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Tattoos as Personal Narrative

A Thesis

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Abstract

This study explores the history of tattoos in the United States along with the role and significance of tattoos today. The study's primary research question seeks to discover whether tattoos anchor an individual's personal narrative and help to solidify an individual's sense of self. The study considers both modernist and postmodernist concepts of identity, but ultimately supports a perspective which argues that identity is the result of an individual's ability to keep a consistent narrative going over time. This exploratory study uses a qualitative approach to discern the meanings behind individuals' tattoos through their own words and conceptions. Eight individuals ranging in age, race and gender were interviewed in order to collect data for the study. The findings suggest that individuals frame the importance of their tattoos in a variety of ways from tattoos that commemorate aspects of one's past to tattoos that are highly symbolic of an individual's sense of self.

Keywords: Tattoo, Identity, Self as Narrative, Postmodern, Technology

Introduction

There is an on-going debate over the existence of what is generally called identity. As this study will discuss, the concept of identity has been approached from both modernist and postmodernist perspectives and range from modernist notions that claim there is a core self - a doer behind deeds or actions – (Mead, 1913; Giddens, 1991; Zalewski, 2000) to the postmodernist conception of the self as purely a social construction of various discourses that define identity - where the doer is defined by his or her deeds (Butler, 1998; Gergen, 1991).

The question of identity and my own personal experiences with tattoos served as the inspiration to study the contemporary roles of tattoos. The primary question I seek to answer is: Do tattoos serve as anchors for individuals' definition of their own identity in the United States today? I take a modernist approach to the concept of identity based on the work of Anthony Giddens and argue that the self can be best understood as a narrative.

However, I also consider the postmodern challenge to the construction of identity, which contends that individuals in postmodern societies are bombarded by social relationships, which leads to both the saturation of the self and the fracturalization of relationships. Theorists like Kenneth Gergen (1991) recognize the massive amount of information and communication technology available in postmodern societies and their implications for the increasing number of identities individuals now possess. The frequency and sheer quantity of social relationships and interactions made possible by these new

technologies has been argued to make the construction of a committed identity an arduous and complicated process. Therefore, the study's secondary research aim addresses the question of how individuals define identity in postmodernity and whether individuals are experiencing multiple identities in their day-to-day lives.

While I argue that the individual's sense of identity is being significantly affected by contemporary social conditions including mass travel and mass communication, I do not wholly follow the postmodern view that identity can be deconstructed to the point of non-existence or simply to performances of social construction. Rather, I, and the participants in this study, will argue that there does exist core individual identities, which, while difficult to articulate, are present nonetheless. Here, I adopt a definition of identity, which is, if not comprehensive, broad enough to encompass time as an unavoidable variable that must be considered when discussing identity.

My definitions of identity and sense of self are taken from the perspective of authors such as Anthony Giddens (1991), Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs (1996), who define the self as "the ability of an individual to maintain a narrative over time" (Giddens, 1991:36). It is an individual's ability to remember the past that allows for the creation of a consistent, personal narrative or story in which one plays the main character. Narratives in turn are defined by Lawler as "created within specific social, historical and cultural contexts, which contain transformation, some kind of action and characters, all of which are brought together within an overall plot which then serves as a means of connecting past, present, future, self and others" (Lawler, 2002:243).

Participants in this exploratory study were interviewed in depth about their tattoos

and meanings of tattoos. The purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals experience their tattoos and whether tattoos have a significant relationship to an individual's sense of identity. This is important because this study specifically addresses the concerns put forth by theorists who see contemporary individuals as struggling with their sense of identity, in part due to the technologies of post modernity. The major discoveries here can contribute to new avenues of research, which, in the future, may provide a better understanding of identity as well as a greater awareness of the adaptability, creativity and resilience of individuals.

The present discussion begins with an examination of tattoos' origins, rejection, and acceptance in the United States from the turn of the twentieth century to the present in order to show the evolution of tattoos throughout the country's history. It then explores recent tattoo literature and current research. From there I discuss social structural changes since the Industrial Revolution, which have contributed to increasing individualization and a fragmentation of self that encourages an atomistic philosophy. The next two sections aim to lay out the differences between the modern and postmodern view of the self and discuss features of postmodernity that increase the "saturation of the self" (Gergen, 1991). Section five details the methods of the research. Finally, the closing sections analyze the findings and limitations of this research, as well as their implications for future research.

Section 1: The Sociogenesis of Tattoos in the United States

Before turning to present day conceptions of tattoos, I will briefly describe the changing attitudes surrounding tattoos since the turn of the century in the United States. A complete history of tattooing is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, authors Jane Caplan (2000), Michael Atkinson (2003), and Nicholas Thomas (2005) have greatly contributed to a multicultural perspective on tattoos and their meanings dating back as early as 250 C.E.. For my purposes, the historical significance of tattooing will be limited to its practice in the United States, beginning with the sideshow "freak".

Tattooing in America, after 1900, represented a complex and patronizing form of ethnocentrism at a time when the United States was rising to the status of a global economic and political power. Duncan and Goddard (2005) explain the country's colonial impulse: "Applying Darwinian and manifest destiny ideas to nations, Americans viewed themselves and their country as a superior race/nation which had the right to expand over lesser peoples/nations in the survival of the fittest" (p. 23). As Europe expanded her colonies in many parts of the globe, the United States turned its eye both southward and toward the Far East. Indeed, the Spanish-American War is generally considered to be the watershed in American history that marked the translation of the United States' growing industrial might into military and political power on a global scale. From the last decade of the 19th century to the First World War, the United States took possession of Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Samoa. It also established protectorates over Cuba, Panama, and the Dominican Republic and mounted armed interventions in China, Haiti, and Nicaragua. The zephyr of jingoistic cultural and racial superiority that swept the U.S. defined the way

in which Americans came to view tattoos. With both a sense of entitlement and inherent superiority, it was in its Far Eastern ventures that Americans encountered Samoan, Hawaiian, and Polynesian tattooing practices—deeming them primitive and savage.

Through colonial expansion many Pacific Islanders were enslaved and eventually brought to America as both proof of conquest and for their entertainment value. Introduced as entertainment, these tattooed individuals were "usually enslaved Samoans, Polynesians and Hawaiians" (Atkinson, 2003: 35). Though American sailors were already accustomed to tattoos prior to 1901, most landlocked Americans were only marginally aware of the practice. According to Atkinson (2003), "In 1901 the first 'freak show' involving tattooed people at Buffalo's world's fair introduced the cultural association between tattoos and carnivals in North America" (p. 33). The carnival, for those Americans who rarely left their own town much less the continent, became the means by which they would encounter real tattooed people.

Because the Polynesians were considered and exhibited as inferior to Westerners, their cultural practices, including elaborate tattooing, were judged barbaric and crude. Atkinson (2003) says, "Set upon stages and wrapped in chains and loincloths, these individuals were exhibited as 'savages' and 'primitives'" and "stood as the antithesis of modernity" (p. 33). Thus, most Americans' initial contact with tattoos prejudged the art as uncivilized, and unsophisticated. This association would persist until World War I.

Though most Americans were marginally aware of tattooing at the turn of the century, such awareness was more prominent in urban areas. Tattooing had certainly been practiced in Europe for centuries and many immigrants came to the U.S. with tattoos and a

desire for more. In large urban cities like New York, tattooing became a professional occupation when the first tattoo parlor opened in 1875 (Caplan, 2000: 214). Important to the progression of tattooing in the United States was the invention of the electric tattoo gun around 1890. This device made tattooing faster, less painful and associated tattooing with technological advances. Discouraging the dominant primitive associations, these two factors, the electric gun and the establishment of professional tattoo parlors, helped to legitimize tattoos for many Americans.

During World War I, tattoos would have most likely been found on both merchant sailors and military men (Caplan, 2000; DeMello, 2000; Atkinson, 2003). However, in civilian America we find that a large, male working class would also begin to utilize the practice as a display of nationalistic, social or class solidarity. During the war, working-class, non-enlisted men adopted hyper-patriotic tattoo styles in a spasm of nationalist pride, which for a time overcame their low class status by eliciting the respect of fellow patriots. Atkinson (2003) says, "Even though conservative codes about bodies and physical display were firmly embedded in the social fabric, the discredited practice of tattooing was a socially legitimate way of indicating one's class status to others" (p. 38). Returning veterans bearing tattoos also helped create a small fervor for the art, as they were emblematic of bravery and heroism.

Though not as commonly as men, women also were getting tattoos at this time. Gus Wagner, professional tattoo artist and globetrotter, recalled in a journal written in 1905 that among thousands of clients "about three hundred women have been numbered among his customers" (Wagner quoted in Caplan, 2000: 216). Popular female tattoos were different

from men's. Rather than pictures, dates, memorials, and 'lodge emblems', Wagner recalls that, "a popular idea among the women was to have a beauty spot tattooed on the cheek or chin" (Wagner quoted in Caplan, 2000: 217). Not all women preferred the simple and sparse cosmetic application of permanent ink beauty marks. By 1907, Wagner's wife, Maude, had had her entire body covered with tattoos of several oriental, biblical, and landscape designs.

After the war ended in 1918, America experienced a short-lived but widespread era of prosperity before the Great Depression of 1929 would mark its end. Duncan and Goddard's *Contemporary America* (2005) describes the 1920s as a hedonistic age: "It was an age marked by the pursuit of pleasure, pushed along by the rise of advertising and radio, stimulated by the writings of Sigmund Freud and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and changed by a revolution in manners and morals, movies, automobiles and a 'me generation' that stressed a live for today attitude" (p. 25). Women in particular "threw off the Victorian fashion, cut their hair short, and reached for rayon stockings, silk panties, makeup, short dresses, a dance partner and a cigarette" (Duncan and Goddard, 2005: 25). The moral revolution of the 1920s may partially account for the greater social acceptance of tattoos among a greater variety of people, including middle-class teenagers and women.

Despite the moral revolution of the 1920s, there still existed a strong conservative ideal of female bodies and femininity and most women were unlikely to get large, full-body tattoos, preferring the cosmetic application of tattoos rather than descriptive or explicitly self-narrating tattoos. Maude Wagner was able to make her living on the shock value of her body and provides the exception that not only proved the rule, but also emblemizes the

gradual erosion of the rule. Her full-body tattoos set the stage for a niche employment opportunity for women as carnival entertainers. Decades later full body tattooed females would continue to shock audiences.

Two women in particular stand out during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Betty Broadbent and Artoria Gibbons are two of the most photographed tattooed women of the time. Even more shocking than tattooed men, these women were able to use the curiosity of a confounded public to provide a steady income and an independent occupation. Betty Broadbent's flare for performance, as well as her renowned tattoos, helped her stay in the circus business until her retirement in 1967 (Caplan, 2000: 212).

The overarching political attitude toward tattoos remained strongly conservative throughout the first thirty years of the twentieth century (Duncan and Goddard, 2005: 29). The normative attitude, held by the middle and upper classes was that tattoos were a distinctively lower class practice. However, among the young, urban, middle-class the popularity of tattoos was rising. Caplan's (2000) research shows that "From the few references in the New York Times in the 1930s, it is clear tattooing was also becoming popular among teenagers, a fact which angered middle-class parents and prompted the New York Assembly to pass a law in 1933 making it a misdemeanor to tattoo a 'child' under the age of sixteen" (p. 221). Due to the increase in the number of establishments where one could acquire tattoos and a rise in public popularity, the first legislation that addressed the legality of tattoos passed in 1933 in New York State.

Efforts to control tattooing indicate that throughout the first forty years of the century Americans had gradually been getting used to tattoos. As American, patriotic-style

tattoos became more prominent between the 1920's and 1940's, the 'savage' association disintegrated and a more generalized acceptance of tattoos emerged among the public. According to Atkinson (2003), "North American tattoo artists of this time were constructing their own unique tattooing genres, including the hyper-patriotic style now known as 'Traditional'" (p. 37). American tattoos were coming to consist of a new distinctive symbology more easily recognizable to Western "audiences": American flags, bald eagles, hearts, anchors, swallows, pin-up girls, and religious iconography. DeMello (2000) argues "tattoos were the least stigmatized in North America at this time" because "they emitted and embraced a sense of jingoism within America that was regarded as an expression of patriotism" (p. 17). Atkinson agrees that, at this point in time, tattoos in America became "quasi-normative" (Atkinson, 2003: 38).

However, the 1930s and 1940s saw a population shift away from rural towns toward urban centers and a corresponding increased tolerance for tattoos. In the 1950s, the U.S. saw the population swing back both geographically to the farmlands-cum-suburbs and attitudinally towards physical and moral conformity. Although the agrarian lifestyle had been lost for good, many Americans saw the suburbs as the best of both worlds. The introduction of the G.I. Bill helped expand and establish a growing suburban middle class and "as the middle class expanded and prospered, they became more homogenized and seemed to reach a basic consensus about values and culture" (Duncan and Goddard, 2005: 28). Published in 1969, David Reisman's, *The Lonely Crowd,* described this homogenization of culture "as a loss of individualism and the change to a new conformity of doing what others expected" (p. 270). Such conformity could not and did not generally include

indelible self-expression located upon the body itself.

Resistance to tattooing was also institutionally assisted by a strong push toward Christian moral values during the 1950s. It was in this decade, in 1954, that Congress added, "under God" to pledge of allegiance; soon to be followed by the printing of "In God we Trust" on all currency in 1955. For women, this social climate of moral, Christian imperatives soon restricted many of the freedoms gained in the 1920s— "Christianity demanded order and pressured women to return to the domestic sphere to raise 'decent' children" (Duncan and Goddard, 2005: 28). A strong interest in Protestant Biblicism ensured that "decent" children would not grow up and get tattooed, as this violated explicit Old Testament texts and was taboo according to Christian values (Leviticus 19:28).

To summarize, three major factors affected the declining popularity of tattoos in 1950s. First, tattoo artists were primarily located in the cities and the 1950s flight to the suburbs meant that many Americans were more distant from tattoos and tattoo businesses. Second, post-World War II society emphasized middle-class conformity and material comfort - ideals that were further supported by Christian moral values. All of these ideals conflicted with general impulses toward tattoos and specifically the desire to express oneself as distinct from others. Third, social scientific discourses of this era contributed to the labeling of individuals with tattoos as rebels, deviants, and criminals. For example, in a 1959 *New York Times Sunday Magazine* article, author Gay Talese, cited a previous 1958 study whose findings suggested that, "the tattooed man is more likely to have been divorced, is more of a rebel, has more trouble with society, and authority and is more likely to have been in jail" (Talese quoted in Caplan, 2000: 231).

Such discourses became the popular framework for judging tattoos despite the fact that the study mentioned above was based on data gathered from a nonrandom, institutionalized sample and, therefore, produced inconclusive evidence for the claim. Nevertheless, with the word of "science" labeling and marginalizing tattoos as deviant, popular opinion strongly associated them with a rebellious attitude against the moral norms of society. In Atkinson's (2003) words, "In the increasingly suburbanized, family-centered era of the 1950s, tattoos became identified primarily with rebelliousness among adolescents and young adults" (p. 37). Even in the military, where tattoos had held a specialized kind of acceptance, "tattoos were losing their significance as status symbols" (Caplan, 2000: 229).

Predictably, American's desires for tattoos waned and then began to grow again in the late 1950s early 1960s. Samuel Stewart, one time college professor turned tattoo artist, details the young American male's desire for tattoos during the 1950s and 1960s in his book *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos* (1990). His thesis is an astute observation based on gendered changes in the workplace after World War II. Stewart (1990) says, "Something was slowly going wrong with the young American male. His concept of the Hero had been removed and he was searching to find it again" (p. 45). Stewart argues that, despite the institutional push for conservative values, due to the economic climate women were appropriating what had been an exclusively male prerogative for middle class men —work outside of the home. As women began moving into the workforce some men experienced a loss of male identity. Tattoos became a way to affect and maintain the image of the male Hero that young American men were wanting to find. Stewart (1990) says, "on the basis of an obscure feeling about the decline of his role as Hero, a dwindling of his importance, one could erect a

number of motives for getting tattooed" (p. 47).

Atkinson attributes the desire for tattoos at this time to a kind of social backlash against the conservative values of the 1950s. He says, "Deploying the tattoo as part of rejecting class-based social norms, values, and beliefs politically charged North American counter-cultures engaged in social critique, commentary, and rebellion through their corporeal manipulations" (Atkinson, 2003: 41). It appears that middle-class conservatives held the same notions of tattoos and saw young peoples' inclination to get tattooed stemming from a sense of rebellion. Again, legislation stepped in to rein in a rebellious generation.

More drastically than the legislation of the 1930s, "civic groups, in a combined effort with the police, health departments and the courts, moved to make the practice of tattooing illegal, proceeding from the general assumption that tattooing was a deviant activity" (Caplan, 2000: 232). Again in New York in 1961, a ban on tattoos made it illegal for anyone without a medical degree to use tattooing equipment. Eventually tattooing was outlawed in ten states until these laws were overturned in 1969. Yet, the ban did not do much to stem the tide of youngsters' desire for and acquisition of tattoos. Despite its prohibition, tattooing continued in the United States throughout the sixties.

The 1960s are usually considered the era during which Americans became politicized in large numbers. More accurately it was a time during which American college students became political. Tattoo designs were changing in response to the radicalized climate as more and more young people decided to get tattooed in a new symbolic idiom. Caplan (2000) says, "In a curious reversal of military associations of tattooing, as public opinion

and growing counterculture sentiment increasingly opposed the war in Vietnam, so tattoo designs reflected this change" (p. 233). Tattoos emerged as a vehicle for controversial political and social statements: "Peace signs, marijuana leaves, mushrooms, swastikas, motorcycle emblems, and other counter-cultural symbols gained fairly widespread popularity"(Caplan, 2000: 233). Duncan and Goddard (2005) claim that they had become a popular method of expressing a social and political standpoint as "the nation divided sharply among generational, philosophical, gender and racial lines" (p. 31) and were a way to show others one's own political point of view, as well as a way of locating oneself visibly in the changing dynamics of American society. Slowly tattoos were becoming increasingly indicative of personal beliefs and values, an inscription of the self. By the next decade reflections of individuality would come to be expected in tattoos.

David Frum, author of *How We Got Here: The Seventies* (2002), writes that "From the 1970's on, Americans would live for themselves" (p. 58). After the rejection of 1950s conservative, middle-class, Christian values and the backlash of the 1960's, what emerged in the 1970s was a new emphasis on the importance of the individual. Robert Ringer's, *Looking Out For Number One*, a best seller in 1977, describes the mood of the decade when it urges its readers to "Forget foundationless traditions, forget the moral standards others may have tried to cram down your throat, forget the beliefs people may have tried to intimidate you into accepting as right" (p. 12). In its opening sentence, *Looking Out for Number One* called for Americans to take hold of their independence, explore new ideas, and stop using the past as an example of how to be now. Central to this new lifestyle was doing what was right for you. It is during this decade that the U.S. sees the manifestation of a philosophy that

encourages not just self-reliance, but utter individuality.

Increasingly tattoos became personal expressions of one's identity inscribed indelibly upon the body, and it is worth looking at how the body itself was coming to be viewed. The conflicts surrounding identity and the cultural imperative to locate one's identity led society into new ways of thinking about the body. Atkinson (2003) says, "Recognizing the body as a key text of cultural exposition, those ultimately committed to challenging dominant social codes found in the body a highly political means of expressing and recreating identity"(p. 42).

Atkinson (2003) explains how the social push for individuality changed what people wanted in and from tattoos: "Neither identifying with nor understanding the dominant American tattoo styles practiced for over a century, during the 1970s, the new middle class clients began demanding something more personal, less offensive, and customization of the tattoo" (p. 44). Due to the change in clientele, the tattoo industry changed in response to this new demand and soon began "treating the body less and less as a canvas to be filled with tattoos and more as an integral part of the self" and "redefined many of the old ideologies held strongly in the trade" (Atkinson, 2003: 45).

Women's increasing desire for tattoos also had significant effects on the tattoo industry—primarily tattoos' association with masculinity. Atkinson (2003) remarks, "As women demanded more feminine imagery, more personalized work, sensitive treatment in the shop, and a higher quality of work, their participation in tattooing transformed the structure and ideologies underlying the practice" (p. 44). Radical feminists in the 1970s were generally critical of body modifications, and they argued that, "modification of the female

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body is linked to its victimization" (Pitts, 2003: 52). However, many females with tattoos argued the exact opposite. By getting tattooed, many women interviewed in Pitt's book claimed that they were able to take control over their bodies and reclaim their own identities. Not surprisingly, between 1970 and 1980 one the most popular places for a woman to get tattooed was on her breast (Mifflin, 1997:56).

Unlike their earlier female counterparts, whose tattoo preference was generally cosmetic, (e.g. beauty marks tattooed on the chin or cheek) women in the 1960s and 1970s embraced this new, more flexible conception of the body and that increased women's desire for more symbolic tattoos. Victoria Pitts says that it is during this time that women begin using body modification practices, including tattooing, in an effort to reclaim and redefine the female body. Pitts (2003) further suggests that in late modernity the conception of the human body underwent a profound change, which presented the body as, "a plastic, malleable space for the creation and establishment of one's identity" (p. 65). The emergence of the body's relationship to identity is an important point, which I explore further in Section Four.

The process of increased globalization in the 1980s and 1990s introduced a new kind of 'international' chic. After a hundred years, tattoos in the U.S. had come full circle back to their 'primitive' roots. During this time American tattooing came under the influence of its foreign predecessors including Pacific styles that a century before had transformed regular humans into exotic 'freaks'. Atkinson (2003) writes that "this trend was particularly appealing to the new middle-class clients who did not wish to adorn themselves with images and symbols common in North American tattooing history" (p. 45). Thus, tattooing saw the

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return of the 'tribal' style. This style was reminiscent of traditional Maori and Samoan designs that utilized swirls, spikes, flowing linear designs, and celestial imagery.

Some people who chose tattoos in this style would soon adopt the term "Neo-Primitives" to identify themselves with an anti-modern, anti-capitalist philosophy. "Groups such as the Neo-Primitives have promoted an interpretation that encourages us to look back at the most primal and primitive uses of tattooing as symbolic acts of cultural cohesion and group identity" (Atkinson, 2003:45). If Atkinson is right, though hundreds of years removed in time from their artistic sources, American Neo-primitives were attempting to adopt or reflect sympathy for ancient cultures by way of body modification in lieu of U.S. capitalist culture, which they criticized. Furthermore it should be noted that the political self-identity of much of the 1960's body art, which had been designed to separate the individual from a moribund or dissatisfying community, was giving way to a more sophisticated tribalist semiotics in which one identified with the values of the dead or distant past more than the immediate values of one's own culture. Much of the reasoning given behind Neo-Primitives desire for tribal tattoos is similar to Maori cultural understanding of tattooing. As Atkinson (2003) writes, "In representing the focal concerns of Neo-Primitives tattoos are used to signify a personal rite of passage, a marking of personal deference, an ability to endure pain, a challenge to conventional Christian notions of beauty and sexuality, and an exploration of alternative spirituality" (p. 46).

Between the late 1960 and early 1970s, tattoos have been shown to be increasingly representative of individual's sense of self. Caplan (2000) refers to a more generalized role of tattoos when she argues: "Tattoos continue to act as 'rites of passage', as well as straight-

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forward badges of identity for bikers, sailors, prisoners, or gang members. But what certainly is central to a lot of contemporary tattoo and piercing talk is the idea of individuation, as a declaration of me-ness"(p. 244). What in earlier generations was valued, such as following the normative cultural expectations as a guideline for identity, is now looked at as a betrayal of the self. In other words, the self that is valued more in today's society is one that appears infinitely unique, free of cultural expectations, and independent. In light of this self-constituted-self some tattoos have been shown to serve as anchors for identity in world of rapidly dissolving traditions in which the new and fresh is preferred over the old and tested.

Within these conditions the body is not only freed from its normalizing limitations, but, like identity, is viewed as an object that can and should be constructed. For some scholars, like Giddens in particular, in high modernity or postmodernity the body cannot be separated from identity. Jane Caplan (2000) agrees, "Body-work, whether normalizing, transgressive or pathological, resting upon the deployment of sophisticated technologies or upon physical effort and willpower, all seem to share is a kind of corporeal absolutism: that it is through the body and in the body that personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained" (p. 236).

In light of the historical social changes surrounding tattoos seen throughout the United States, Johnson (2006) posits that today, "In this fast-paced, technological society where everybody is becoming a number, being tattooed is a way of remaining a person, something capable of feeling and expression. It is possibly another coping mechanism that helps an individual get along in the world as it is today" (p. 59). Several authors express a concern

with conditions of contemporary life. Such conditions are often cited as a causal factor for individual's desire for tattoos (Shilling, 1993; Velliquette, 2004; Johnson, 2006). Here the unique ownership of one's own skin must not be overlooked. In what is often labeled as a "throw-away" culture ,one thing that cannot be carelessly discarded is the body. In a society of competing and conflicting social discourses and norms, one thing that individuals can be reasonably certain of is the reality of their bodies and their control over those bodies. In this sense, it seems highly rational to inscribe one's narrative on the one thing we can be sure is real and the one thing that we will keep for our entire lives.

Velliquette and Murray's recent study has argued for the significance of tattoos' role as anchors for personal identity. Murray says, "We continue to be struck by rapid and unpredictable change. The result is a loss of personal anchors needed for identity. We found that tattoos provide this anchor" (Velliquette, 2004: 3). From the responses of the seven volunteers of their study, the emerging significance of their tattoos manifested itself in narrative terms. Tattoos as a method of story-telling or story-creating harkens back to the problem of how individuals create a sense of self in the midst of the decay of traditional sources of identification. Velliquette concludes that one way is to permanently write down one's own stories on one's body.

Both Atkinson and Pitts situate contemporary tattooing in the breakdown of culture as an external guide to self-description within the contemporary U.S. Atkinson (2003) suggests, "Perhaps as a function of the current era of cultural uncertainty and doubt brought on by globalization processes, political correctness, ethnic pluralism, and the breakdown of dominant cultural social-classification systems (race, class, gender), people are turning to

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tattooing as part of a collective quest for something uniquely (North) American" (p. 48). In this view, tattoos become a way to reconstitute what is perceived of as a failure of culture; and, in so doing, they rewrite culture around the self with unique symbology, ritual, language and meaning.

Atkinson (2003) says, "In many ways, by pursing tattooing body projects, individuals may be actively and purposefully shopping for culture through their corporeal alterations" (p. 48). So, to permanently inscribe one's symbolic version of culture is to also inscribe one's symbolic version of the self's identity: the codes of culture become fragments which an individual may draw from to piece together a culture of one, a culture of the self, that is distinct from and yet interwoven with the larger culture whose symbology he/she has co-opted. One may think of this as a theory of tattooing as cultural memory, a redemption of cultural disintegration.

Pitts (2003), on the other hand, takes an optimistic point of view: "The postmodern conditions of social life, which include insecurity about the truth of human subjectivity, the erosion of tradition, nostalgia, and an expanding array of cultural possibilities with which to identify, create opportunities for new forms of bodywork" (p. 34). In Pitts' view, identity is freed from the tyranny of the past and one's culture-of-origin. Bodywork then becomes a way to create culture. In either case, Pitts and Atkinson argue that an individual's desire for control stems from a lack of shared culture. Contemporary response to these social conditions is to either find culture through the past or create culture in the present.

Others have proposed that tattoos' popularity today stems not from individuals' search for culture or attempts to anchor the self, but simply because they are trendy. A 1990

survey conducted by the University of Connecticut discovered that nearly 30% of the United States population was tattooed (Kosut, 2006: 21). To explain this unprecedented increase in size in the tattooed population, Mary Kosut makes a connection between the growing prevalence of tattoos in suburban America and its current wide-ranging presence in the media. Many public figures such as professional athletes, television personalities, fashion models, movie stars, and musicians can be found with highly visible tattoos, which are most often accepted and frequently emulated by their fans. Thus, as individuals witness tattooing in the media so do they internalize a general acceptance of the practice. In this sense, getting tattooed could appear to be an act of conforming rather than an act of individuation.

Kosut (2006) also argues that, "The community of new tattooed transcends age, class, and ethnic boundaries, and includes a heterogeneous population of teenagers and young adults, women, African Americans, Latin Americans, urbanites, suburbanites, white-collar professionals, and the college-educated" (p. 23). This is evidence for a marked difference between prior class-based, tattooed populations and a general increase in acceptance of tattoos. It is important to note that the very lack of a single population that has tattoos provides insight to the general ubiquity of the practice.

Due to its ubiquity it is fair to say that tattoos have become a trend in the United States. However, unlike other commodities that reach faddish heights the tattoo remains something that *can* be absolutely one of a kind. For some, today's tattoos are seen as an extension of the self, which in today's society is encouraged to be utterly unique. Because of this, artists and clients often collaborate on designs attempting to ensure the tattoo's individuality. Several studies of tattoos and their meanings have discovered that, despite a

general pervasiveness of tattoos, individuals imbue their tattoos with a variety of meanings limited only by one's imagination.

Today we see that tattoos are representative of myriad ideas including important people, events, life philosophies, and memorials. Because these were also common themes throughout tattoo's history, I do not intend to argue that today's tattoos are more meaningful than yesterday's. There is absolutely no evidence for that, nor do I have any reason to assume that people today feel more strongly about their tattoos than people in the past. What we do see alongside the evolution of tattoos is that social values in the U.S. have changed over time, which have significantly affected the way individuals construct a sense of self.

In the next section I explore how atomism or an increased emphasis on the individual over the group has taken root in the social imagination of the United States. Along with social structural changes born out the Industrial Revolution, the adoption of such a philosophy has, over time, undermined the value of tradition. I consider the work of Erik Erickson and Richard Sennett who both present tradition and custom as necessary to the ontological security of individuals. Because traditions and customs serve as anchors for a secure sense of self and place, today many theorists argue that individuals in contemporary society are struggling with the security of self due to the declining significance of traditions.

Section 2: The Erosion of Tradition and the Rise of the Individual in Modernity

The purpose of the discussion here is to describe how the contemporary concept of identity has changed with the rise of modernity or industrial societies. The decline of tradition has meant that identity construction in the modern world became a far more individualistic and deliberate process. Indeed, it is a common belief in industrial societies that one *should* take control of one's life, lifestyle, and identity. This rise of the individual is concurrent with the decline of both tradition and the belief that external forces, such as gods, spirits, and fate strongly determines the lives of individuals (Weber, 1904). In short, modern, industrial societies reject the concept of unalterable fates. Instead, such societies tend to highly value rational thought, freedom and choice to the extent that life becomes a series of unending options—including one's identity.

Several of the major features that characterize the rise of modernity, include the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, the rise of a highly specialized division of labor, and the rationalization of social institutions and worldviews. All of these factors contributed to the decline of traditional societies and the rise of modern societies. Indeed, the term "modernization" is defined expressly by the processes of social, economic, political and cultural social change begun by industrialization (Macionis, 2009: 492). The Industrial Revolution set off a chain reaction - what began as an economic revolution quickly spread to redefine the social world as many of our most famous classical sociologists discussed. Emile Durkheim (1893), for example, highlighted a complex and highly specialized division of labor as the mark of modernization and a process that divided not only labor, but people.

By contrast a traditional society is one in which most members all do similar kinds of work, therefore maintain similar kinds of lifestyles and shared values, norms and concerns.

Ferdinand Tonnies distinguishes the traditional society from the modern using the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* where the former translates as traditional and latter as modern. While Tonnies (1965) is often criticized for over-romanticizing the strength of interpersonal bonds in a Gemeinshchaft society, he argues that Gesellschaft societies are those in which individuals are "essentially separated in spite of uniting forces" (p. 65). Tonnies saw that, "the Industrial Revolution weakened the social fabric of family and tradition by introducing a businesslike emphasis on facts, efficiency, and money" (Tonnies quoted in Macionis, 2009: 493). The consequence of such structural changes was that, "European and North American societies gradually became rootless and impersonal as people came to associate with one another mostly on the basis of self-interest" (Tonnies quoted in Macionis, 2009: 493). For Tonnies, the lack of strong interpersonal bonds amongst individuals of a society marks a Gesellschaft society.

Though all the structural factors mentioned above have contributed to the rise of atomism, I believe we can look to a particularly self-defeating ideological tenet of modernity that discredits the value of tradition by idealizing the value of the individual. Much of the United States' progress and prosperity, including military victories, the strength of its democracy and economic stability is attributed to the self-determination of the individual. The man who can pull himself up by the bootstraps has become a western credo, an aspiration and ideal for all young men (and, more recently, women) in this country. In Western society, Gergen (1991) says, "It is the good person who makes his own decision,

resists group pressure, and 'does it his way' (p. 97). The social construction of what a good person is and does has strongly affected the way we judge the value of both community and communal traditions. In this way, the very individualism of the American imagination contains within it the seeds of a violent paradox: to be the individual, one must reject the traditions that define the individual.

This credo of individualism or *atomism* fundamentally proposes that people think of themselves as isolated from others. Because the opposite of 'doing it your way' is compromising among several different ways, the myth of the individual also highly discourages cooperation. Cooperation and sharing of resources are foundations of community and community is also the basis for traditions, at least those traditions that create a shared sense of place, history, and identity. Kellner (1992) says, "Identity used to be a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanctions to one's place in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behavior" (p. 139). Historically, rites and rituals have acted as social reinforcement of individuals' sense of self, which arguably also served to provide a more stable sense of self. Macionis (2009) argues that, 'the traditional world gave each person a well-defined place that, although limited in range of choice, offered a strong sense of identity, belonging, and purpose" (p.492).

In a basic sense, "invented traditions generally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past as a response to a novel situation" (McCulloch and McCaid, 2002: 238). Much like the individual narrative provides continuity for the self, traditions and customs provide a continuous and reliable sense of the world for the members that

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participate in them and those who are peripherally aware of them. Giddens (1991) argues in a similar vein saying, "In pre-modern contexts, tradition has a key role in articulating action and ontological frameworks; tradition offers an organizing medium of social life specifically geared to ontological precepts" (p. 48).

In 1950 Erik Erickson's *Childhood and Society* was published. In his work, Erickson observed a distinct difference between his patients and the patients of earlier psychoanalysis, which reveals individuals' reaction to modernization and a system of eroding tradition. Erickson's work provides an excellent example of how ontological precepts shape our identities by specifically highlighting the struggle of individuals who, while rejecting traditional norms, simultaneously experience a lack of ontological security. He writes, "the patient of today suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should—or indeed might—be or become; while the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under inhibitions which prevented him from being what and who he thought he knew he was" (Erickson, 1950: 242). In a society where traditional norms and values are upheld, its members are expected to adhere to such traditions. With such expectations individuals may feel a personal conflict or strain against the overwhelming tide of social norms. However, without those traditions, Erickson's work found that individuals continue to struggle with their own sense of ontological security by working to define the self without any guidelines.

This line of argument does not intend to surmise that traditions are absent from contemporary society, far from it. However, consider that along with Christmas, we are encouraged to appreciate Kwanza, Hanukah, and Ramadan. The difference is not that we

do not participate in traditions anymore, but that we are exposed to so many traditions and traditional values that the saliency of a single custom is too far weakened to serve as a basis for identity. Holidays serve as a good example of the cultural pluralism and miasma many contemporary individuals experience.

Indeed, as I shall highlight in a later section of this thesis, the new social era, which some writers refer to as postmodernity or high modernity, results in even more fragmentation of the self. Scholars of postmodernity (whether they be modernists or postmodernists) argue that today's individuals are struggling to create a cohesive sense of self out of nothing or rather out of the shreds of cultural life that have revealed themselves to be insubstantial. Sennett (1992) explains how the process of highly reflexive self-identification has become problematic due to the collapse of tradition: "The absence of traditional influences forces people to mold their self identity out of their personal experience or to turn to other cultural information sources (e.g., the mass media) for guidance. There is no tested basis of experience against which to assess the value of the result" (p. 324). The consequence of limited value placed on traditional methods of self-identification results in what Sennett (1992) calls a terrible burden for those in this postmodern age whose "members must find a meaningful life and craft a meaningful self, without the benefit of tradition" (p. 330).

The discussion now turns to an exploration of the ramifications of the modernist and postmodernist approaches to the concept self. I first explore the modernist approach that argues for a doer behind the deed. Though the modernists and postmodernists share concerns about structural and social changes of postmodernity or high modernity and their

effect on the contemporary construction of individual identities, the two perspectives fundamentally differ in their approach to identity and the notion of a core self. Though I ascribe to the modernist view of the self, I include a discussion of the postmodern view, because theorists, like Kenneth Gergen, highlight the significance of technologies produced in the last thirty to forty years and describe how these technologies, which he sees as technologies of social saturation, considerably affect

the process of identity construction.

Section 3: The Modernist View of the Self

The modernist view of the self maintains that there is a core self and that this self is, "formed through the interaction and intersection of inner (the core) and outer (society) worlds" (Zalewski, 2000: 40). This modernist view of the self has been metaphorically described as an apple in that it contains a definite core. In contrast, as I will discuss later, the postmodern view of the self metaphorically resembles an onion, where each layer is the manifestation of social discourse. Modernist thinkers certainly acknowledge the underlying power of social discourses. Indeed from a feminist perspective gender itself is such a discourse. However, for the modernist, despite whether women choose to perform gender according to the dominant social discourse, there still exists a" doer behind the deed" (Zalewski, 2000: 41). This perspective recognizes the reflexive consciousness of humans, which is able to conceive of the self from an outside view.

George Herbert Mead's theory was one of the earliest to articulate the self concept as emerging from a subject/object dialectical process. He differentiated between these two aspects of human consciousness as the "I" and the "Me". The "I" is the person as actor, acting in the world, while the "me" is the individual reflecting back on himself or herself as imagined through the eyes of others. For Mead (1913), the self "arises in social experience," and can be thought of as "an object to itself," and possesses a "social structure" (p. 375). This suggests that individuals can reflexively conceive of their own being and objectively construct identities by selectively appropriating the attitudes of the generalized other.

Time and Memory

Individuals' ability to remember past events, both as discrete individuals and in social relationships that stabilize and interact with their individual memories is implicit in the creation of the "I" and the "Me". Ezzy (1998) explains how the ability to remember is integral to the formation of a self –concept: "The idea of 'taking the role of the other' is a development of Mead's analysis of the process of the construction of pasts and futures through anticipating and remembering one's own responses and treating these as objects" (p. 241). In other words, an individual's sense of self develops not just over time, but also because of time. Time also illuminates how an individual's sense of self changes throughout a lifetime through the act of reflecting upon past events, behaviors, and decisions. Ezzy (1998) says, "The meanings of past and anticipated events change as a consequence of the reframing effects of role-taking during the passage of interaction" (p. 241).

Some scholars offer a distinction between selfhood and identity that illustrates a distinction about how humans experience time both chronologically and phenomenologically. Putting it simply, "identity" is coextensive with the recollection of the self, a memory of how one has chronologically existed in linear fashion up to and including the present moment, while "selfhood" is one's engagement with what one might call one's own story. That is, "selfhood" is the imaginative snapshot of one's total life within time. Atkins (2008) argues that because psychologically life is experienced as a direct result of one's bodily existence, "selfhood is inherently temporal, and identity is inherently historical" (p. 70). Chronological time is perceived as a linear constant. It is also how we conceive of cause and effect relationships. However, phenomenological time is what allows

humans to remember past events, recall them in present situations and imagine one's self in future situations. With these two dimensions of temporal experience humans are able to interweave both concepts of time into a cohesive story of oneself, which includes projections of the self in the future. For Atkins, identity is rooted in an individual's past experiences, but no less important to identity is the setting in which the past experiences occur. Therefore, Atkins (2008) sees how chronological and phenomenological dimensions work together to, "form the temporal matrix in which practical identity is constituted and reconstituted" (p. 70).

About the importance of memory in the construction of identity, Clark (2004) says, "Personal identity is established largely by history, by the persistence within an individual of a set of experiences and learned ways of reacting. To lose one's memory is not emancipation, but a mental disorder, for without memory we cannot function as ourselves" (p. 13). This is so, he argues, because "the past is not some remote and abstract catalogue of names and dates, but the very fabric of the individual identity… men [sic] are made up of past experiences" (Clark, 2004: 14). For Clark, memory is what makes identity construction possible insofar as memories allow for a cohesive construction of a personal narrative. The collection of memories allows for the creation of personal narratives, which not only describe one's past, but also set the stage for envisioning one's future.

Self as a Narrative

Giddens (1991) establishes identity as a reflexive process, "the identity of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness" (p. 52). Here

Giddens' use of the word "reflexive" implies that the self is able to conceive of an objective other as well as observe oneself from an objective perspective. Thus, like Mead, Giddens presumes that the individual is capable both of seeing himself or herself as an object separate from other objects in the world and of analyzing the self as an object from an outside point of view. His argument establishes identity as a fundamental process understood throughout human cultures. He argues that "personhood is the capability to use 'I' in shifting contexts, characteristic of every known culture, it is the most elemental feature of reflexive conceptions of personhood" (Giddens, 1991: 53).

What is important to grasp is that the process of objective observation of the self does not cease, which is to say that the self is not a static goal that can be attained and set. Individuals participate in this reflexive process throughout their lifetime. A consequence of this is that biographies must be able to be maintained over time. This means that they "must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them in to the ongoing 'story' about the self" (Giddens, 1991: 54). Giddens (1991) explains what he sees as important to the stability of identities: "a person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively" (p. 54). When we consider Giddens' assumption that the self is constantly participating in a reflexive process while negotiating present situations, we must then consider how it is possible for individuals to know themselves and furthermore communicate their identity to others.

Ultimately this thesis will approach the research question from a perspective that argues for the self as a continual construction of a personal narrative. In this section, I have

discussed how reflexivity, personal history or biography and individual memory are essential components of an individual's understanding of self. Identity that exists as a narrative practically means "that the only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative" (Currie, 1998: 17).

Ochs and Capps' (1996) provide an understanding of the self as "understood to be an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one's past and future" (p. 22). Scholars agree that narrative is a fundamental way in which human beings make sense of the world. By invoking the narrative individuals are able to grasp past events and past behaviors and incorporate these memories into the thinking, feeling, and acting person he or she is today. Carr (1986) notes, "we may think of autobiographical reflection as being conducted in the present and being directed entirely toward the past. More often, however, it is concerned with the past in order to render it coherent with or comprehensible in terms of a present and a future" (p. 75).

The self as narrative recognizes that individuals struggle to create a whole sense of identity through the integration of several selves that may be separated by time, contrasting values, or competing facets of the individual's personality. Identity scholars emphasize that selves are not necessarily the same across time and place nor do they necessarily cohere. Therefore, narrative theory asserts that individuals exist in a tension between selves across time, conflicting values, differing moods, and in different settings.

Individuals show a desire to behave differently at different stages in their lives, in essence to rewrite the self. Whether values change or experience grows, it is common for

individuals to experience a certain sense of dissonance between selves over time. Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that narrative assimilates these discordant selves: "Narrative is born out of such tension in that narrative actively seeks to bridge a self that felt and acted in the past, a self that feels and acts in the present, and an anticipated or hypothetical self that is projected to feel and act in some, as yet, unrealized moment" (p. 29). Atkins (2008) concurs in that narratives function to normalize events in one's past to create a whole being or identity: "Continuity in one's identity is a self-constitutive process of self-constancy— backward and forward-looking processes through which I integrate my past, present, and anticipated future into a chronological order, from my first-person perspective, in such a way that those aspects are intelligible to an normative for me" (p. 69-70).

It is in this sense that we explain our selves through the activity of narrating. For Ochs and Capps, as well as for Atkins and Giddens, this activity of narrating is the creation of identity. When this fluidity of the self-narration produces anxiety of any sort, one might tentatively suggest, a person makes a motion towards permanently inscribing the self-narrative through any number of means: marriage, purchase and ownership, enactment of laws, artistic endeavor, and possibly the permanent tattooing of the body. The keynote in this argument is that, in the process of defining the present self, a simultaneous and necessary act of storytelling takes place. We will see this in Section Five, as several of the participants engage in narratives to explain how they define identity.

The self as narrative perspective assumes a core sense of self—a personality that can be relied upon to think and behave according to prior experiences and in a reasonably predictable manner. However, humans also have a tendency to act out of character, change

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our minds and opinions drastically and rapidly. Indeed many have experienced days where we "just don't feel like ourselves". How are we to explain this? Ochs and Capps (1996) acknowledge the instability of selves and say, "We use narrative as a tool for probing and forging connections between our unstable, situated selves" (p. 29).

For Giddens (1991) this instability of behaviors, feelings, opinions, and desires does not affect our sense of identity. This is because he argues "a person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor – important though it is – the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (p. 54). In this view, identity is both a set and a fluid thing. It is definable in the present, but continuously evolves as individuals accrue experience day after day.

 Giddens' view of the self is not entirely optimistic. His concern over the fragmentation of the self is similar in some ways to postmodern concerns. However, the two perspectives fundamentally differ in how they view the existence of the self. In Giddens' view, the contemporary individual is seen as, "dissolved or dismembered by the fragmenting of experience" (Lemert, 1993: 538). The "fragmenting of experience" refers to the varying social roles in which an individual must engage as well as the influence of thoughts and opinions of those varied others with which one interacts on a daily basis. Further in the discussion, we will see that Giddens' fragmented self is similar to Gergen's saturated self. Both theorists point to how the increase in the volume and frequency of social relationships make a committed identity more difficult in postmodernity or high modernity. Though Giddens expresses this concern over fragmentation, he does not follow the more extreme position of the postmodern view, which argues that identity can be deconstructed

into no more than a manifestation of complex social discourses.

However fragmented individuals are, Giddens (1991) argues that self-identity, "emerges after basic trust forms the original nexus from which a combined emotive-cognitive orientation towards other and the object-world" (p. 38). In other words, Giddens reclaims the idea of a core self through the trusting relationship that confers upon the participants a true self. The basic trust between an infant and his caretaker marks the emergence of a social identity as one separate from another. For Giddens, identity is already formed (but not set) before we as individuals are aware of the greater society.

To summarize, the modernist approach to identity establishes the view that individuals possess a core sense of self - a doer behind the deed. George Herbert Mead's approach to the self assumed the emergence of a dual consciousness in which the individual is both subjectively and objectively conscious of his or her self. In others words, the individual is aware of how he or she sees himself or herself as an object through interactions with others. Better stated, the individual has a perception of how the greater society views him or herself, and shapes or influences that view through his or her future social interactions as a subject.

Further, I have suggested that time and memory are critical to the creation of personal narratives and that individuals primarily rely upon biographical history and memory as sources for the construction of personal narratives. Over time, past experiences are reframed according to new experiences and information—all of which coalesce to become biographical narratives. The reframing of the past through narratives helps to bridge the temporal existence of the self by producing a consistent identity validated though one's

ability to remember the past and to integrate memories into dialogues that explain oneself in the present.

Section 4: The Postmodern View of the Self

As noted above, the postmodern self is metaphorically described as an onion. The basic difference as to whether the self is similar to an apple or an onion is the existence or lack thereof, of a core self. From the postmodern point of view there is no doer behind the deed (Butler, 1998: 181). Identity is essentially deconstructed down to a collection of social discourses and scripts. Hence, the expression of identity is simply repeated performances of those social discourses. Postmodernism emphasizes that identity is primarily a function of cumulative socio-cultural influences, a proposition that is open to strong critiques but which raises important questions concerning the construction of stable identities under the conditions of postmodernity or high modernity.

I return to Zalewski's analogy using apples and onions. The postmodern perspective sees the self as an onion, which after peeling back all the layers reveals no core. The onion's layers are a complex matrix of language, social discourses, and norms. These discourses, in turn, provide individuals with a sense of identity. Postmodern theory recognizes that individuals assume or think they have a core sense of self. However, they see this as a false assumption. Judith Butler's (1990) postmodernist queer theory argues that there is no core self, identity, or subject that acts to express itself, rather performances or actions create the interior self (p. 272).

Gender or the social discourses concerning gender provide a good example of the power of discourses. Consider that every child born across the world, often times before the birth, each child is situated within several categories—gender being one of the most basic. Individuals are either designated as boys or girls and once one category is applied, the other

seems almost impossible to attain. The postmodern view acknowledges the power of such discourses, however they will argue that there is no apriori female subject contained within female bodies. Rather, it is the power of discourses (usually scientific discourses) that designate what criteria determine a "female body" and this designation, in turn, determines how the individual is socialized within the greater society. It is the designation of the female body along with the performance of femininity that gives the individual the notion that, "I am female." For the postmodernist, "I am female" is a mis-statement. Rather, female bodies are the effect of performing and doing gender. Underneath the performances there is nothing we are able to point to which would signify 'female'.

Rather than accept the normative discourses that create identities, postmodernist thinkers want to challenge such discourses and deconstruct the layers of identity in order to reveal the power of hegemonic ideas. Hence, supporters of these post-perspectives find freedom in the deconstruction of identity into non-identity by resisting the very categories that define individuals. Moreover, they see this resistance as not simply negative or destructive, but creative and liberating in that resistance offers individuals new dynamics with which to define the self (Butler, 1992: 273).

The next section addresses this lack of social authority by examining Gergen's (1991) theory of the 'saturated self'. He proposes that the new electronic technologies of mass communication tend to populate individuals with fragments of others including their cultural norms, customs, and beliefs. These 'social ghosts' arguably, are responsible for undermining the overall stability and authenticity of individuals' sense of self as well as affecting the kinds of relationships in which contemporary individuals engage.

The Saturated Self in Postmodernity

The term "postmodernity" is a controversial term that has generated heated debates over whether the seismic transformations in social conditions over the last few decades are substantial enough to speak of a qualitatively new social era. Theorists who agree with this assessment use the terms "postindustrial societies" or "postmodernity" to refer to this qualitatively new era (Featherstone, 1991; Smart, 1993). Those who disagree with this assessment argue that we are simply witnessing the unfolding or unraveling of a later state of modernity that they term "radicalized modernity," "high modernity", "fast capitalism" or "flexible capitalism" (Giddens, 1990; Agger, 1998; Harvey, 1989). Because this particular debate is less relevant to the concerns of this thesis, I will sidestep this controversy and simply examine some of the dramatic changes in social life that are most relevant to the issues of self and identity.

In particular, below I explore how the rise of new electronic technologies have significantly increased the frequency and volume of social relationships that characterize life in postmodernity. In turn, I discuss how the accumulation of what Kenneth Gergen calls "social ghosts" and how the influx of information and technologically-mediated social relationships contribute to the saturation of the self.

With increased mass communication, globalized economies, and rapid international travel the possibility of multiple interactions with individuals from diverse of cultures (all embedded with their own truths about the external world) increases dramatically. In this convergence and clash among diverse peoples, cultures, and lifestyles, one's own culture and lifestyle is seen as merely one of many different ways of being. Gergen (1991) argues,

"as new and disparate voices are added to one's being, committed identity becomes an increasingly arduous achievement" (p. 73). Indeed, Gergen, as well as other theorists of Postmodernity, sees this as a process of undermining the stability of one's personal perspective, which in turn has the effect of undermining belief in the validity of the self.

Gergen further explains how maintaining a sense of self is problematic in contemporary society by examining how new technologies have utterly transformed the social fabric of the U.S. While he cites various inventions of the modern, industrial world that had direct effects on the ways in which individuals interact and communicate with one another, such as the railroad, the public postal service, the automobile, the telephone, radio broadcasting and film/television, he cites the new electronic, micro-chip and satellite communications as propelling societies into postmodernity. While other theorists have discussed how these new electronic technologies have virtually annihilated the previous boundaries of time and space (Harvey, 1989), for Gergen (1991) the postmodern era is primarily one in which, "an array of technological innovations has led to an enormous proliferation of relationships" (p. 49). The consequence of this is that individuals today live in a state of social saturation. Further, these technologies of social saturation are "central to the contemporary erasure of the individual self" (Gergen, 1991: 49).

The erasure of the self occurs through what Gergen (1991) calls them, "populating of the self, the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being" (p. 69). From this view, the fragmenting of the self is seen as a process of fluid, almost sub-conscious segues from one social role to another. He explains this segueing of selves as a state of *multiphrenia*, and says, "as we begin to incorporate the dispositions of the varied others to who we are

exposed, we become capable of taking their positions, adopting their attitudes, talking with their language, playing their roles" (Gergen, 1991: 85). In some ways this can be seen an increasing empathy for diverse lifestyles, but Gergen (1991) says, "the result is a steady accumulating sense of doubt in the objectivity of any position one holds" (p. 85).

Along with accumulating doubt about personal objectivity, what Gergen calls 'social ghosts' also accumulate. These social ghosts are the voices of those that influence the individual, and they can come from anywhere. Social ghosts can be the voice of Smokey the Bear warning one not to start forest fires, just as easily as they can be family members (dead or alive) urging us toward proper public manners; they can be the voice of a religion or a celebrity on a cinema screen who exerts some influence over a viewer's self-perception. These ghosts often hold conflicting agendas and with the accumulation of many ghosts the distinction between what should be done and what should be avoided becomes increasingly blurred. Gergen (1991) explains, "As we become ever more saturated with relationships, we become increasingly populated with fragments of the other, each of us harboring expanding congeries of potentials for relating and replacing the other" (p. 173).

Gergen argues that one particularly unnerving effect of social saturation is contemporary individuals' inability to maintain committed and intimate relationships. He says, "In the context of social saturation, one can see why both intimacy and commitment are slowly vanishing from relationships" (Gergen, 1991: 175). As individuals become populated with a variety of selves, it becomes possible, if not necessary to choose an identity to 'perform' depending on the expectations of others. As shown in further discussion several participants interviewed for this study mentioned the need to be different people depending

on the situation. Gergen (1991) poignantly states, "Rob the culture of its expression of personhood and its fabric of relationships begins to fray" (p. 176).

Gergen outlines two barriers produced by the population of the self, which obstruct individual's ability to maintain committed and intimate relationships. The first argument hinges upon the postmodern view of the self as coreless. Gergen (1991) begins with the romanticist's perspective, which assumes that "people possess core identities locked away in inner depths (p. 176). Indeed, for the romanticist it is only when two people touch at this level that we speak of "deep relationships" (Gergen, 1991:176). However, upon rejecting the idea of a core self, we necessarily reject the traditional, romantic possibility of engaging in intimate relationships.

The second barrier to committed relationships to come from a postmodern lifestyle is concerned with general availability of relationships. Before the era of mass travel and mass communication, one's choice of mates and friends was limited to geographic proximity. However, the very definition of 'close' has changed dramatically with the technologies of social saturation. Gergen (1991) says, "Even with the smallest amount of mobility, one is forever on the verge of 'new prospects'" (p. 177). Similar to the economic law of supply and demand, it stands to reason that the greater the availability of potential mates, the less the value of each. In turn, Gergen highlights how even though the frequency and volume of social interactions have increased, the actual time spent in face-to-face interactions has declined. Rather, today our relationships are mediated by technologies such that we interact through cell phones and emails more than we do face-to-face. For all of these reasons, Gergen characterizes postmodern relationships, even those that are characterized as

intimate relations - as "microwave relations" - brief, fleeting and superficial in terms of their emotional intensity.

Finally, Gergen concludes with the argument that the technologies of postmodern society, particularly those that increase the frequency and speed of mobility and communication, have had a cumulative effect on individual's relationships. Both the rejection of the possibility of relationships as understood from a romanticist view and the unfortunate view that the very availability of mates makes committing to one more difficult have contributed to social relationships that are increasingly suffering from fractionalism. Gergen describes a fractional relationship as, "a relationship built around a limited aspect of one's being. In effect, with the disappearance of true self, the stage is set for the fractional relationship," (Gergen, 1991: 178). Basically, a fractional relationship is one in which the participants find commonality based on a single or few shared interests of the individuals. Gergen sees this as a less committed relationship because the whole self is not brought to bear on the relationship, only small fractions of the self. So, in a fractional relationship neither party actually 'gets to know' the other. He acknowledges that individuals still desire romanticist type relationships and that most individuals desire intimacy in the relationships they've chosen. Nevertheless, fractionalism is a product of postmodern technologies that we have come to rely on within the past thirty or forty years.

Fractionalism can be seen in other aspects of postmodern lifestyles. One aspect of postmodernity is the high value placed on individual freedom and the individual right to choose certain lifestyles. Moreover, both the technologies that contribute to the populating of the self and postmodernity's focus on the desirability of personal choice, effectively assail

individuals with a plethora of potential interests and desires. However, like with expanding relationships, the expansion of choices and potential interests makes committing to one choice or interest difficult. Indeed, Gergen (1991) argues that in such situations individuals experience a sense of self doubt as to the overall authenticity of the self when the self is fractured with multiple and competing interests and desires (p.180).

In light of Gergen's position that social relationships are becoming increasingly fractured, it is possible to view a number of reasons behind why individuals living in postmodern societies may desire tattoos, one being that the permanence and visibility of the tattoo is a way to confirm and display one's sincerity and commitment to a cause, ideal or relationship. In this way, the tattoo may be viewed as a way to authenticate individual identities. The logic of such a proposition being that the permanence of the tattoo and the willingness to undergo a painful procedure may indicate a particularly strong feeling or desire. And to the individual, it may seem as though compared to other interests and desires, the one that elicits the desire for permanence may be an indicator of one's core values, desires and, thus, one's true or authentic identity. For example, as will be discussed at more length later, this study found that memorial tattoos, those done in order to honor and preserve important individuals and places from the past were the most common reasons given behind the participants' tattoos.

In the next section I explore how contemporary individuals, who are starting to challenge normative discourses see the body as a possible foundation on which to build a sense of identity and that through bodywork and bodily alterations they may be better able to visually grasp their sense of identity. Both the resistance to normative body regimes and

postmodernity's lack of ontological security are what Shilling (1993) refers to when he argues that bodywork has, at heart, the goal of providing those individuals that participate in bodywork practices with a sense of control.

The Body as a Means of Control

Scholars today generally agree that the desire to undergo bodywork is deeply connected to an individual's desire for control. Shilling (1993) argues that individuals who express identities through bodywork are essentially concerned with control in the grips of what may be an unmanageable plethora of choices: "The ability to construct a reliable self-identity through the adoption of lifestyles, which have at their centre a concern with body regimes, is inextricably concerned with control" (p.184). Shilling (1993) makes the point that "If the experience of living in high modernity is like riding a juggernaut which is out of control, then at least the body provides individuals with a last retreat, an entity which appears to be a solid basis on which a reliable sense of self can be built" (p. 182). Giddens (1991) expresses a similar view: "the body has become central to organizing self –identity as traditional sources of identity—family, marriage, gender, occupation, etc. —are no longer reliable sites on which to ground the self" (p. 202).

Without the presence of an authority over the body, some individuals experience the same lack of ontological security that Erickson's patients experienced. In contemporary society some individuals seem to be attempting to reconcile an ontological insecurity through corporeal alteration or bodywork. Bodywork is an umbrella term that refers to the voluntary option to change one's physical appearance. Bodywork appropriately describes a

spectrum of procedures including but not limited to dieting, cosmetic surgery, piercing, implantation, and tattooing. In this section I will explore the current literature that addresses the flexibility and versatility of the contemporary concept of the body and its relationship to how identity is viewed.

This view of the body, as not only related to identity but as a living manifestation of identity, is precisely why we are able to observe a current near-obsession over the appearance of the body and that is why, Giddens (1991) says, "The body cannot be any longer merely 'accepted', fed and adorned according to traditional ritual; it becomes a core part of the reflexive project of self identity" (p. 178). In contemporary society, the body is inextricably linked to identity. Therefore, it becomes necessary to work on or to alter the body so that it conforms to the kind of identity we wish to have or to promote.

Pitts (2002) refers to the tremendous expansion of technology as it contributes to the fragmentation of how what was once fixed is now becoming quite fluid: "Relatedly, technology has also been imagined as freeing us of cultural constraints, so that the postmodern body appears as a highly flexible, unmapped frontier upon which an ontologically freed subject might explore and shift identities" (p. 186). Pitts' phrasing is crucial: a subject is not at sea or an unstable self, but ontologically freed and liberated. She sees bodywork as an avenue to establishing identity through challenging social norms. She explains, "from a post-essentialist perspective, which argues that human bodies are always shaped and transformed through cultural practices, new body modifications have been interpreted as challenges to the naturalized status of Western body norms, and as forms of self-fashioning and self-narration in postmodern culture" (Pitts, 2002 :33). Where Western

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practice had come to regard the body as a pure thing, where the dominant social discourse maintains that the body's 'natural' state is desirable, Pitts detects discourses of power and contradictions that constrain the self-narration. Most bodywork, including tattoos, piercings, and some, but not all, forms of implantation are generally viewed as rejection of the natural state of the body.

Postmodern scholars reject the very idea of a 'natural' state for the body. For example, Judith Butler (1990) argues that "One is not simply a body, but in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well" (p. 272). For Butler, not even the body is representative of reality. The body can become a locus upon which we ascribe our sense of identity, but from her perspective how we choose to perform our bodies and the social discourse that surround our bodies determine how we think of our bodies and not the other way around.

The overarching point of Butler's statement is to show that how one does one's body is determined by overarching social discourses, which determine normative body regimes and are not anything that we can point to as 'natural'. Indeed ,from this perspective, everyday life appears highly regimented by dominant social discourses. However because norms are so internalized, the postmodernist argues that most individuals are not aware of the restrictions put in place by social discourses.

According to Pitts, the body is liberated under postmodern conditions. In contrast, according to Butler social discourses still hold enough hegemony that, even under postmodern conditions, the body and, indeed, one's sense of self is still highly regimented.

In light of both arguments, it appears that today's individuals live and construct identities along a continuum, which on one end encourages individuals toward highly unique identities and on the other encourages individuals to maintain dominant social discourses. The concern from both perspectives is that under postmodern conditions social discourses that determine norms are deconstructed into highly relative terms. Historically, traditional norms were responsible for giving individuals a sense of place and identity. A general acceptance of such norms also provided an authority that was able to provide guidelines and directions for how individuals see their place in the world. However, without the authority behind these norms due to massive influx of a variety of conflicting cultural norms, it is argued that individuals today are grasping for anchors for their sense of identity.

Before discussing the findings, the next section details the methodological approach to the study. As previously mentioned, this study used a qualitative research design and employed in-depth interviewing as the primary data collection strategy. Because the study is exploratory in nature, I used open coding techniques to organize the data into general themes: the individual's self-perception, how identities were described, how tattoos were described, the tattoo's symbolism, and individual's worldview. Among these themes I looked for commonalities, differences, and frequency. Below, I provide a description of each participant, detail the coding process, and address the ethical considerations this study.

Section 5: Methodology

The Qualitative Research Design

The approach to studying tattoos and the role they play for their owners is a qualitative one. I chose to use in-depth interviewing techniques to gather data with the primary goal of describing the lived experiences of individuals that choose to be tattooed. Due to the intimate nature of the information I sought, I chose a strictly qualitative strategy that aims to understand the framework used to describe the meanings behind tattoos and how individuals define their identities. Because I wanted to get the participants' stories behind their tattoos as well as a rich description of their identities, I chose in-depth interviewing over surveys and secondary data analyses.

Data Collection Strategy

The data takes the form of narrative description gained through several in-depth interviews with tattooed individuals. I interviewed eight tattooed individuals. The sample included three white females, two African American females, and three white males. In order to obtain participants I used snowball-sampling techniques. Snowball sampling is defined as, "a non-probability sampling scheme in which you begin by sampling one person, then ask that person for the names of other people you might interview, then interview them and obtain a list of people from them, and so on" (Creswell, 2009: 56). I interviewed individuals with whom I had pre-existing relationships, personal friends, colleagues, and extended friends of family members. Their ages ranged from 23 to 40 years of age.

The interviews took place at varying locations including local coffee shops, on campus, and in my own home. One interview was conducted over the phone, as this participant lives in another part of the country. The rest of the interviews took place face-to-face. All the interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. Most of the interviews lasted an hour and half, although some were necessarily scheduled in relatively short windows of the participant's availability. For example, Matt's interview took place during his lunch break at his job.

Within the interview, I asked several open-ended questions that were geared to reveal individuals' thoughts and feelings about tattoos, what they think their tattoos say about them, how individuals perceive themselves within American society, as well as questions involving identity—how many identities they have, how they change and interact with one another, and how they define their own identity. The interview protocol was semi-structured in order to gather comparative data, meaning that I made sure to ask each participant the same questions in order to clearly see possible similarities and discrepancies. I did not use observation, documentation, or audiovisual materials as data. The information gathered from the interviews served as the primary data for this study. All participants names were changed to protect their privacy.

Description of the Participants

Alicia is 31 years old. She is a white female, was born in Colorado and is the most heavily tattooed person I interviewed. She presently works as a tattoo artist in New York City's lower east side. She has close to 30 tattoos and they reflect almost every tattoo-type

category discussed here so far. She has memorial tattoos, like the orange bomb on her left calf, which reminds her of an ex-boyfriend. She has pop-culture references; like the white, sparkling Michael Jackson glove on her lower right ankle. The Dr. Seuss' Star Belly Sneetches on her shoulder represent a note-to-self type of tattoo, reminding her to be tolerant of those who appear different. She belongs to a group of self-identified "crazy-girls" who named their group, "Cold As Ice". She has this tattooed on the back of her left leg, which was done specifically to represent group affiliation. However, she views this tattoo with a sense of irony. She also has her ears, nipples, eyebrow, the nape of her neck, and her genitals pierced.

The next interviewee was P.J. He is a white male in his mid-thirties originally from New Jersey. He works part time at a local coffee shop and has seven tattoos, but he did not show me all of them. His first tattoo was of "Tigger" from *Winnie the Pooh*. The tattoo represents a part of his personality that is hyper, fun-loving, and carefree. Two or three (depending on how you look at it) of P.J.'s tattoos were done specifically to memorialize places. On both of his elbows he has outlines of the state of New Jersey. The outlines are identical and were done at the same time. P.J. views this is as one tattoo. On his right forearm he has a pirate ship christened, "NOLA" to represent New Orleans—what he calls his real home—and his view of himself as a rebel against the greater "nine to five" society. The pirate ship also represents the culture he grew up in. He describes his friends and family as pirates with motorcycles instead of ships, but pirates nonetheless. On his right calf he also has a "NOLA" tattoo, which was done after 2005's Hurricane Katrina. He also has an inscription in Latin of Plato's view of hope across his back and one other, also on his back

that is specifically representative of an old friend who had passed.

Nikki is a 26 year-old, black female. She was born in Alaska, then moved to Hawaii and finally moved to New Orleans when she was six. She currently works as a dispatcher for substitute teachers for the New Orleans public school system. Nikki has four tattoos. The hibiscus flowers on her left wrist symbolize her time in Hawaii. The Pisces symbol on her shoulder, her first tattoo, was done because she strongly felt that she embodied the Pisces personality. She has 'runes' written on her left wrist in a language known only to her and two friends. On her upper right shoulder, Nikki has a tribalist-styled butterfly. Nikki told me she had seen another girl with a very similar butterfly tattoo. At this point she says she began to dislike the tattoo. She now has plans to have it changed. Nikki has her eyebrow, tongue, and upper ear cartilage pierced.

Jane is a 40 year-old, white, female. She originally hails from a small suburb of Minneapolis and moved to New Orleans in her mid-twenties at which point she started her own business. Jane is the proprietor of a local hair salon. She has six tattoos in total. Although her back piece is considered one tattoo, it consists of a combination of several images. On her right shoulder is a purple tribal band. The colors of this tattoo are particularly symbolic—"royalty without the inbred crazy". Above this is a grey scale heart with 'NOLA' written in the banner. On one forearm is a bluebird with a matching cardinal on the other. These birds symbolize her grandparents. At the base of her left wrist is a green 'Converse' star. This is her most recent tattoo and it symbolizes her "punk-rock" phase.

Stacy, age 23, is a black female who also claims Creole heritage. She was born and grew up in New Orleans. She attended a private Catholic high school and took the

opportunity to move to Hawaii when she was nineteen years old. She currently attends a local university. Right now, Stacy has five tattoos, though she has definite plans for more in the future. On her right bicep is a Wiccan symbol of the goddess. Both the symbol and colors chosen to pigment the tattoo are symbolic in nature. This one was done for her ex-girlfriend. On her left shoulder, Stacy has a map of Africa. This is representative of her racial background. She explains that she is proud of her heritage and would get a Creole symbol if there existed such a definitive image. Her sidepiece, located on her left ribcage, is what she calls her 'uber-lesbian' tattoo. It depicts a woman, the elements fire and water, planets, trees, and fertility symbols. Her first tattoo is a full back piece. It depicts a tribal styled black dragon. On the back of her neck is a rainbow-colored barcode—symbolic of her sexuality. At one point she had more piercings, but as of today she only has her tongue, lip, eyebrow, and genitals pierced.

Chelsea is 25 years old. She is a white female, born in southern Louisiana. She is also physically disabled. Chelsea has three tattoos. The first is a fairy she got on her right shoulder blade for her 18th birthday. For Chelsea this tattoo is representative of a desire to expand her cultural horizons. She reflects on it as symbolic of a time in her life when she just wanted to get out and see the world. Her next tattoo is a fleur de lis on the back of her neck with a "NOLA" banner. Though she got it done in South Carolina, this tattoo was specifically done to represent her home. In light of Hurricane Katrina, like P.J., Chelsea wanted to get something that would represent her home. It is highly symbolic of an important place. Her final tattoo
(though she plans on getting more) is of a silhouette of a 'mud flap girl' in a wheelchair. For

Chelsea this tattoo serves two roles. It is representative of her identity in that, despite common attitudes toward her disability, she views herself as a sexual. In conjunction, this tattoo also serves to embolden her desire to follow through with a difficult choice regarding her college career.

Matt is 39. He's a white male, born in southern Louisiana. He has traveled the United States extensively but resides in Algiers, Louisiana. In fact, many of his tattoos were done during a trip. He presently works as a mechanic for a submarine building company. He also readily acknowledges his membership in a local biker club. Matt showed me four of his tattoos but alluded to others, which he did not want to reveal at the time of the interview. He also alluded to getting his entire sleeve done at some point using more Oriental imagery because "they can tell a better story". On his right inner forearm is an image of a Viking. This was his first tattoo. On his left inner forearm is an image of a boar's head, which was done with his children in mind. There are three daisies tattooed on his right wrist, which symbolize his ex-wife and a black panther adorns his right outer forearm.

Jonah, 29, is a unique case in that he only has one tattoo. All other respondents have at least four. Jonah is a white male. He was born in Gretna, Louisiana, attended private school until his second year of high school at which point he transferred to the public school system. His tattoo is of a 45 record adapter colored blue on the back of his neck. The tattoo represents a time in his life when DJ-ing was a large part of his life. Blue is his favorite color. He is a college graduate and currently works in a glass shop installing and building commercial windows and mirrors.

Verification

In order to ensure that qualitative researchers maintain a consistency in their approach, researchers often use procedural techniques which systematically check for the research's reliability. Qualitative reliability indicates that, "the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects" (Creswell, 2009: 190). Creswell cites G.R. Gibbs (2007) who suggests that to enhance reliability researchers should first check transcribed interviews for obvious mistakes, make sure there is not a drift in the definition of codes, and cross check codes which were derived independently.

After transcribing the interviews and before permanently deleting the mp3 files, I went back and listened to interviews as I read along. During this process, I was able to better listen for things, such as tone and volume of voice, pauses or sighs. This helped to re-live the experience of the interview with all the emotional nuances of nonverbal language. In some cases, this process caused me to reconsider the overall tone, positive or negative, of certain responses. Throughout the research I kept a table of the codes used for analysis.[1] For me, this visual graphic of the codes kept their interrelationship clear and understandable. I was able to change the ordering of the table and make additions to it as the coding moved from general to specific. This process helped to address Gibbs' second suggestion for consistent definitions of codes.

I did not cross check the codes using the aid of a different researcher. In future study, this check on the overall reliability of the research should be taken into account. However,

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[1] See appendix i for complete coding table.

some of the codes used in my research came from the work of previous study, specifically those that indicated themes of remembering. Creswell suggests that by "triangulating different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes" the overall reliability of the themes is supported. (Creswell, 2009: 191). Much of the data collected from the interviews supported the information found in the literature. Creswell (2009) says, "If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study" (p. 191).

After the first three interviews, I began sharing preliminary themes with the participants. I usually ended the interview with a short description of what I had found so far, partly to vet my findings and partly because many of the participants expressed an interest. After discussing these early findings, the respondent would reflect and more often than not offer explanations, opinions, and further avenues of inquiry. Though this took place in an informal setting, Creswell (2009) refers to this as *member checking*. The purpose of this is to, "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions of themes back to the participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 191). By triangulating my data with that of previous literature and studies, as well as *member checking* the research findings along the way, I have made efforts to account for the overall validity of the research.

Collaboration with members of the thesis committee greatly contributed to the quality of the research. Each committee member was chosen based on her specific strengths as sociologists. Thus I was able to utilize the expertise of committee members who possess

strong understandings of sociological theory and methodology, as well as past research experience. The committee members were instrumental in helping to develop the interview questions, suggesting various lenses of analysis, and maintaining the theoretical, methodological, and ethical integrity of the research.

Coding

Using the qualitative approach, researchers interpret data using the methodological schema of description-reduction-interpretation (Creswell, 2009: 57). While the description is provided by the respondent through the interview, the reduction is the process by which the researcher highlights relevant data and codes it under large categories of ideas. The coding process allows the researcher to organize general meanings and themes from qualitative data. In this study I used open coding techniques, which determined general themes from the data as a whole. Creswell (1998) notes that, "in open coding, the researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information (p. 57). Because this study was primarily an exploratory one, the three primary aims of the open coding process were to: a) notice relevant data; b) collect examples of this data; and c) analyze the data in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996: 29).

I began coding by starting with queries pertinent to the research questions. The first round of coding looked specifically at the respondents' thoughts about their tattoos. Important relationships, memorable events, political statements, and spiritual beliefs were noted and coded when they appeared. Initially I coded data regarding tattoos and

remembering as 'memories'. However, as I continued to reflect on the interviews, I went back and recoded the original 'memories' as 'important people', 'important places', and 'important pasts'. Metaphors were also used to describe the overall role of tattoos. The first respondent used this method, but it was not a theme I was initially coding for. After the second interviewee described his tattoo metaphorically, 'metaphors' became a code. There appeared a significant consistency across the participants' use of metaphors and the underlying analogy of the metaphor.

In the second reading of the data I coded for statements that described individuals' self-perceptions. I coded these as 'view of the self'. Subsequent re-readings led to codes pertaining to external perceptions, how other people view the participants' tattoos, social acceptance, rejection of the group or society, and media influence. I coded these as 'other's views'. This particular analysis was rather remarkable because I was able to observe Mead's theory of a pluralist self in action. Several respondents mentioned the difference between the way society sees them and they way they see themselves. Whether the participants experienced multiple identities was also more specifically coded under 'view of self'.

A related aspect of the analysis involved categorizing the various ways in which the participants tried to explain their identity. I initially coded this 'describe identity'. More specific coding under 'describe identity' included, 'physical attributes', 'likes/dislikes', 'relationships with others', and 'sexuality', though there were several others. The ways in which the participants described their identities varied across each person and this variation indicated that the concept of identity is highly fluid.

One surprising theme coded for came from a particular difference in the phrasing of

two questions: 'Do you think tattoos define your identity?' and 'Do you think tattoos represent parts of your personality?' This is described in detail in the next section, but the two codes 'does not define' and 'part of personality' indicated a distinction about the specific role that tattoos play for many of the respondents. The analysis will reveal that this distinction suggests support for the theory that one's identity can be understood as a narrative.

Finally, though it does not fall into major themes of the study, I asked the participants to describe both the greatest 'life lesson' they had learned so far and their overall worldview including life philosophies. The consistency of answers to come from this particular line of questioning was remarkable and certainly deserves more study in the future. This data was coded as 'worldview' and 'life lesson'.

Data Analysis Procedures

The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data, preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. (Creswell, 2009: 183). After reading all the data and getting a 'gist' for the tone and general meaning of each interview, I began coding the hard copies. These codes were organized into general themes. After the themes were sorted, I reflected on how they were interrelated. It is the relationship between the two topics, tattoos and self-perception, which lead to interpreting the meaning of how tattoos relate to identity.

The code table served as a process of data analysis as well. By having to graphically

lay out the qualitative themes, I necessarily had to reflect on their relationships. It was

through this process, that I was able to notice both a significant overlap and a disparity

between the tattoos' symbolism and the tattoo's role. This particular conflict reveals the

range and limitations of tattoos and their particular capacity to help anchor individual's

identities.

Ethical Considerations and the Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research involves "sustained and intensive experience with the

participants" (Creswell, 2009:177). Because this study aims to discover highly personal

information, it also creates an ethical challenge for the researcher. Creswell (2009) says that

due to the range of strategic, ethical and personal issues within the qualitative research

process, inquirers should keep in mind, explicitly identifying their biases, values, and

personal background (p. 177). Despite my own tattoos, while conducting this study I have

attempted to securely bracket my own presuppositions surrounding tattoos and what they

mean by relying on the information gained through the interviewees, as well as reflecting on

the findings and reassessing the structure and questions of the interview itself.

My personal biases as a researcher include issues of my social location. I am a 28

year-old, middle-class, white American female. My formal education consists of a college

preparatory high school diploma and a Bachelors degree in Sociology. My tattoos are

primarily symbolic of spiritual beliefs, as well as a visual expression of the idea that I own

my body and, therefore, are free to decorate it as I see fit. To overcome such a standpoint I

tried to choose diverse participants to gain a wider perspective. I also thoroughly considered

the questions I intended to ask.[2] None of the questions were designed to lead the respondent's answers and I attempted to make clear that the goal of the research was to discover what the respondents' tattoos meant to them. Hence, there could be no 'wrong' answer.

This research aims to study intimate aspects of individuals. It was designed not only to reveal what their tattoos mean or the stories behind their tattoos, but also how they perceive their own identities. For researchers to be confident in their findings it is necessary that the researcher earn a relative amount of trust with the participant. To encourage such trust, I assured the respondents that their participation was voluntary and that they were under no obligation to answer questions they were not comfortable answering. Above that, in light of further ethical considerations, all recordings of the interviews were erased after they were transcribed and rechecked. The electronic transcriptions are kept on a secure hard drive located in my home and the hard copies of the interviews are kept in a locked filing cabinet in the Sociology Department. As well, the participants' names were changed to protect their identities.

Despite the findings of current tattoo research, I did not go into this research assuming that all of the answers had already been revealed. Because the meaning and desire behind tattoos is highly individual, a full understanding of what tattoos mean for their owners has yet to be supplied. Bearing this in mind, I was able to allow individual experience, new data and new concepts to emerge from the interviews. The final goal is not to provide a definitive answer as to what tattoos mean to individuals. Rather the goal is to

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[2]   See appendix ii for interview schedule

provide a fuller understanding of the essence of what tattoos mean to their owners by

acknowledging that there is an abundant variety of meanings, as well as to show that

tattooing continues to change and evolve, generating new ways in which tattoos are viewed.

Section 6: Findings

Through the interviews and contributions from the participants, tattoos appear to perform in several ways as components in self-understanding. The data suggests that some tattoos serve as coping mechanisms for today's tumultuousness of life. Other respondents argue that some tattoos are just 'fun'. Others have suggested that tattoos are still highly representative of strong cultural traditions despite the current era of 'trendy' tattoos. In short, all of the diversity of human self-perception is brought to bear on the interpretation of one's own tattoos, and marks on the body become targets for self-interpretation in the same way that one's own body might for a body-builder. Consequently one may accept the apparently contradictory findings of Kosut (2006) who proposes a theory of media-induced popularity of tattoos; Velliquette (2005) who finds that tattoos are symbolic of an individual's personal narrative; and Pitts (1991) who emphasizes that bodywork contributes to the construction of the self through control of the body. They all appear to be important means of expressing an individual's conception of his or her identity. The discussion now turns to exploring the major themes that were engendered by this study.

Major Themes

Three primary themes emerged throughout the interviews. The first is that tattoos play the role of a mnemonic. Underlying the variations among tattoos, tattoos no matter how old or new tended to illicit memories from the respondent. All of the participants related a story behind their tattoos that encompassed several different memories that included the people they were with at the time or relationships that the tattoo itself was

originally intended to invoke, the events leading up to the tattoo, consequences thereof, and past self-perceptions. Some tattoos also were described as a string tied to a finger as these tattoos served as constant reminders for those individuals to act in certain ways or to manifest certain ideals for living one's life. I call these 'note-to-self' tattoos. Metaphors and similes often were used to describe how tattoos are similar to other things that tell a story about one's life. The fact that the majority of metaphors used described a kind of memory device further supports the remembering theme.

The second major theme to emerge from the analysis was an overlap between the role of tattoos and the tattoo's symbolism. Among tattoos, which were symbolic of 'note-to-self', fun or curiosity, and memories, some were also framed as representative of parts of personality. Further, these tattoos were described as having a role, which served to anchor their sense of self. Examples of these tattoos were Zodiac signs, a 'Tigger' (from *Winnie the Pooh*), a rainbow barcode, and a Viking. The participants readily acknowledged that their tattoos reflected their personalities. However, significantly, every single respondent declined to say that his or her tattoos defined their identity. This distinction emphasizes a general resistance towards allowing the tattoo to completely define the self any more than a single page in a novel can define the entire book. This emerged as an important distinction for those with tattoos and, thus, became another strong theme with which to better understand tattoos and their meanings.

Third, the number and description of the participants' identities varied across all the respondents. Participants' definitions of their identities were varied, ranging from single experiences unaffected by others to the quality of their relationships. Some participants

claimed that they were 'themselves' all the time. However, most participants noted that they experience a multiplicity of selves. Some described social situations, in which there was a need to control and to adapt one's identity. Some claimed to have different identities on different days of the week, while others claimed to have a work-self and a home-self. The variety of ways in which people define identity and then manage it according to social norms and expectations revealed an over-arching theme of how identity is complex and fluid and depends entirely on the respondent and/or the particular social situation he or she is in.

Remembering

'Note-to-self' Tattoos

The three main types of reminders were those of important people, important places, and 'notes-to-self'. "Note-to-self" tattoos are referred to as such because the participants specifically frame these kinds of tattoos as symbolic of a life philosophy by which they are trying to live or character traits to which they aspire. Five of the eight respondents framed some of their tattoos as 'note-to-self' tattoos. Alicia, who describes a tattoo of an owl on her ribcage as her 'cheesiest' tattoo, said, "The owl is like the cheesiest one I guess that I can think of. Like the idea is like protecting my own emotions too much and letting logic run my decisions and like trying to let that go. It's kind of a big reminder." However, Alicia continues to explain that, "Sometimes it definitely solidifies an idea that I had, but sometimes I don't agree with whatever it was I was thinking at the time, but I like to remember." Later discussion shows that Jonah's account also indicated that he has changed

or the way he sees himself has changed since he go this tattoo. This supports Ochs and Capps (1996) argument that the self exists as a tension of selves across time. Alicia explains this by saying, "That's who I was, but it's not who I am anymore."

P.J.'s tattoos perform the same role, helping him to reify his Platonic definition of hope. He says, about the Latin inscribed on his back, "Um its, the one on the back with hope… it's the one. So I mean that definitely…that's something that would, would remind me. Where you can be in life, but where you can also stand up and keep going."

Nikki, relating her own personality quirks, says, "The runes [tattooed on her left forearm] say 'No Regret' and that's um, a reminder to myself to put in the effort to think before acting. I have impulse issues." Another common thread within the 'note-to-self' type of tattoos is the respondents' desire to think, be, or act, differently than they would normally tend to. The participants acknowledge things like inborn traits i.e. "impulse issues", but also view their sense of self as something that can be changed.

For some of the respondents, the tattoos' role was to curb negatively viewed character traits. However, for Chelsea, the tattoo on her left wrist (a silhouette of a of "mud-flap" girl in a wheelchair) was done for the opposite reason. Instead of keeping her in check, this tattoo was done to purposefully push her to into action. She says, "I was always going back and forth about the thesis idea. I didn't want to do it. It kinda freaked me out. So I had a friend that was an artist and I was thinking about the thesis and she was like, 'oh, that would make a really cool tattoo.' She drew it up and now that I have it tattooed on me I can't not do a thesis because my whole story is gonna be gone. So it kinda encouraged me to go through with what I wanted to do." Chelsea frames her tattoo as a 'note-to-self' tattoo in

her last sentence where she says it encouraged her to do what she wanted to do. However due to the content of the tattoo it could also be perceived as a significant reflection of her identity as a physically disabled, sexual woman.

Stacy has layers of significant memory associated with her first tattoo. Describing the dragon on her back she says, "I mean like the back piece, the guy that drew it for me, we're not really close anymore. But it helps me to remember who he was and the person he was." Not only does her back piece help her remember the friend that designed the piece, but also a new phase of her life and the person she was at the time. Stacy says, "I also remember being nineteen, just getting to Hawaii, you know, first tattoo. And it's really significant that it's a dragon 'cause for me I've always liked dragons cause they're strong and wise and they learn." Stacy's dragon is an example of both 'note-to-self' tattoos in that the characteristics of the dragon are those that she aspires to and because the design itself reminds her of an important person in her past. The complexity of the dragon's symbology then is deeply personal, triangulated between a social relationship and a set of philosophical ideals that the dragon symbolizes to her as an actuating memory that makes itself real to her in the tattoo.

Tattoos for Important People

However, even more prevalent than note-to-self tattoos were tattoos that were done in memorial for others. Six out of the eight participants had tattoos done in specific honor of other people or were planning to have a memorial tattoo done in the future. Though they were framed as having a remembering role, tattoos for people were also described as a method of honoring those individuals that strongly affect one's life, which is to say that they

served a specific autobiographical and narrative function. These tattoos served a dual purpose of honoring the loss of a loved one and reminding the bearer of that person's influence on his or her life.

Jane's tattoos on her forearms were done with the idea that they would continue to remind her of her grandparents and their influence on her life. She chose the location based on the fact that her forearms are almost always visible and, therefore, serve as a constant reminder. Jane says, "I wanted the balance and a memorial for my grandparents because they were hugely instrumental in bringing me up and affecting the person I am today."

Stacy's account shows that the desire to keep her tattoos has as much to do with how they represent her self as with their ability to represent others. She describes a tattoo done for an ex-girlfriend: "Like I may not be with her anymore, but she was very important in the definition of who I am currently. So I can't say that 100 percent I'm not that person anymore so this tattoo doesn't mean as much, no! 'Cause it's the same thing with remembering and remembering everything that she taught me. We could turn around tomorrow and not be friends, but the tattoo is important because it demonstrates to me everything she ever taught me. I still remember those points, and I remember what I got out of them, and each of those little points are still a part of me." Her statement shows that this particular relationship from the past still significantly affects who she is today—harkening back to the concept of social ghosts. For Stacy, her relationship with her ex-girlfriend, like Jane's grandparents, is significant in that the relationship and the things learned from it affect Stacy's present conception of her self.

Matt did not claim to have any tattoos that held specific lifestyle advice, but he did

say they help him to remember little things about his past - especially important people. Matt said, "So you know, it's just once in a while, I'll see one of them and I'll look at it a different way and remember something. Like I remember something that my kids did or something from my first marriage. Just little things, but they make me remember a lot of things." Matt's tattoos seem to provide a generalized memory. However the daisies on his wrist were done specifically for his wife. "I got these daisies for my second wife. I wouldn't get no names put on me so I got daisies cause she liked them. Luckily I didn't get her name 'cause we ain't married no more." Even though Matt is not currently in a relationship with his is ex-wife, he wants to keep his daisy tattoos. Matt did not make any allusions to how this person from his past affects the perception of himself today, but his reluctance to remove the daisy tattoo may imply that the tattoo is representative of an aspect of his past or a feature of his personal narrative that he wants to maintain.

Matt, Stacy, and Alicia all have tattoos representative of people that they were close to at one time but who are presently are not involved in their lives. Despite the negative feelings they have toward these people in their past, all three say that they would never get these particular tattoos removed. To erase the tattoo would be, it would seem, a symbolic and significant erasure of the past, and apparently the self.

Tattoos for Important Places

Tattoos done to remember important places symbolized both geographic places and significant points in one's life. For example, place was used to describe a tattoo that was done in memorial of a specific event that were viewed as rites of passage or transitional

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stages, such as a birthday, moving into one's first apartment, or Hurricane Katrina. Tattoos to represent one's 'home' was a common theme. As well, several participants got their first tattoo for their eighteenth birthday. In this way, the tattoo is representative of a metaphorical place in their past.

Describing her various tattoos, Chelsea says, "The one I got when I was 18, I can still remember the place I was at. I had just graduated high school and I was trying to figure myself out a little bit and like the second one I got with one of my friends that I have been friends with since I was like 12. But for memory wise it's the NOLA tattoo". Chelsea framed two of her tattoos as symbolic of an important place. Her 'NOLA' tattoo represents her home. In this case NOLA literally stands for the geographic location of New Orleans, Louisiana. However her fairy is not symbolic of a specific geographical place, but rather in this case the place refers to a specific point in her life. The fairy could also be considered symbolic of a rite of passage because it was done for her 18th birthday after she graduated high school. For many, this time is considered a significant transition in moving from childhood to adulthood.

Stacy's dragon, along with layers of memory, also included a reference to an important place. Like Chelsea, the tattoo symbolizes a geographical place, Hawaii, and a point in her life. To reiterate, recall Stacy said, "I also remember being nineteen, just getting to Hawaii, you know, first tattoo."

Jonah's tattoo is a 45 record adapter at the base of his neck. He says about his tattoo, "You know at this point in my life I don't ever really see me DJ-ing again or going down that route. So I hope that when all that really does fade away, cause I'm getting tired of

lugging all that stuff around with me. That when that goes away, I'll still be able to remember some of it. So even if I were to lose every little memorabilia type thing, I'd still have that." Jonah acknowledges prior to getting the tattoo that its significance would change over time. He says, "But I think that happens to everybody. I mean, I knew that going in. One day there would be a time where it just would be, not pointless, just not as significant as when I got it."

His account alludes to a good deal of personal insight on Jonah's part. In some cases, the participants showed some disappointment in their older tattoos. For example, Alicia had some tattoos that, while she does not want removed, are symbolic of a very different person than the person she thinks she is today. Gergen enlightens us on the point of individual's desire for authenticity. Perhaps, because the participants acknowledge that the tattoo does not reflect their identities anymore, they may also have to acknowledge that what, at one point in their life, felt like an authentic part of identity turns out to diminish over time. This may, like Gergen proposes, create a sense of doubt as to the overall authenticity of the self.

Tattoos as Anchors for the Self

The second major theme to come from the analysis was tattoos' role as an anchor for the self. The accounts from Alicia and Nikki give insight into the concept of numerous identities. Alicia tells me, "I definitely feel like I have a duality in me. I've got a lot of different aspects and turning them into tattoos helps me remember those parts of me. So I don't get caught up in one thing." For Alicia, then, the tattoo reifies valuable "parts" of the self. Each of what she views as conflicting instincts, drives and responses find a visual or

symbolic form on the skin is specifically intended to keep any one of them from becoming dominant at the expense of the others.

Nikki's comment is almost identical, but her word-choice emphasizes a basic self beneath the multiplicity that holds the facets of the self in a coherent orbit. Nikki states, "My identity changes a lot. I guess, I'd say I'm multi-faceted. And I'm interested in a lot of different things and could easily fall into one thing or another. But I just want to remember the basics of who I am and those things that do make me, me."

Though commonly described as addictive, within this sample Nikki was the only person to describe tattoos as such. She thinks they are addictive because, "it's connecting to some part of your personality. In general deciding on acknowledging and confirming some part of my personality. You know, let me pick some visual way to represent this characteristic." Nikki says, "The more tattoos I have, the more parts of my personality I have in place."

Nikki's statement shows a commitment to being adaptable. She see her ability to change as a positive thing. However she also appears to struggle with the threat of losing distinct characteristics that make the individual who she is or believes herself to be. She says, "I want to be a person that can change when need be, but I just want to remember the basics of what makes me, me." In this way Nikki's tattoos secure those pieces of herself that she doesn't want to lose. Her statement shows a desire to permanently inscribe an idea to prevent the loss of this idea. However according to some other accounts it appears that even when individuals feel strongly enough about something to get it tattooed on them, they have the potential to change over time into something very different from what they thought or

felt at an earlier time.

Stacy's account of her tattoos is similar to both Alicia's and Nikki's. She says, "They [her tattoos] all speak of different aspects of my identity. I have Africa on my arm. I'm very proud of my heritage, proud of where I come from. If there was a big symbol for Creoles I would totally get that tattooed on me. Because each one of those represents different identities that I have."

About the solidification process of identity through body tattoos, Stacy says, "The tattoos kind of take something that like this social fiction or social identity that I have. I can't exactly touch it or feel it, but I put the tattoo on me and I can see it. I can touch it. I can feel it. It makes it more solid in a way and it reminds me constantly that these are different aspects of you and they may not all blend together. But each one of these conflicting identities are not really conflicting. They're a part of you."

Furthermore she says, "They take something abstract and make it visible to me and to others." Thus the body itself becomes the unifying principle of the self. Even though the facets of the self may be amorphous or even self-contradictory, the fact that they exist in (and now on) one body transcends their apparent fluidity.

The comments from Alicia, Nikki and Stacy seem to suggest that applying Kenneth Gergen's theory of the saturated self may be an effective method of framing and describing individuals' desire to get tattooed. As individuals are exposed to massive amounts of information from an increasing variety of sources, the self gets 'muddy' with what Gergen calls, 'social ghosts' (1991). All the aspects of the self must be kept in play, but they must always be authentic in some way, responsive only to the self that one is ultimately

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constructing. To tattoo oneself appears to clarify what is authentic, what one chooses or affirms as an authentic part of the self, and it fixes them upon the self.

Describing the Role of Tattoos through Metaphor

Several participants chose to use metaphors to describe the role of their tattoos. Prior discussion has shown that individuals ascribe a variety of roles and meanings to their tattoos. The participants' tattoos have been shown to act as anchors for aspects of an individual's personality, for people who have had a strong impact on the participant's life, and as a general locus for memories. Some participants agreed that some tattoos were done for nothing other than fun or curiosity. From the data gathered from the participants in this study, there does not seem to be an overarching cultural consensus about what tattoos symbolize. As well, the variety of the participants' metaphors supports the notion that within this society there seem to be very few rules about the role of tattoos. Unlike traditional societies (Tahitian, Samoan, and Maori) in which tattoos generally maintain the same styles and same cultural and social designations, Americans seem to use tattoos to represent whatever they want.

Because there does not appear to be a general consensus about tattoos' role the analogies are both varied and individual, meaning that the participants tended to say, "my tattoos are like..." rather than saying, "all tattoos are like...". This phrasing indicates that the participants recognize that meanings behind tattoos are personal rather than communal. Thus, while several participants described their tattoos using metaphors, the analogies varied from stories, narratives and remembering, to describing the multifactedness of the

individual, to the cosmetic aspect of bodywork.

P.J.'s metaphor uses the concept of a conversation. His description indicates a real life, daily interaction between what Mead calls the "I" and the "me". He said, "It's like having a conversation with myself. When I look at it and think about things. It's just uh, I mean, you change every day so to look back and even though you're not that person, you really still are and you've changed, but some things never do." The theme of change was prominent within this sample. Later discussion explains in detail the participants' worldviews. While the participants emphasized the issue of change, they also, like P.J. frame their tattoos as a possible coping mechanism for such change. By describing his tattoos as a conversation, it may be possible to interpret the role of his tattoos as similar to that of the narrative in that as we experience time phenomenologically, we are reflecting or having conversations with ourselves. Through this process we are able to bridge conflicting identities over time. The role of P.J.'s tattoos seem to help him to reflect on himself in the past.

Alicia described her tattoos as, "pushpins on a map". Like P.J.'s, Alicia's metaphor alludes to the role of her tattoos as a way of remembering her past. Matt's description is similar. He said, "They're [tattoos] are like scars. Scars will remind you of things." Indeed, we have not discussed scarification so far, but this is a rather popular practice, in which the skin is burned or cut to purposefully leave a scar. This is sometimes called 'branding' as well. Generally, the roles of both tattooing and scarification are similar, although branding is more commonly symbolic of group affiliation. P.J., Alicia, and Matt all chose a metaphor that evokes one's ability to remember and further supports the study's major finding that

tattoos tend to serve a remembering role.

Stacy chose to employ the use of metaphor to describe her piercings. Her metaphor indicates an aspect that heretofore the research has only touched on. That is that bodywork is often done for cosmetic purposes. Similar to Indian henna tattoos, piercings and permanent tattoos are quite often done because they look pretty. They are done specifically to emphasize or enhance the beauty of the wearer. Stacey said, "I always explain it to my mom like, Mom, she puts on makeup in the morning to make herself look pretty. Even if she's not going anywhere she puts on makeup. And I was like, that's what my piercings are. They are my permanent makeup."
Stacey does see a slight difference between her piercings and her tattoos. She acknowledges that the tattoos are more symbolic of specific things. But she also notes that her piercings have become so normal to her that without them she does not feel like herself or that something integral to her sense of self is missing.

Chelsea uses a puzzle metaphor in light of her various tattoos. She said, "They're all very different. They don't have a single theme. And I know I'll probably get more tattoos in the future and they'll probably be like a jigsaw puzzle." Chelsea's metaphor highlights her sense of multifacetedness. It also indicates her ideas about the future. Because she says that they'll probably be like a jigsaw puzzle, we may assume that Chelsea sees her multifacetedness as something that will remain with her. However, the puzzle metaphor also assumes that after all the pieces are in place there will be a whole picture. So even though she says that among her tattoos there is no single theme, together they say something important about her sense of self as a whole.

Chelsea's metaphor brings the discussion to an important distinction between the role of tattoos. Support for the distinction between tattoo's ability to represent parts of an individual's identity and tattoo's ability to define an individual's identity was found from every respondent interviewed. From explaining this contrast in the role of tattoos and acknowledging that tattoos alone did not define identity, important information emerged about how the individuals did define their identity. This important distinction leads the discussion to the final major finding, which explores individual's perceptions of themselves.

A Critical Distinction in the Role of Tattoos

There is ample evidence that some respondents frame some of their tattoos as representing and anchoring aspects of their sense of self. However, the participants were reluctant to say that their tattoos "defined" their identities. What emerged from the data analysis was both a complex and strong distinction between tattoo's ability to represent parts of their respective personalities and a tattoo's ability to define the self. It was common for the participants to think that others' perceptions were highly influenced by their body work. While the respondents did not feel as if their tattoos defined them, some felt as if other's defined them by their tattoos.

Jane was set against the idea that her tattoos defined her identity. To explain she says, " No. No. Because that's just a part of decorating the package for me. It's like accessorizing. The only way I think they would really define me is if I were to do a whole body project. Like the lizard guy." However she agreed that they represented parts of her personality.

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Jane reveals how she perceives of tattoos' potential to define the self through the wholesale commitment of the body to body art, but distinguishes it from the freer use of art to express oneself more discriminately. It is worth speculating whether this is because more discrimination by definition implies the subject is declaring what "reflects aspects of myself" and what does not.

Jonah believes that his tattoo was representative of identity in the past, but that he has changed since then. Jonah's record adapter is more representative of the person he was than the person he is today. He said, "At one time I think it did, but I don't think it does anymore." Jonah does not define himself as a DJ anymore. Therefore he doesn't necessarily feel like the tattoo defines him.

Matt agreed that his tattoos were representative of parts of his personality. He said, "Oh yeah. Definitely. A lot of it [the tattoos], you can see your own personality in a lot of it." However, his later statement shows that where he doesn't think his tattoos define him, he does think others tend to see his tattoos as a defining characteristic of his identity. Matt said, "I don't think so. I think a lot of people think they do though." Meaning that often others with judge his identity based on his tattoos alone.

P.J. does not think that his tattoos define him. Rather his tattoos serve as a kind of scrapbook of the past. He said, "I don't think they define me, but they're definitely…I mean, it's definitely something I hold onto." But in another sense, like Matt, P.J. thinks that more often others judge him based on his tattoos. Generally he thinks that most people view him as a bad person. He said, "Because other people judge tattooed people as wild or irresponsible or just plain bad people. They might think like, 'Oh, this person does this or

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does that' and that's [the tattoos and their associations] maybe all they see." For all the participants, the general feeling was that others tended to define their identities based on their tattoos, but their tattoos did not solely define the way they see themselves.

This distinction, upon reflection reveals a strong argument for Giddens' (1991) prior assertion that identity is to be found in one's ability to keep a particular narrative going over time. The participants' reluctance to say that tattoos alone had the ability to define them shows that identity is more complex than their tattoo's depictions alone. The tattoo acts as a snapshot of one's life. Essentially it is bound in time, therefore representative of the past and is generally unable to incorporate the present and future. When pressed to explain this distinction further, the participants argued that their identities, while numerous, would require much more than their tattoos could possibly tell. For example, P.J. says, "It's not a two-hour conversation, but it's definitely not a short answer."

As the next section will show, most of the respondents agreed that identity was not a short answer. Not only did all of the respondents state that they perceived themselves as having multiple identities, but also each respondent used a variety of methods to describe their identity.

Individual's perceptions of themselves proved to be a highly complex issue, which was relative to time on several levels. The respondents' accounts indicate that identity can change across years, days, and hours. There was also an indication that the general sense of multiplicity may decrease over time. Identity was also structured and managed according to social situations. The following discussion turns to the study's final major finding, which explores individual's various perceptions of the self and also reveals the range of the ways in

which the participants viewed, explained, and described their identities.

Perceptions of the Self

The third major theme discussed here is how individuals perceive their identities—specifically whether individuals experience a multiplicity of selves or identities as posited by theorists such as Gergen (1991) and Giddens (1991). One of the main theoretical claims addressed in this study was the case that individuals are experiencing a multiplicity of identities in their day-to-day lives. The findings here indicate that all of the participants view themselves as containing a variety of personality traits that coincide with a range of varying interests. Indeed, responses to the suggestion that tattoos are coextensive with one's identity provoked an aggressive defense of the multiplicity of the self, suggesting that respondents value the freedom and complexity that comes with eluding a final self-definition.

Multiple Identities

Chelsea defined her identity by acknowledging that it has changed over time. Chelsea says, "I would say that my identity is not concrete, but that its fluid depending on what point I'm at in my life". For Chelsea, time has clearly been a factor in how she sees her identity. Chelsea notes how personalities change over long periods of time, but further discussion shows that Chelsea also feels the need to be different kinds of people at different times; "I think I have multiple identities…well, see, I really don't know. I think it all depends on the situation I'm in. It's not that I'm trying to act like different people, but it's just one element of who I am at the time".

Stacy's account is equally revealing when she describes how at one point in her life she felt as if her identity changed on a day-to-day basis. She also relates that this was confusing. She said, "I think for me I did have that phase where I was like, "How come I'm like this one day and totally different that next?" Like I have to pick a side. And when I got older, I was like, "Fuck that. I'm not gonna pick a side. I'm gonna be girly today and butch tomorrow." I'm gonna shave my head. Now I'm gonna have dreadlocks. Now I'm gonna have straight hair. I don't care. I like the fact that I can be fluid with any identity that I have."

Nikki's account of possible multiple identities is explained by the fact that she responds to at least four different names depending on who she is with. Nikki says, "Family views me a certain way and they call me one name. And guys view me a certain way and they call me another and girls view me a certain way and they call me a different one. Um, I don't which came first. Like their perception or if that's actually who I was, but I kind of grew into it for a while. Between high school and my early twenties I grew into all those different things." At the end of Nikki's statement, she alludes to a confusion about such numerous identities. She notes that she doesn't know which came first, either a supposed 'natural' multifacetedness of her personality or society's perception of her having different identities. Nikki's comment supports the modernist view that identity is established through the interaction between the inner and outer world. Her response further suggests that at a particular stage in life this can be confusing. However her account also notes that over time the feeling of multifacetedness may decrease. Nikki said, "I only have two now. A work self and a home self."

Jonah does not claim to have numerous identities presently. However, he does describe a struggle to define identity when he was younger. He says, " Honestly when I was younger, music really wasn't a big part of my life. I was the clueless kid. I had no idea about Pop culture. I was in my own little world. And yeah, I struggled with that for a long time." Jonah felt that his lack of knowledge about pop culture kept him from creating relationships because he had little to talk about with peers at the time. He says, "I felt like I should have opinions about that stuff cause everybody else did. I felt isolated."

It was music that eventually gave Jonah his first real sense of identity. He explains, "See, I had always watched MTV and dug on the videos, but it was…It wasn't like I had an opinion about any of it. It just was. I think that's why I got into DJ-ing so much. It was different. It was kind of my own thing. It was something different that I could form an opinion about and relate it to other stuff. It was a good thing for me."

However, similar to some of Alicia's tattoos, Jonah stated that his tattoo was not necessarily representative of his identity anymore. He said, "No, I've changed since then." Thus his tattoo is symbolic of a specific personal interest that helped to give him a sense of identity in his youth, but does not apply to his sense of identity now. Still, Jonah does not wish to get his tattoo removed. He wants to remember that part of his life. Perhaps this can be attributed to nostalgic impulses, but Jonah's interest in music and DJ-ing are also integral pieces to his identity when the self is seen as a narrative.

Matt acknowledges that his identities have coalesced due to age. To explain, after a thoughtful pause, he says, "Well, that's kinda hard to say. At the beginning, yeah. Over the last ten years, no, I've been the same. But when I was getting tattoos I was changing a lot.

But now that I'm older, I done figured out what I want to do."

Jane also acknowledges that age may be a factor in the process of solidifying identity. When she was young her parents' separation required her to take on a caregiver role to help raise her younger sister. While Jane does say that she is "average and made up of many different parts at any given time," her early childhood experiences "helped [her] develop to the 'there's a time and place for it all'" notion—meaning that as a child she recognized that, "many different parts make the whole", but "there are certain parts that are more appropriate at certain times."

Jane's experience shows that even at a very early age, individuals are learning how to manage several different facets of their personalities and how roles that one takes on even as a young child can shape how she thinks of herself as an adult. Jane goes on to say, "I think as you grow to accept yourself and appreciate who you are, you're more comfortable to realize that you are carrying yourself throughout all of your daily activities depending on where you're at or who you're with, but you're more selective about how much of you you get to share in any given situation."

All the participants agreed that having multiple identities and multiple interests was quite normal. Indeed, they confirm George Herbert Mead's notion that "multiple personalities are in a certain sense normal" (Mead quoted in Ritzer, 1996: 340). Moreover the respondents suggest that experiencing a confusion about one's identity is simply a part of growing up. Postmodernist and Modernist theories use the words 'fragmentation' and 'saturation' in a distinctly negative context to describe individuals in this era of late modernity. As well, they describe the contemporary individual as 'grasping for anchors to a

sense of reality' and experiencing a 'lifelong struggle to create a sense of self". It appears that the idea that individuals experience a multiplicity of selves is a valid one. However, the findings here indicate that a) individuals see this struggle as normal, b) individuals can creatively adapt to such struggles, and c) that a sense of multiplicity may decrease over time.

Multiple Ways of Describing Identities

Another aim of this study was to explore how individuals define their identity. From the eight respondents came six different aspects of the self that were reported as significant to their respective identities. The participants used a variety of methods to describe or define their identities including physical attributes, personal interests, personality traits, likes and dislikes, relationships with others, and sexuality.

Parts of Personality

Several respondents used features of their personalities to define their identities. It is clear that quite a few of the participants saw these features as innate. These aspects of their personalities are framed as features that make the individual who he or she is. Within parts of personality, likes and dislikes, as well as so-called 'quirks' are included in this method of defining identity. As contrasted with 'Relationships with Others', participants often framed their 'physical attributes' and 'parts of personality' as things they had no choice over. In short, they did not view these features of their identities as socially constructed. Rather, they viewed them as immutable aspects of the self that could be consciously controlled but not changed. For other respondents, identity rested on the kinds of social choices the individual made.

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Jonah approached his identity by describing the kinds of things he likes. Jonah describes his identity as, "A big kid. Most of the time. Um, I like to laugh a lot. And I like to kid around and joke. I have a hard time letting go of things—like childhood things, little things. But I mean we all have to grow up, but I would not like to lose that part of myself." Jonah's final sentence reveals a common thread among the participants, which is that there appears to exist a sense of temerity about one's identity. It appears to be a rather fragile thing that is threatened by time. His reference to childhood things may indicate that, for Jonah, his past is integral to who the kind of person he wants to be in the present.

Nikki defines herself through acknowledging parts of her personality. She says, "I have impulse issues. I like to do things on a whim. I guess, I'd say I'm multi-faceted. And I'm interested in a lot of different things and could easily fall into one thing or another". Alicia and Nikki tended to define their identity by describing features of their personality. Alicia describes identity in a different way by relating an overall personality trait she's observed over her lifetime. She says, "I get sick of things and ready to try new things quickly. My thing is always doing different stuff. That's what defines me." However, later in the interview while discussing her right arm, which is dedicated to works by artist that have inspired her, Alicia says, "My right arm sleeve is full of artists that I like and have been inspired by. I guess that defines me as an artist." So similar to Jonah, Alicia used her likes and dislikes to describe her identity.

Physical Attributes

Stacy begins with a list. She tells me, "Okay, Black, female, lesbian, feminist, activist, kinkster, wine taster." Listing attributes was another common method the participants used to describing identity. Stacy acknowledges that female, along with other features of her identity, is a social construction. She explains, "Okay, terms like female and woman, I had to find out what that meant for me. Do I identify that? Okay yes I do." She says the same thing about the term 'black'. Stacey's tattoos then reflect her own personal conceptions of overarching social discourses such as race and gender. She identifies as female and Black, but appears to pick and choose which aspects of femininity and Blackness she wants to identify with. She also chose to describe things she was interested in, such as wine tasting.

Stacy appears to be comfortable with her sexuality. But more than that, she sees it as an integral part of her sense of self. In this case, both 'lesbian' and 'kinkster' refer to sexual preferences. Importantly, these two aspects of her personality are also forms of group identification. Not only do these labels provide a vocabulary to distinguish her personal preferences, but they also give her access to a sense of belonging within the two groups. She describes a sense of confusion about emerging interests. What at one point seemed like a personal interest has become a facet of her identity. She says, "Now, I'm completely immersed. I belong to a BDSM community here. Now I could never disassociate with it. It would be like saying I'm not a lesbian."

However, Stacy also makes the point that in the past she used labels to define herself, but over time found that from initially feeling liberated, eventually these labels became

restrictive. She used her "Goth" phase as an example. She said, "I had a Goth phase in high school. But it was kinda like, I don't like to be restricted. I don't like to wear this uniform. Sometimes I wanna wear bright colors. I don't want to listen to just this. I want to listen to folk music too. I think I have grown from being constricting to being more open and that's allowed me to find that I do have multiple identities and there's nothing wrong with that."

Chelsea begins, "Well…my identity, I would just tell them that I'm a lot of different things in one. I love…I'm a sexual person and I love knowledge and I have a lot of… I could be described by my disability. So I would say that my identity is not concrete but that it's fluid depending on what point I'm at in my life." Chelsea's answer is rather revealing because she goes through several different avenues toward defining her identity without truly settling on one method. Chelsea and Stacey are the only two people who specifically addressed physical aspects of the body as relating to their identity. Perhaps, these two individuals may see their bodies as more salient aspects of their identities as a response to social marginalization, Stacy is a black woman and Chelsea is a physically disabled, white woman. This issue of marginalization is expanded upon within the discussion of the gender analysis.

Both personality features and physical attributes are framed as innate characteristics of the individual. Such features, perhaps because they appear to be innate, are possibly viewed as authentic aspects of identity. However, the final two respondents define their identities using, not innate characteristics, but individual choices. As Jane and P.J. describe how they relate to others, either intimately on a larger society scale, their accounts reveal that the most salient aspects to their self perceptions are the personal choices one makes. For

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P.J. whether to follow the social nine-to-five norm or for Jane in how she carries herself on a daily basis, identity appears to be more about what you make it than what one perceives him or herself to be.

Relationship to Others

How the participants related to others was not the most common avenue used to define identity. Only two of the participants situated themselves in the context of society or social relationships as a method of defining identity. Jane's idea of identity is "how I carry myself in life and what I do with my friends and family." Her choice to relay this example of her identity shows that, for her, the most salient aspect of identity is how she relates with those individuals with whom she maintains close relationships. Jane views this aspect of herself as defining because she says, "I think that defines me more than what I wear or what tattoos I have just because that's the kind of stuff that's still around when you're gone. That's what people will remember about you. They won't necessarily remember my kick-ass converse tattoos, but that I have a good heart and a good soul. And had compassion in my life for others."

For P.J., his identity is more centered on how his concept of himself clashes with society as a whole. He says, "I don't want to follow the norm. I don't want to be a part of the nine-to-five American way. I'm more of an innovator." Indeed, P.J. sees himself as a pirate and rebel. P.J.'s definition of himself comes by way of defining what he is by recognizing what he is not. In particular he is not a typical American (typical from his point of view). For P.J. and Jane, their identity is strongly related both to how they compare,

contrast, and relate to the larger society and to intimate friends and family. It is their individual roles within and in relation to society that serve as the most salient of identity features.

Having to describe their identities all the respondents, regardless of which method they chose to use, were actively engaging in a reflexive process of reflecting on a life-time of their own perceptions, other's perceptions and, if Gergen is right, all the social ghosts that individuals internalize over time. From all those, individuals chose which aspects to highlight as salient to their sense of self and which aspects were irrelevant. Even though the participants agreed that identity was complex they were generally able to condense a few important aspects of either their personalities, physical attributes, or personal choices into a cohesive description of how they view themselves. Effectively, the respondents were actively creating narratives as they described their identities.

What is noteworthy about the respondent's description of their own self perceptions is that each person made specific choices about what they view as important. The issue of choosing identity highlights an essential aspect of narrative theory which recognizes that identity construction is a highly conscious process of decision making on the part of the individual as to which parts will be integrated into the story and which parts will be left out. Narratives have been shown to serve as a method in which individuals create a cohesive sense of self among conflicting identities across time. Similar to how individuals make sense of identity is how they make sense of the world at large. The next section explores how the respondents used this same reflective process to describe their personal worldviews, life philosophies, and life-lessons.

Narrating the Self

The respondents engaged in narrating the self when they described their identities. They do the same when describing their worldviews. These worldviews were framed as life philosophies and life lessons learned over time. The respondents' reflections on life lessons are examples of how individuals create narratives and the philosophies that come from such reflection are can be viewed as personal theories which aim to explain an overarching conception of the world. Narrating the self argues that individuals actively reflect on the past in order to bridge a tension between conflicting selves, and thus create a better understanding of the self and the external world in the present. These life lessons and subsequent philosophies help to provide a better understanding of the self in the past, the self in the present, as well as, how to best anticipate the future.

Six of the eight respondents expressed their greatest lesson as understanding that life changes and suggesting that one should be prepared for change, as well as learn from it. The participants generally acknowledged that they have changed over time so it follows that they narrate both their internal selves and the external world as constantly changing. Therefore, if the world is always changing then it normalizes and in a sense justifies the tendency for the self to change as well.

P.J. says, "Philosophy…hmm. You know there's so many for certain situations, but ah, for me I would just have to hold true to simplicity". Because he says, "When I look at it [the world] and think about things. It's just uh, I mean, you change every day so to look back and even though you're not that person, you really still are and you've changed, but some things never do. Like the tattoo and that's something that, like you said, a

commitment and that's something I stand by." What is fascinating about P.J.'s response is that he goes on to argue that despite the world changing, including the birth of his son, he does not. P.J. says, "I take pride in still being who I am and living the way I do. Some people might do this or this happens to them and they change and I refuse to change who I am because of something else in life. I live a certain way and he [his son] wasn't going to change me because of that".

Alicia reiterates the concept of a changing world. She says, "Greatest lesson?...maybe the greatest lesson I've learned is that everything changes. Things are constantly evolving and shifting, good and bad. That's pretty funny considering what I do for a living…ha ha". Alicia recognizes the irony of her job as a creator of permanence and her concept that the world is always changing. She also brings up the second most common theme of worldviews, which was that individuals should simply try to be the best people they are capable of. Alicia said, "I try to live my life to the best of my abilities without stepping on anyone in the process. I don't expect any sort of reward in a future life (or particularly in this one) but I just want to go to sleep at night knowing I've done the best I can with each thing that has come my direction.

Stacy said, "Man, that's a deep question. That you can't change the past even if you want to. That the best thing you can do is to learn from it, own it and move on". Her life philosophy reiterates Alicia's response about just trying to be the best person you can be. Stacy said, "I would think that my life philosophy is to be better than I was the day before. That's what I try to do. Be better than I was the day before and be more open. I like I want to be as wide across the gap as possible. As far as accepting, experiencing and

understanding".

Nikki's and Jonah's answers to the two questions are equally similar to P.J.'s, Stacy's and Alicia's. After giving it a good deal of thought, Nikki said, " This is what it is. It's not being afraid to apologize. And not being afraid to change, Just because that's how you have been doesn't mean that's how you have to be". In earlier parts of her interview she alluded to a similar outlook. Nikki mentioned that it's important to her to be capable of change as much as being capable of retaining the things that make her identity. Jonah's response reiterates the idea of change, but also notes that the changes are not necessarily what one expects or desires, but that individuals should learn to deal with such disappointment. He said, "That things don't always work out the way you want them to, things are gonna change and you've got to deal with it".

Jane and Matt are the study's oldest participants by about ten years. Both have differing perspective on life's greatest lesson and personal life philosophies. Jane's greatest lesson is to, "Trust your gut. Sometimes what other people are telling you is not what's really going on. If you've got a feeling about something or someone it's probably right on for a reason. You might not know it right away, but trust your gut. You think with your head all you want, but if your gut says something totally different eventually the gut wins". Matt just laughed at the question and said, "I don't have a life philosophy. Just have fun now."

The responses from the participants which aimed to describe an overall worldview are examples of how individuals narrate their lives so that the past makes sense to them. The participants actively reflected on their past experiences, noted a common theme that

ran throughout their biographical histories, and constructed a narrative (albeit a short one) that attempted to create a cohesive sense of the past. As well, the respondents then use this concept that "the world always changes" to explain what to expect from the future.

The youngest participants all constructed similar narratives that described the world as constantly changing, where the two oldest respondents differed. The commonality within the narratives is noteworthy, but the explanations of why this is can be only speculative. Perhaps younger age in general contributes to a life that seems to change all the time. As one ages life may seem to settle down. It is also possible that such commonality is merely coincidental within such a small sample. Perhaps the younger participants are responding to the very conditions of postmodernity that have been highlighted here. This could be explained by attributing individuals' worldviews to fundamental discourses of their particular society. Thus, it could be that the younger participants have been socialized into a kind of postmodern, post-industrial society, which is characterized by much more rapid change than earlier eras.

Within the discussion about how individuals perceive of their identities, describe their identities, and explain their worldviews, narrative has served a vehicle to communicate these ideas. As time continues, an individual's sense of self continues to remember the past, incorporate the present and imagine the future. All of this bears upon an individual's sense of identity and place in the world. As well as the varying social discourses of the time, individuals' sense of identity is also influenced by subtle social discourses that classify individuals before birth. Gender and race are two, out of numerous, aspects of social location which contribute to an individual's concept of identity. The next section discusses

the findings from both a gendered and racial perspective in order to further explore how issues of social location may affect the kinds of tattoos individuals choose and which aspects of the self are viewed as salient to an individual's identity.

Gender and Racial Analysis

The analysis of the findings from a gender perspective separate the study's two major areas of interest, tattoos' symbolism and individuals' perceptions of their identities including how they describe their identities. By distinguishing the themes we can look to see if there were differences in the data between the male and female respondents. Using this gendered angle, it is necessary to keep in mind the relative discrepancy between the number of females and males that participated in the study. Jonah is also a unique case that is significant for this analysis because he only has one tattoo, which obviously limits the kinds of meaning ascribed to it.

The two largest variations within the categories of tattoos' symbolism were 'note-to-self' and 'important places'. In both categories females were more likely to have tattoos that prompted a particular philosophy to live by or tattoos that were representative of specific places.[3] Within the categories that the participants used to describe their identities there was very little difference between and within the gendered groups. However, after looking at the data through a gendered lens such findings showed that the men in this study were highly unlikely to describe their identity using concepts that referred to their physical attributes or sexuality.

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[3]   See appendix iii and iv for gender analysis

It may be possible to interpret this data by understanding that in general those members of the dominant group (in the U.S. that is white, heterosexual, males) do not often encounter challenges or prejudices toward these aspects of their identity. Thus, they are less aware of the social implications of these particular features of their social location and do not interpret them as salient aspects of identity. On the other hand, marginalized groups (in the U.S. those are females, non-whites, and homo-, bi-, or trans- sexuals) experience social challenges manifested through prejudice and acts of discrimination. Because such aspects of their identity are brought to bear on everyday life and interactions with the dominant discourse, those members of marginalized groups may be more inclined to see their race, gender, and sexual preference as highly salient.

Peoples marginalized by race echo this same idea. Out of all the participants in this study, Stacy was the only person to use the word 'black' to describe her identity. She also was the only person to use the word 'woman' or refer to her gender at all in her description. It should be noted that the non-white participants in the study represent a small portion of the sample and they were both women.

Within the categories used to describe identity, the major variations were in 'personal interests', 'personality', and 'relating to others'. However these do not appear to be significant differences. Both Stacy and Nikki, as well as Alicia and Jonah, used personal interests to describe their identities. Stacy and Nikki used personality traits. So did, Alicia, Chelsea, and Jonah. Neither Stacy nor Nikki used how they relate to others to describe their identity.

In regard to the differences between the white and Black respondents within the

categories used to describe tattoo's symbolism, there was very little variation. The same kinds of meanings behind whites' tattoos were found in both of the Black participants' tattoo meanings as well. However, the Black respondents were less likely to have tattoos that were symbolic of 'Past events' and 'people'.[4]

As noted, the racial variation within the sample should be taken into account regarding the analysis. The lack of variation among tattoos' symbolism could be explained by the relatively small sample of Black participants. The similarities may also be explained by other factors. Though the participants' social class locations were not specifically determined, both of the Black respondents are college-educated and probably well within the middle-class range. Despite racial differences, the fact that, in this study, the Black participants were similar in class to their white counterparts may account for the similarity in the kinds of tattoos they had. Across classes, it is likely that there would be a greater variation in the kind and meaning of tattoos. Noting the limitations of this research is important not only to adding to the academic discourse, but also to contributing to better research in the future. With that in mind, the discussion turns to further limitations of this study and implications for future study.

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[4]   See appendix v and vi for racial analyses

Section 7: Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study had several features which limit its generalizability. The sample of participants does not cover a wide range of ages, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Of particular concern is that social class was not a factor I specifically questioned the participants about during the interview. In future research the issue of class cannot be over looked. Indeed, the historical section of this thesis showed how important class was in terms of the people who got tattoos, as well as the meanings attached to them. Moreover, even though tattooing today crosses the boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, future research should investigate more carefully whether the tattoos of people in these diverse social locations reflect different life experiences and different expressions of self.

Clearly, sociological research has highlighted how all of these social locations are significant to an individual's sense of self. They affect the life chances of people and include significant cultural meanings. The ubiquity of tattoos across these boundaries are, in part, due to the fact that tattoos are relatively inexpensive forms of self-expression. Indeed one participant in this study alluded to differences between those individuals who can afford to get tattoos whenever they want (such as famous athletes and rock stars) and those who have to save up for bodywork. The difference, he said, was that "rich" people's tattoos do not have the same stories behind them. Such issues need to be further explored. Consequently, more attention to diverse social locations and the intersections between them would enhance this study. In light of the postmodern concerns, future studies also need to consider the "digital divide" or unequal access to technology.

While several of the participants were not originally from New Orleans, the geographical area from which I collected my sample is also limited and, therefore, cannot be generalized to the larger United States. Historically, there is evidence that tattoos tend to be more popular in cities than in suburban communities. Data from a suburban sample may show an overall decrease in the frequency of tattoos, greater social stigma attached to tattoos and/or stricter policies regarding the business of tattooing.

More study is needed in order to supply a more unified definition of the concept of identity. The sample drawn for this kind of study would benefit from an immense diversity of international and transnational cultures. Given the increasing numbers of people migrating internationally today - especially from less industrially developed countries - a study of recent immigrants might reveal different uses of tattoos. It would be revealing to do a study whose single intent would be to collect the numerous ways in which individuals attempt to define their identities. Even more revealing would be the possible overlays among differing cultures. Common methods of description could be highlighted in order to better establish a general consensus about the primary aspects individuals use to express the concept of identity.

Some of the findings within the gender analysis suggest that individuals within the dominant population enjoy a certain privilege that allows them to view aspects such as race, gender, and sexuality as irrelevant to their identity. On the other hand, like Stacy and Chelsea, future study may find that individuals within minority groups not only tend to view their minority status as more salient to identity, but also may get tattoos specifically representative of features of their social location. Therefore, an informative future study

attempting to discern how individuals perceive of their identities would include an analysis

that not only looked at differences between class, gender, race, and sexuality, but also

looked for a possible relationship between an individual's social location (either dominant or

marginal) and which features of identity tend to be viewed as more salient than others.

Section 8: Conclusion

This study has highlighted theoretical claims that suggest that identity construction is an increasingly difficult struggle for individuals living in postmodernity primarily due to highly advanced communication technologies; the most fundamental effect of such technologies is that they are capable of broadcasting and transferring numerous and conflicting social discourses on a global scale. Even in modernity, the self was more fragmented as compared to the premodern era when most individuals were socialized into strong, local social norms, which were well preserved through traditional rites and rituals. In such premodern societies, ascribed statuses and a kind of ethnocentric orientation kept individuals' identities within a fairly narrow path of options. While the rise of modernity broke many of these local, community ties and increased the options open to individuals, the effects of the postmodern technologies have multiplied enormously these options. Not only do these new technologies saturate the self with multiple messages that are often competing and conflicting, but also they further fragment the self through this process.

This study has explored these concerns about identity construction in postmodernity by examining bodywork and specifically tattoos as possible anchors for the self. Having said that, this study both buttresses and argues against views of self fragmentation in postmodernity. The desire for permanent record-keeping via tattooing, plus the statements made by some of the respondents suggest that individuals are indeed experiencing postmodern conditions as laid out by Kenneth Gergen, specifically his theory of the saturated self. Even so, the participants in the study also show that, over time, identity has the potential to become more stable (or alternatively that older respondents have different

perceptions about these issues). Moreover, while such postmodern conditions contribute to the experience of saturated identities, individuals are using creative methods of solidifying a sense of self.

The supposed struggle to construct a solid sense of identity in contemporary society has not been found in this study. The individuals I spoke with do not describe a life long struggle in the process of determining personal identity. Rather the participants in this study agree that it is normal to experience a range of varying identities. Moreover, individuals who do experience a multiplicity of identities tend to refer to this as a positive trait. So, while the postmodern concern is a valid one, this study suggests that individuals are creative in narrating a self that does relate to culture in a coherent way.

In conjunction with the current literature tackling the issues of bodywork, I believe the research conducted here makes a solid argument for the tendency for tattoos to serve as a creative method to help solidify various and often conflicting aspects of personality. However, it is also worth noting that it is a highly selective form of remembering and also could be considered a form of selective forgetfulness, for it excludes perceptions of the self that the subject does not wish to incorporate into that story.

A final point is that despite identity being an enormously complex concept, I believe that by understanding identity as a narrative it may be possible to bridge the conflict between the modernist and postmodernist view of identity or the existence of a core self. In this study I have made the case for the idea that humans experience time both chronologically and phenomenologically. In light of this it appears that there exists a theoretical relationship between the human experience of time and G. H. Mead's theory of

the pluralistic nature of human consciousness. To reiterate, the "I" is the person as actor, acting in the world, while the "me" is the individual reflecting back on himself or herself as imagined through the eyes of others. I submit the argument that Mead's "me" experiences time phenomenologically through actively reflecting upon past and future social interactions. Simultaneously, the "I" experiences time chronologically as present experiences unfold. The act of narrating encompasses both the actions of the "I" and the reflections of the "me".

The act of narrating also allows for the story to change over time. Importantly, the identities of social actors need not cohere across time. If we acknowledge this aspect of the narrative theory we are able to account for the postmodern concept that the self has no core, but that what we call identity is the manifestation of an array of social discourses. Because postmodernity entails rapid social change, the increasing influx of competing discourses and messages, and the availability of massive amounts of information, we also have to acknowledge that an individual's conception of his or her identity—likes, dislikes, interests, perhaps worldviews and life philosophies—would in all likelihood experience a great deal of change in a 'postmodern' era and, therefore, may need additional anchors for the self.

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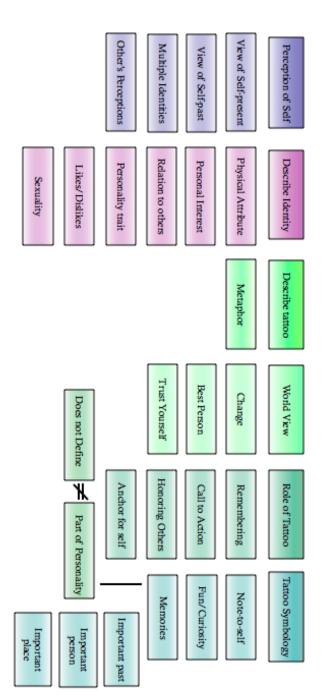Tonnies, F. (1963). *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. New York: Harper & Row.

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Appendices

Appendix i: Code table

Codes for Tattoo Role Analysis

Perception of Self
- **Describe Identity**
  - Physical Attribute
  - Personal Interest
  - Relation to others
  - Personality trait
  - Likes/Dislikes
  - Sexuality
- View of Self-present
- View of Self-past
- Multiple Identities
- Other's Perceptions

Describe tattoo
- **Metaphor**
- **World View**
  - Change
  - Best Person
  - Trust Yourself
- **Role of Tattoo**
  - Remembering
  - Call to Action
  - Honoring Others
  - Anchor for self
  - Does not Define ≠ Part of Personality
  - Note-to-self
  - Fun/Curiosity
  - Memories
    - Important past
    - Important person
    - Important place
- **Tattoo Symbology**

Appendix ii: Interview Schedule

Can you remember your first tattoo? Would you describe that event?

Tell me a bit about how you decided to get your tattoos and what they mean for you.

Please tell a bit about the significance of the location of your tattoos.

How do your tattoos help you remember things from the past?
If so, what kinds of things?

How do you think your tattoos help to define your identity?
If not, what does define your identity?

Do you have more than one identity?

How do they shift? What changes? Dress, talk, attitude?

Are some tattoos more personal than others?

Are some of your tattoos just for yourself?

Are some of your tattoos gotten specifically to make a statement to society?

Do you think society is generally accepting of people with tattoos?

Are there any tattoos that you regret or would like removed?

How would you describe your identity to someone else?

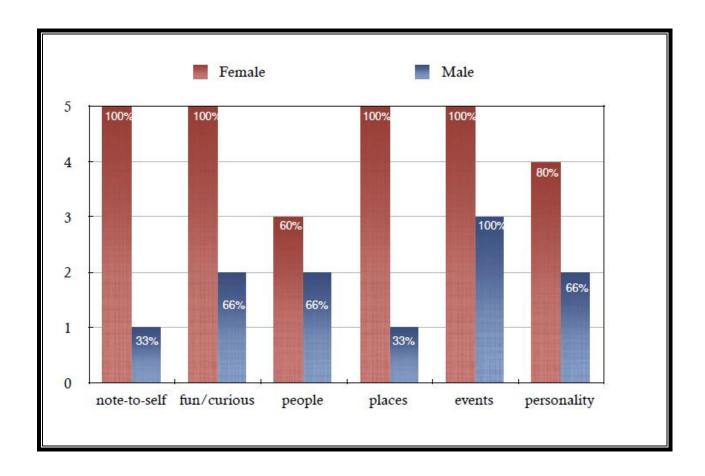*Would you describe yourself as "traditional"?*

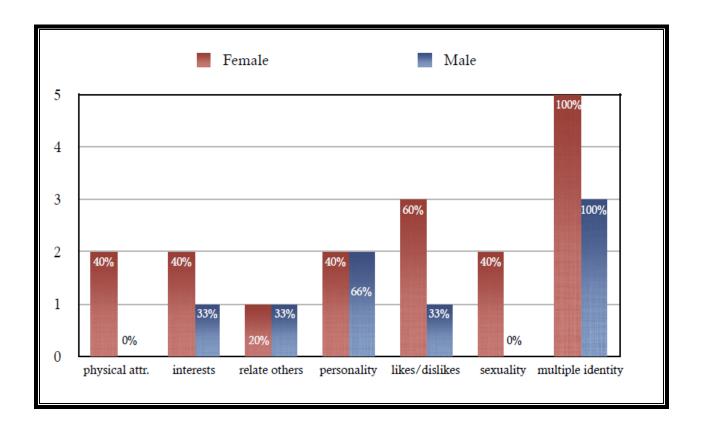*If you have a life philosophy what would that be?*

What was the greatest lesson you've learned so far in your life?

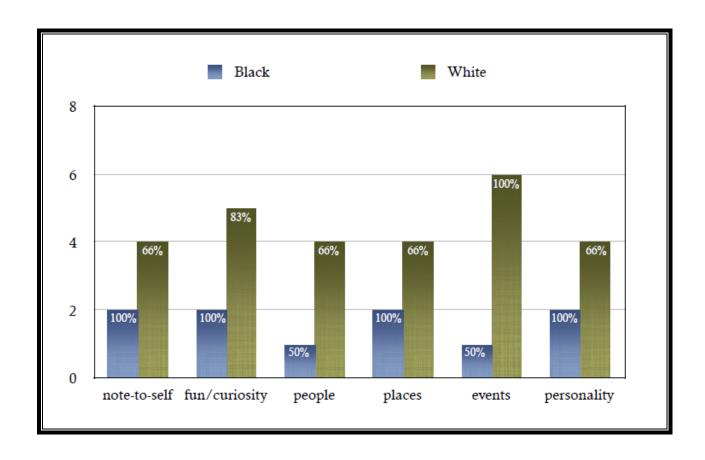*Is there anything we didn't discuss in the interview that you would like to talk about now?*
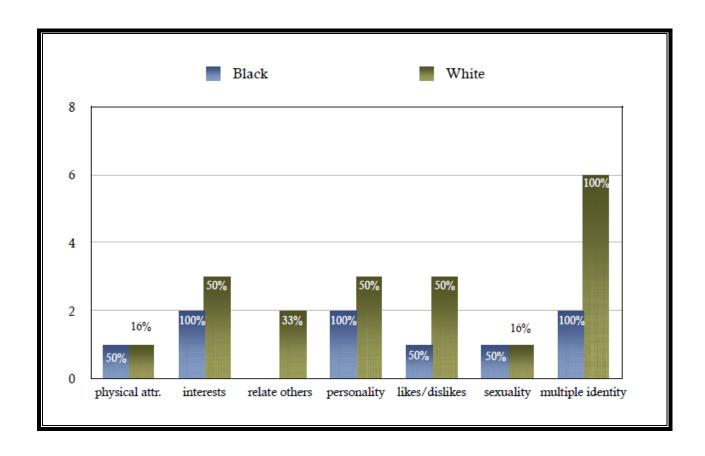
Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix iii: Analysis of Tattoo Symbolism by Gender

Appendix iv: Analysis of Describing Identity by Gender

Appendix v: Analysis of Tattoo Symbolism by Race

Appendix vi: Analysis of Describing Identity by Race

Vita

Michelle Alcina was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's degree in Sociology from the University of New Orleans. She is currently working on her second Master's in Counseling Education.