transaction more and more. The shops, though businesslike and professional in nature, still do their best to educate and inform clients on how to get the most out of the tattooing process. Paradoxically though, the same factors that influence shops to provide a high quality tattoo experience to any client that comes in the door is also increasing the number of casual clients. Along with the increasing number of casual clients, the businesslike nature of shops is increasing the chance that the casual clients will remain as such. It's almost as if by having such a high standard of quality—at least at the shops I visited—casual clients don't need to involve themselves in the interaction or process in core ways, as they receive high quality tattoos regardless.

The two categories I have described here—core and casual—don't accurately reflect the incredibly varied ways in which clients and artists interact and the tattooing process unfolds. The two categories simply generalize the two most common ways the process turns out, as told to me by the artists I interviewed. The whole tattoo experience is complex both for the artist and the client. How this experience happens—how the tattooed person has engaged in their own tattoo process—should be taken into consideration by all research conducted on tattooed individuals.



## **Appendix A: Atkinson's six social eras of tattooing in North America**

(all information comes from Atkinson 2003:30-50)

### **Colonist/pioneer Era 1760s-1870s**

During this time period, European explorers were first exposed to native tribes that utilized tattoos to express a multitude of things (ancestral lineage, social rank, spiritual beliefs, etc). Some tattooed tribes-people were transported to back to Europe and exhibited as sensationalized examples of the various 'savages' that existed throughout the world. European interest in tattoos was a mix of fascination and disgust since tattooing grossly violated the dominating norms and standards for physical appearance.

Sailors on these voyages began to sport tattoos, usually with European inspired designs and brought the practice home with them to Europe and North America.

### **Circus/Carnival 1880s-1920s**

During the carnival era, tattooed individuals both tribal and white became popular attractions at circus sideshows and various freak shows. Growing amounts of circus and carnival workers began to get tattooed in order to cash in on the increasing popularity of attractions featuring tattooed individuals. This, along with the invention of the electric tattoo gun in 1891, made it possible for individuals to make a living solely as a tattoo artist.

Since the sideshow was an outlet for culturally repressed desires, it was during this era that tattoos and tattooing first began to receive some amount of cultural disdain.

### **Working-Class 1920s-1950s**

The working-class era saw the birth of the first American tattoo shops which catered mostly to military servicemen, sailors, circus workers, and working-class men. American tattoo artists began creating the style of tattooing known today as 'traditional.' Increasingly more efficient tattoo instruments allowed artists to create designs of higher detail and quality. Tattoo shops began to spring up in major urban centers across North America.

Though not seen as entirely normative or accepted by mainstream society, it was during the working-class era that tattoos were popular enough to be commonly displayed by men of the working-class. This "quasi-accepted" practice of using tattoos to indicate class status did not last through the events of the 1950s.

### **Rebel 1950-1970**

While tattoos had been used to mark criminals, convicts, and prisoners throughout the world for centuries, it was during the rebel era that these and other sub-cultural groups actively adopted the tattoo as visual expression of their discontent with mainstream society. Prisoners began experimenting with different styles of tattooing and tattoos began to be used as codes indicating gang affiliation.

Outside of prison walls, biker-gang members openly displayed violent and vulgar tattoo designs. Their use of tattoos combined with the public's fascination with biker culture during the late 1960s resulted in much negative mainstream exposure for tattoos and tattooing. Various youth cultures began using tattoos to express social discontent, much like the individuals in prison or biker gangs. By early 1970, tattoos had become firmly entrenched in the consciousness of middle-class America as a “voluntary mark of social deviance.”

### **New Age 1970-1990**

As the body became more recognized as a vehicle for “cultural exposition,” individuals from all walks of life began to sport tattoos. The tattoo was still mainly intended as an expression against social norms. Unlike the violent, nihilistic and criminal attitude that surrounded tattoos during the rebel era, tattoos during the ‘New Age’ were expressions of personal agency and intended to spur social change by challenging dominant norms that were seen as pervasive and restrictive. Women entered the ranks of the tattooed, using their bodies as sites of protest against masculine codes of appearance.

With the increased visibility of tattooing across class and gender lines, tattooing’s dark image coming out of the Rebel era began to soften and middle-class American increasingly participated in the practice. Numerous new styles of tattoos were flourishing and customers began to expect a higher level of quality and customization of their own tattoos. As “women and more ‘respectable’ social classes” participated in the practice, tattooing was increasingly viewed as a form of self-expression rather than a sign of deviance.

### **Supermarket 1990-Present**

Tattooing now exists as a legitimate business industry. Clients have dozens of different styles to choose from when getting a tattoo. The supermarket era is characterized by a highly varied tattooed population and an ever expanding industry with more tattoo shops than ever before operating across the continent, several national and regional tattoo conventions, and various media—magazines, websites, etc—devoted to the craft.

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

How did you first start working as a tattoo artist?  
What motivated you?

How long have you been working at (shop name)?  
Is this the only shop you've worked at?

Describe your average client.  
How did they chose your shop?  
How did they chose you to tattoo them?  
What kind of tattoos are they getting?  
Are they regulars, drop-ins, appointments?  
Do you have regular customers that you work on frequently?  
Describe them.

What's your favorite type of person to work on—what's your favorite style/type to tattoo?

What's the worst type of person to work on/type of tattoo to do?  
What are the differences between these?

How has tattooing changed since you started working as an artist?  
Are shops busier? The clientele more diverse?  
Are there an increasing number of people getting their first tattoo?

When people come in to get tattooed, how often do they talk with you about *why* they are getting one?

What kind of reasons do they give?  
What are the best/worst reasons for getting tattooed?  
Is there a right or wrong reason to get tattooed?

What kind of stereotypes have you had to deal with concerning tattoos?  
Your tattoos.  
Your client's tattoos.

In the stuff I've been reading to prepare for this project, there's a lot of writing talking about how tattoos are really mainstream now. Thoughts?

How long are you planning on being a tattoo artist?

Is this your current 'career plan?'

Is there something else you have in mind for later in life, possibly in the works now?

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