

Abstract

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS WITH TATTOOS

by

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The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the perceived meaning of tattoo(s) for individuals with tattoos and the decisions, dimensions, and intentions related to the tattooing experience within the context of the participants' lived experiences. The qualitative findings resulted from two in-depth, open-ended interviews with each of six participants who addressed various aspects of tattooing, including the meaning of their tattoo(s) and decision points and motivations associated with their tattooing experiences. In conjunction with the one-on-one interviews, participants viewed photographs of their tattoos while sharing their stories and completed a lifeline document on which they indicated significant events in their lives, including obtaining their tattoo(s). The researcher coded, categorized, and identified patterns and themes in the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Themes that emerged from the data included a shift in thinking regarding tattoos, the tattooing experience, meaning of tattoos, tattoo presentation, the benefits of tattoo(s), desire to continue getting tattoos, and tattooing advice. The emergent themes created a foundation for understanding the lived experience of being tattooed including the decisions

associated with the tattooing experience and health concerns and adverse reactions associated with tattooing. The Theory of Planned Behavior provided a foundation for discussing the findings of this study. The findings supported the existing literature regarding motivations for getting tattoos and meanings associated with tattoos, while extending the research about the tattooing experience. Findings also led to implications for the discipline and future research. Researchers and educators may use the findings from this study to assist in the development of effective strategies for modifying behaviors associated with tattooing within the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An examination of the history of humankind revealed that body modifications such as tattoos and body piercings have been part of the fabric of human experience (Braverman, 2006; Lineberry, 2007). Archaeologists have found tattoos on Egyptian mummies dating back to 2000 B.C. (Braverman, 2006). A tattoo is a type of body art that involves inserting pigment into the dermis of the skin to create and display permanent pictures or scenes that convey a specific message about the individual (Stirn, Hinz, & Brähler, 2006; Tiggemann & Golder, 2006).

According to Lineberry (2007), tattoos are permanent, personal decorations that have served several purposes throughout history. These tattooed inscriptions have conveyed messages and stories about the people possessing them and thus used the body as a canvas to display various aspects of an individual's life narratives (Fenske, 2007). People have used tattoos in ways that signify love, religious affiliation, or punishment. Individuals and researchers have commonly viewed tattoos as a form of self-expression. Many societies have regarded tattoos as protective totems or powerful amulets with magical powers that warded off evil spirits (Scheinfeld, 2007). Tattoos have also served as markers to identify membership in various social groups. For example, the full-body tattoos of the members of the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia, made them easily identifiable in society (Fulford, 2004; Scheinfeld, 2007).

America has experienced a tattoo renaissance over the last several decades (Blanchard, 1991; Vail, 1999). Data have revealed that tattooing continues to increase in popularity, with estimates of 7 million to 20 million adults having at least one tattoo

(Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999). The number of Americans who have tattoos has been steadily increasing, and the demographic characteristics of individuals with tattoos have shifted. Once reserved for sailors, bikers, circus performers, criminals, or individuals on the fringe of society, middle class people now become tattooed. The prevalence of tattoo ownership, both visible and private, among middle class and upper socio-economic levels continues to rise. Because tattooing has become more socially acceptable, professionals such as professors, physicians, laborers, and students are deciding to get tattoos (Blanchard, 1991).

This qualitative research study used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences, thoughts, and values of individuals with tattoos in order to gain an understanding of what it meant to live with one or more tattoos and how individuals made decisions about and experienced tattooing. To understand the meaning of the tattooing experience within the context of the participants' lives, the researcher explored the meaning participants derived from their tattoo(s) and the decisions associated with the tattooing experiences, including addressing health-related concerns. The researcher also sought to explore the perceptions of individuals with tattoos in terms of understanding how possessing a tattoo shaped their life experiences.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the perceived meaning of tattoos for participants and to gain an understanding of the decisions, dimensions, and intentions related to the tattooing experience within the context of lived experiences.

Significance of Study

Understanding the meanings associated with tattooing and exploring decisions made during the tattooing experiences was significant for several reasons. First, understanding the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos may provide insight into the motivations for obtaining a tattoo and the rationale for keeping them. There was a need to understand how individuals' perceptions of tattoos and the tattooing experience resulted from their subjective social norms regarding tattooing and decision points involved in the tattooing process. The tattooing experience was unique to each individual because of varying motivations and factors that led to the decision to be tattooed. Although at the individual level, tattooing was different for each person, on a larger scale there were commonalities that exist within groups of individuals with tattoos.

This study examined the health-related concerns and issues of individuals with tattoos as they decided to get tattooed. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2008), tuberculosis, Hepatitis B, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) are among the diseases that can result from the process of tattooing. Infection is another possible risk associated with tattooing. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (2007) and other agencies document the risks associated with tattooing; yet, tattooing continues to play a significant role in the lives of many individuals. The researcher was interested in exploring health-related concerns, if any, held by study participants.

In addition to understanding the perceptions of individuals with tattoos and examining their health-related concerns, the researcher also sought to determine the

significance attributed to individual tattoos by the owner. Blanchard (1991) examined tattooing from a historical perspective and observed its shift into mainstream culture. Vail (1999) examined how tattoo collectors came to realize that they wanted to collect tattoos, how collectors gained access into the tattoo collector subculture, and how collectors developed an identity as a tattoo collector. Vail (1999) stated that the meaning of each tattoo by its very nature was individual to the person who owned them. This study sought to describe the role that tattooing played in the lives of individuals with tattoos and the affect of tattoos on the health of the participants.

Understanding the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos and exploring the meaning of tattooing in their lives had potential implications for the types of programs offered to youth and adults by health education professionals and others. By gaining insight into the experiences shared by individuals with tattoos, health educators could design programs that “inform and help those who are interested in obtaining tattoos become effective decision makers and make good personal choices” (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts, & Koch, 2002, p. 322). In a study that examined adolescents’ interest in tattooing, the characteristics of the adolescents with tattoos, and the health-risks associated with tattooing that prevented adolescents from obtaining a tattoo, Armstrong and Murphy (1997) advocated the creation of proactive, comprehensive health education programs for children attending public schools. Armstrong and Murphy (1997) proposed the creation of tattoo programs include discussions about the health risks associated with tattooing, an emphasis on the permanence of tattooing, and how to make informed decisions about obtaining tattoos. Through the development of such programs,

professionals in health care or health education could employ methods of open communication to facilitate the development of informed tattoo consumers.

The researcher intended for the findings from this study to contribute to the existing research in the area of tattooing by providing in-depth descriptions of the real life experiences of individuals with tattoos. As tattooing has become more common, researchers have explored issues surrounding individuals with tattoos. The existing body of scholarly literature emphasizes the tattooing experience within the context of health risks or psychopathy. To understand the experience of living as an individual with tattoos, researchers have commonly selected adolescents and young adults as research participants. A need existed to explore tattooing from the perspectives of adults.

The qualitative literature that examined tattooing is growing. Vail (1999) studied individuals with tattoos and tattoo artists who consciously chose to identify themselves as tattoo “collectors.” He explored how these individuals formed their identities as collectors within the context of Matza’s theory of becoming deviant (Vail, 1999). Vail (1999) defined a tattoo collector as an individual who has gone through a physical, psychological, and subcultural transformation; tattoo collectors acquired tattooed images with the intention of working toward an artistic collection. Fenske (2007) interviewed, photographed, and observed heavily tattooed individuals attending a tattoo convention in order to gain an understanding about the ways in which those with heavily tattooed bodies derived meaning over time. She showed how performance and movement during a tattoo competition produced meaning for the individuals involved. Fenske (2007) showed that “deviant” and “normal” mores existed within the tattoo community, to the point of

creating class oppression within the tattooing culture. The tattoo artist's reputation and type of tattoo determined what label the individual with the tattoos received. Having a label such as a biker or having one's tattoos called "art," for example, created class distinction within the tattoo subculture (Fenske, 2007). In this study, the researcher sought to understand the tattooing experience from the perspective of individuals whose number of tattoos ranged from many to one tattoo. The present study involved immersion in the worlds of individuals with one tattoo as well as those individuals with multiple tattoos. The study sought to address the gap in the existing literature with respect to understanding the experiences shared among individuals with tattoos. The study also sought to understand how individuals derived meanings from tattoos. By studying individuals with one tattoo to individuals with several tattoos, the research can provide an understanding regarding decisions and factors associated with being tattooed.

An understanding of individuals with tattoos affords an opportunity to influence tattoo policy and regulations. At the time of this study, no universal federally regulated policies regarding tattooing existed. According to the CDC (2008), city, county, and state level agencies regulate health and safety protocols that body modification artists must follow, but such regulations vary by area of the country. The FDA (2008) has not historically regulated the pigments used to create tattoo inks. However, the FDA does monitor reactions and other health risks associated with tattooing. As tattooing becomes more prevalent and researchers continue to study tattooing, policies will need to be created and enforced to help ensure the safety of individuals seeking to obtain tattoos (FDA, 2008).

Terminology

Body Art: Body art is a type of body modification. Body art typically refers to body piercing and tattoos as decorative forms of modification.

Body Modification: “The (semi) permanent, deliberate alteration of the human body” (Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2007, p. 87). Forms of body modification include cosmetic surgery, tattooing, piercings, and scarification.

Body Piercing: A type of body art that involves inserting a needle into the skin to create an opening where an individual wears a decorative-type ornament such as jewelry (Millner & Eichold, 2001).

Tattoo: A type of body art that involves inserting pigment into the dermis of the skin to create and display permanent pictures or scenes that convey a specific message about the individual (Stirn, Hinz, & Brähler, 2006; Tiggemann and Golder, 2006).

Transfusion-transmitted diseases (TTD): Diseases such as Hepatitis B, HIV, syphilis, and chagas disease transmitted via the use of instruments contaminated with infected blood or saliva (Nishioka & Gyorkos, 2001).

Limitations of Study

1. As a consequence of the qualitative design of the study, findings were not generalizable to all individuals with tattoos. However, the study’s findings provided insight into the lived experiences of individuals, including the meaning(s) associated with tattoo(s) and the decisions related to the tattooing experience from the perspective of English-speaking adults at least 18 years old.

2. It is conceivable that the experiences of individuals who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study may be atypical of other individuals with tattoos.
3. Qualitative research findings are interpretative. The findings generated are a matter of personal subjectivity. The results could be subject to other interpretations.

Sandelowski (1986) stated that findings were not only a reflection of the phenomenon studied but the researcher as well. However, the researchers used direct quotations from the participants to support interpretations.

Delimitations

Delimitations of this study included:

1. Adults at least 18 years or older with at least one tattoo.
2. Residents in the southern part of the United States.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The phenomenon of tattooing has been a mysterious and fascinating area of interest throughout the centuries. The art of tattooing has a long-standing tradition in the history of societies (Braverman, 2006; Lineberry, 2007). Krcmarik (2003) stated that scientific evidence showed that tattooing played a role in the history of humankind in that scientists found prehistoric mummies dated to approximately 3300 B.C and Egyptian mummies that possessed obvious tattoos.

The word *tattoo* elicits different responses from people. People's perceptions about the act of tattooing and individuals with tattoos are the result of the cultural context in which they reside. Many cultures integrated the act of tattooing into everyday rituals, with the function varying among different cultural groups. Blanchard (1991) proposed that, historically, tattoos had four primary functions: ritual, protection, group affiliation, and decorative:

A ritual function, as when an adolescent, usually male, goes through a rite of passage; an apotropaic or protective function: in this case the link between tattoo and taboo is clear, as the person with the sacred mark is sacred; an identificatory function, whereby the individual asserts his participation in a group, a sect or a gang; and finally, a decorative function. (p. 13)

Tribal societies seem to embrace and incorporate tattooing as part of their very existence. On the other hand, western culture often viewed the practice of tattooing as a form of rebellion or psychopathology. Due to Judeo-Christian views and writings found in the

Bible's prohibition of marking the body, industrialized nations tend to view the act of tattooing as taboo or sinful. Leviticus 19:28 states "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD" (NIV, 2002). Romans 12:1 of the Bible refers to the body as a holy temple meant to honor God as a living sacrifice (NIV, 2002). For those who view the body as God's holy temple, tattoos constitute ways in which individuals desecrate their bodies. Thus, the relationship between tattooing and religious beliefs is a complex issue among Judeo-Christians.

Despite Biblical scripture, the practice of tattooing is growing among evangelical Christians. In their qualitative study conducted with 24 participants from a Midwestern Christian college, Firmin, Tse, Foster, and Angelini (2008) examined how Christian college students used their tattoo(s) to convey religious meaning while serving as a means of witnessing and proclaiming their faith. Participants in the study had to possess at least one tattoo, and Scriptural and Biblical themes could not be visible in their tattoo(s). The Firmin et al. (2008) study revealed the following themes: a) participants believed tattooing did not contradict Biblical principles and believed tattoos were allowed by God if the tattoos conveyed neutral or positive messages, b) some participants believed that tattoos served as visible expressions of spiritual commitment, c) participants spent significant time deliberating on obtaining a tattoo and researched the place they planned to get the tattoo before actually getting it, and d) the parents of the college students disapproved of their children obtaining a tattoo, while friends encouraged participants to obtain a tattoo.

Initially viewed as a deviant behavior, a revolutionary shift in perceptions about tattooing and the individuals with tattoos occurred in western culture (Kosut, 2006). Blanchard (1991) sought to understand the relevance of tattooing among a society of mixed classed individuals. After studying several historical and literary writings across different cultures, Blanchard documented several themes. According to Blanchard (1991), middle class individuals embraced tattooing, and tattooing gained respect among diverse social classes. Researchers redefined contemporary tattooing as a new form of artistic expression seeking legitimation (Blanchard, 1991). He stated the redefined tattooing movement, characterized by a rich tradition, highlighted originality of design not just replication of simplistic designs (Blanchard, 1991). Blanchard (1991) also stated that the resurgence of the practice of tattooing among the middle class showed how the body helped to negotiate the acceptability of deviant actions and behaviors among a wide range of individuals from different backgrounds.

Braverman (2006) described the motivation for obtaining tattoos, the method of tattoo application, and the regulations for tattooing by examining the existing literature on tattooing. Braverman also aimed to provide information targeting clinicians about the potential complications associated with body art practices (including tattoo removal) in order to enable these professionals to provide guidance and advice to adolescents and young adults. At the time of Braverman's study, statistics show that 13% of the population in the United State had a tattoo; professional women compromised more than one-half of all new tattoos obtained among individuals (Braverman, 2006).

Approximately 5% of adolescents reported having tattoos or expressed an interest in getting a tattoo (Braverman, 2006).

The Pew Research Center in conjunction with *Generation Next* aimed to examine the lives and opinions of young adults. *Generation Next* was a group of individuals who grew up with computers, the internet, and cell phones readily accessible and who are optimistic about the future (Pew Center, 2007). The sample consisted of adults at least 18 years old or older (young adults aged 18 to 25 years old were oversampled), reached by landline telephones and cell phones (Pew Center, 2007). According to their findings, 36% of those aged 18 to 25 years old, and 40% of those aged 26 to 40 years old have at least one tattoo (Pew Research Center, 2007). *Generation Next* young adults saw tattoos as a way to express themselves visually.

While studying the characteristics of college students with tattoos and piercings in conjunction with other health-related issues and the process involved in deciding to obtain a tattoo, Greif et al. (1999) reported approximately 7 million to 20 million adults have tattoos. Braverman (2006) reported that 3 to 5% of populations in western society had tattoos.

As changes in perceptions regarding the practice of tattooing occur, people in western society are beginning to view tattooing as a complex, multi-dimensional act. The rationale for obtaining a tattoo ranges from simple body adornment to marking a rite of passage. A need exists to understand individuals' motivations for obtaining tattoos and the consequences associated with getting a tattoo and living as an individual with a tattoo. Tattooing has some medical and psychological implications for the individual who

possesses a tattoo and clinical implications for professionals who interact with tattooed individuals (Stephens, 2003). The need to understand the motivations for being and remaining tattooed also creates an opportunity to further explore and expand on the existing tattooing literature (Tiggemann & Golder, 2006). There is also an opportunity to understand why tattooing is growing in popularity among all ages (Millner & Eichold, 2001).

Risk-Taking Behavior

Researchers have traditionally observed an association between having a tattoo and engaging in risk-taking behaviors. Risk-taking behaviors included smoking, drinking, drug use, engaging in violence, casual sex, and other risky health behaviors. Historically, research showed that adolescents and college students of traditional age were more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors due to their representation in the developmental phase of late adolescence (Greif et al., 1999).

Adolescents

Adolescence can be a difficult, confusing time for children. It is a time filled with physical and emotional changes and peer pressure to behave or dress a certain way acceptable to adolescent culture. Adolescence is also the time in which youth begin to experiment with risky behaviors in order to help establish a sense of independence and a sense of self. In response to suggestions that tattooing might indicate the tendency to engage in risk-taking behaviors, individuals in the health field have begun to examine the phenomenon of tattooing among adolescents. To determine whether tattoos and other forms of body art served as markers for participation in risk-taking behaviors, Carroll,

Riffenburgh, Roberts, and Myhre (2008) administered a survey based on the 1997 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey to adolescents between the ages of 12 and 21 years old who visited the Adolescent Clinic at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, CA from December 2000 to April 2001. The researchers discovered that adolescents with at least one tattoo or body piercing scored significantly higher on the Disordered Eating Behavior Index, the Gateway Index, the Hard Drug Index, the Sexual Behavior Index, and the Suicide Index compared to those without tattoos (Carroll et al., 2007). The researchers also reported the greatest influence on the Gateway Index, which measured cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, and marijuana use, was having a tattoo or piercing (Carroll et al., 2007). Males who possessed tattoos scored more than three times higher on the Violence Index when compared to males who did not have a tattoo.

Braithwaite, Robillard, Woodring, Stephens, and Arriola (2001) explored the prevalence of tattooing and piercing as well as alcohol and drug consumption among adolescents who entered the two different juvenile detention centers. Researchers assigned youth to either the control group or the experimental group. Two hundred forty-five of the 860 participants surveyed reported having a tattoo (Braithwaite et al., 2001). The researchers discovered an association between use of alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines, and tranquilizers prior to entering a youth detention center and possessing tattoos.

Academic research has reported the practice of tattooing was prevalent among adolescents who engaged in non-conventional behavior (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Carroll et al., 2002; Mallon & Russell, 1999). Society often labeled adolescents and young adults

with tattoos as “deviant.” Braithwaite et al. (2001) found that a significant number of gang members reported having tattoos to indicate their gang affiliations. There was a significant correlation between gang membership and the number of tattoos possessed. When Armstrong and Murphy (1997) studied adolescents’ interest in tattooing using a self-reported questionnaire among students sampled from eight school sites, they discovered that the adolescents with tattoos in their study classified themselves as “risk-takers” at the time they received their tattoo. Deschenes, Fines, and Demers (2006) explored the relationship between risk-taking behaviors among adolescents with respect to tattooing and factors that increased the likelihood of possessing a tattoo or piercing. Using a cross sectional survey design, Deschenes et al. (2006) collected self-reported information from 12 to 18 year old adolescents from 23 Canadian high schools. They reported a relationship between having a tattoo and engaging in risky activities such as skipping school, gang affiliation, multiple drug use, problem gambling, and rave attendance.

College Students

The existing literature often has examined the association between engaging in risky health behaviors and possessing a tattoo among college students. Researchers, for example, have examined substance abuse rates with respect to possessing a tattoo often. Greif et al. (1999) examined the body art practices of college students across the United States and Australia. To understand the tattooing and piercing experiences of college students, participating college health care providers asked a convenience sample of college students with visible body art if they would agree to answer a self-administered

survey about their body art experiences. They found that 53% of the participants in their study drank excessively on a weekly basis while 39% reported using recreational drugs (Greif et al., 1999).

Researchers have also examined the risky sexual behaviors of college students within the context of possessing a tattoo. Grief et al. (1999) found that 73% of students with body art reported having at least one tattoo. The majority of their participants with body art reported having 1 to 5 sexual partners throughout their lifetime while 24% reported between 6 and 10 (Grief et al., 1999). Twenty-six percent reported more than 11 sexual partners in their lifetime when examining the experiences of American and Australian college students with body art (Grief et al., 1999).

North Carolina Tattooing Regulations

Rules and regulations that govern tattooing vary from state to state. In North Carolina, the Division of Environmental Health (NC DEH) is responsible for regulating tattooing business. Statutes .3200 address the rules and regulations regarding tattooing practices in the state of North Carolina.

Prior to practicing tattooing, a person must register with the local health department and provide his/her name, address of parlor, and operational hours. Individuals cannot engage in tattooing without having a permit issued by the local health department. Local health departments do not issue a permit to any individual or parlor without a site inspection from the health department. Issued permits must be visible to the public (NC DEH, n.d.).

Section 15A NCAC 18A .3206 provides specific information regarding records and health requirements of individuals seeking to get a tattoo. Each artist and parlor must maintain accessible records for each patron. Records must provide a name, address, phone number, date of birth, and signature for individuals getting a tattoo. The parlor must be able to provide the records to the local health demand upon request, and artists have to maintain records on site for a minimum of two years. To help ensure the safety of the artists and the patrons, artists should not tattoo individuals that are jaundiced or have areas of the skin showing visible signs of inflammation (NC DEH, n.d.).

Section 15A NCAC 18A .3208 addresses operational procedures that tattoo parlors must follow. Each artist must have access to antiseptic and germicidal solution, and artist must scrub hands and forearms before applying a tattoo. Artists must wear disposable latex gloves during the tattooing process and have disposable towels to dry off the tattoo. Artists cannot eat, drink, or smoke in the same area where tattooing occurs and must use disposable needles while applying the tattoos. An autoclave must be used to sterile equipment. All conditions should be sanitary, including storage areas. The parlor must store any sharp object in a puncture-resistant container that is leak-proof (NC DEH, n.d.).

Section 15A NCAC 18A .3209 provides the guidelines for applying tattoos. Artists must use new, sterilized razors when shaving an area of a patron's body prior to applying the tattoo. The artist must then use germicidal solution to clean the area. The stencils used to transfer designs must be disposal, limited to one-time use. The artist must use individual containers for the inks used in the tattoo and must discard the containers as

soon as the tattoo is complete. Once the tattooing process is over, the artist must clean and sanitize the tattooed area (NC DEH, n.d.).

NC DEH also regulates age limits related to tattooing. It is illegal to tattoo any part of the body for someone who is under the age of 18 years old. Tattooing a minor is a Class 2 misdemeanor and is punishable by law (NC DEH, n.d.).

Health Complications

As with other forms of body modification, medical and health risks can result from getting tattooed. State and local agencies are responsible for regulating tattoo parlors. The federal government does not provide a formal system of monitoring the practices of the business and tattoo artists. The practices of the tattoo business and the aftercare practices of the individuals can contribute to complications that result from tattooing. When facilities that provide tattooing services do not practice sanitary techniques, the individuals who obtained tattoos in these unhealthy conditions are at an increased risk of contracting blood borne, infectious diseases, such as Hepatitis B and HIV. In certain circumstances, tattoos can serve as markers to healthcare professionals, signaling the possibility of diseases or other risky behaviors, such as drug abuse among individuals with tattoos (Mallon & Russell, 1999).

Hepatitis B

Nishioka and Gyorkos (2001) examined the existing literature found on MEDLINE and other scholarly databases using *tattooing*, *transfusion*, and *risk factors* as the keywords to get a sense of the literature on tattooing. The literature focused on the connection between tattooing and the outbreak of Hepatitis B. Hepatitis B is a disease of

the liver that results from the Hepatitis B virus; an acute case can last for a few weeks while a chronic case can lead to liver disease or liver cancer (CDC, 2008). According to Nishioka and Gyorkos (2001), Hepatitis B can result from the improper handling of tattoo needles and tattoo ink. Although not common today, there have been circumstances in which tattooing led to an outbreak of Hepatitis B. Outbreaks of Hepatitis B forced tattoo parlors to close in New York in 1961 (Nishioka & Gyorkos, 2001). In Grief et al.'s (1999) exploratory study that examined tattooing and piercing among college students and the health risks associated with body art, one of the participants with tattoo reported contracting Hepatitis because of getting her tattoo (Grief et al., 1999).

HIV

According to CDC (2008), HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system, impairing our body's ability to fight off infection. HIV destroys T cells or CD4 white blood cells needed by the immune system to fight disease (CDC, 2008). The use of contaminated instruments increases the likelihood of HIV transmission because of non-sterile condition and practices (CDC, 2008). Although HIV transmission can possibly result from tattooing, few studies have found a significant correlation between tattooing and HIV.

Tattoo Aftercare and Risk of Infection

Individuals who obtain professional tattoos in sanitary, sterile conditions have a reduced risk of contracting an infectious disease. However, if individuals do not properly follow the aftercare instructions regarding caring for their tattoo, infection can result. It is important for the individual with a new tattoo to follow the guidelines given by the tattoo

artists or parlor. Braverman (2006) examined the history of body art (including piercing, tattooing, and scarification), the prevalence of body art modifications, motivations for obtaining body art, complications that can result, and methods to remove the body art. According to Braverman (2006), individuals should not remove the bandage covering a tattoo until 24 hours have passed; however, most tattoo businesses suggest leaving the bandage on for 1 hour (Warlock's, n.d.). Bandages prevent bacteria from entering the tattoo, which is an open wound. Braverman (2006) suggests that once individuals have removed the bandage from their tattoo, they need to clean the tattoo with antibacterial soap two to three times a day, pat the area dry, apply antibiotic ointment or dye-free lotion to the area several times a day, and leave the tattoo unbandaged (Braverman, 2006). During the two-week healing process, individuals are discouraged from picking scabs off their tattoo(s) and should avoid direct sunlight and soaking in water, i.e. swimming or using hot tubs (Braverman, 2006). Proper aftercare promotes fast, proper healing of the tattoo with little or no complications. It is important to note that although the aftercare instructions are similar, the instructions can be different from parlor to parlor and may change over time.

Tattoos completed in non-sterile environments can pose significant health problems for individuals. A study of college students by Grief et al. (1999), for example, reveal that 1% of the participants with tattoos reported tattoo-site infections including pus, blisters, swelling, and pain. Individuals who receive tattoos in a non-sterile setting are at a greater risk of developing complications when compared to individuals who received tattoos in regulated facilities probably because of the unsafe, crude instruments

used to apply the tattoo. In order to understand high-risk HIV behaviors among prison inmates, Krebs (2002) mailed surveys to a random sample of male inmates housed in 11 prisons located in the southeastern United States. The findings showed that 53% of the inmates reported getting tattoos while in prison, which forbids tattooing equipment (Krebs, 2002). One inmate said,

I believe that more emphasis should be placed on the effects of sharing tattoo needles in prisons rather than on I.V. needles. In my experience, from speaking to other inmates, more inmates have contracted diseases, i.e.: Hepatitis [sic] and T.B. from sharing improperly cleaned tattoo needles than from sharing injection needles.” (Krebs, 2002, p.39)

Strang et al. (2000) wanted to understand how prison tattoos might contribute to HIV transmission as well as the spread of other diseases. The researchers interviewed 1,009 randomly selected male prisoners in England and Wales in 1994. One hundred and eleven males received tattoos while in prison. The crude instruments used to apply the tattoos included sewing needles, safety pins, bedsprings, guitar strings, and a makeshift tattooing machine. Strang et al. (2000) reported that prisoners often reused the same needles to apply tattoos on other inmates. When tattooing occurred in these conditions, the likelihood of infectious diseases increased.

Skin Irritation

Not all complications resulting from tattooing involve infections. Non-infectious complications can arise as well. In a quantitative study that focused on tattooing and body art practices among 766 college students attending 18 universities in the United States

and a university in Australia, Grief et al. (1999) reported that 73% possessed at least one tattoo. Their research noted that 14% of the participants with tattoos reported skin irritation including soreness, red skin, and dryness.

Understanding the Risks

Before deciding to get a tattoo, individuals must weigh all of the decisions that accompany the experience. Some individuals, however, are not aware or do not always fully understand the possible health-related risks and complications associated with the art of tattooing. Armstrong et al. (2002) surveyed a convenience sample of college students to gain an understanding regarding the perceived risks associated with tattooing, awareness of tattooing safety issues, barriers that prevented tattooing, “cues” that encouraged obtaining tattoos, and motivations for obtaining tattoos. Armstrong et al. (2002) found that both individuals with tattoos and without tattoos ranked medical-related risks from tattooing as a low priority risk or consequence of getting a tattoo. In fact, the students did not seem to make the connection between bleeding during tattooing and the threat of blood borne diseases (Armstrong et al., 2002).

Huxley and Grogan (2005) explored the relationship between healthy behaviors and having few or no body modifications. They surveyed a sample of 108 undergraduate students using a questionnaire developed from their pilot study and asked them to complete a Reported Health Behaviours [sic] Checklist (Huxley & Grogan, 2005). Among the participants with tattoos, 80% reported not considering the risks associated with tattooing before actually getting a tattoo (Huxley & Grogan, 2005).

FDA and Tattoos

As reported previously, there are numerous health-related risks associated with tattooing. Infection, allergies, and scarring are among some of the risks associated with tattooing (FDA, 2007). Each year, the FDA receives reports from various people regarding allergic reactions as the result of obtaining a tattoo (FDA, 2007). At the state and local level, agencies regulate the practice of tattooing, but the FDA does not regulate the inks or pigments used in tattoos. In 2007, the FDA stated that regulation of tattooing was a low priority in light of the other health issues that the agency was addressing. Vasold, Engel, König, Landthaler, and Bäumlér (2008) found that the primary colors used in tattoos were red pigments and black pigments, which was comprised of carbon black or soot by-product. Braverman (2006) found that tattoo inks contain lead, mercury, and arsenic, which are harmful to the human body. The FDA Administration (2007) warned that the inks used in tattoos are industrial strength pigments used for automobile paint and printer ink. The FDA cannot issue approval for skin injections for the inks used in tattoos.

Psychological Issues

As mentioned earlier, links between tattooing and many risk-taking behaviors exist. Some risk-taking behaviors have a psychological component. While some literature exists that focuses on the relationship between risk-taking and tattooing, limited research has focused on the relationship between psychological issues and tattooing. Stirn et al. (2006) designed a research study to understand the incidence and the association of psychological factors to the practice of tattooing. Responses to a short version of the

General Health Questionnaire that assessed aspects of mental health among 2,043 representative individuals with tattoos aged 14 to 93 years old in Germany, Stirn et al. (2006) found that individuals with tattoos reported feeling worse with respect to mental health when compared to non-tattooed individuals. This section of the literature review will address the following psychological issues: eating disorders, sexual abuse, and suicide.

Eating Disorders

Researchers have proposed an association between tattoos and risk-taking, including behaviors such as eating disorders (Preti et al., 2006). Preti et al. (2006) examined the prevalence of tattooing, piercing, and symptoms of eating disorders among a representative sample of adolescents in Sardinia, Italy using several self-report questionnaires. Females who reported having at least one tattoo scored higher on the Bulimic Investigatory Test of Edinburgh when compared to females who did not have a tattoo (Preti et al., 2006). An investigation by Carroll et al. (2008) revealed that adolescents with at least one tattoo or piercing scored higher on a Disordered Eating Index.

Research that has addressed the relationship between tattoos and eating disorders has been limited and inconclusive. Claes, Vandereycken, and Vertommen (2005) administered questionnaires among 101 females clinically diagnosed with eating disorders to determine characteristics regarding tattooing. The researchers found a negative correlation between tattoo and self-injuring behaviors, including eating disorders (Claes et al., 2006).

Sexual Abuse

Due to the limited amount of literature that has focused on the psychological aspects associated with tattooing, Romans, Martin, Morris, and Harrison (1998) explored abuse experiences, borderline personal characteristics, substance abuse, and psychological disorders in a random sample of women from New Zealand. A bivariate analysis revealed that women with tattoos were more likely to be survivors of one episode of sexual abuse and had five or more borderline personality disorder characteristics. The researchers contended that women with a history of abuse might use the act of getting a tattoo to indicate dissatisfaction with their bodies and selves. In this case, women may use tattooing to reclaim and reconstruct their bodies (Romans et al., 1998).

Suicide

In examining of the relationship between tattooing and health-related risk-taking behaviors, researchers studied suicide as one of the psychological risk factors that can possibly be “predicted” by tattoos. In a study exploring the relationship between risk-taking, tattooing and piercing, Carroll et al. (2002) reported that Suicide Index scores were higher among participants who received their first tattoo between the ages of 11 and 13 years of age. Adolescent females with tattoos were reportedly the greatest risk of suicide. Carroll et al. (2002) also found that the strongest predictors of tattoos and body piercings in female adolescents included anger and a feeling negatively about their bodies. Self-hatred may lead to self-harm, including suicide. Dhossche, Snell, and Larder (2000) reviewed the prevalence of tattoos among the 134 cases of suicide in Mobile

County. Half of the young white individuals who committed suicide had tattoos compared to the less than one third of the matched accidental deaths that had tattoos.

Summary

Research has indicated a possible association between being tattooed and experiencing psychological issues existed. Researchers have explored the relationship between tattooing and eating disorders, abuse, and suicide, but there is a need for more studies. Findings suggest that tattoos may serve as a marker for survivors of abuse among women while there may be an association between having a tattoo and suicide. While limited research suggests that individuals with tattoos may have psychological issues, the findings in this area are inconsistent.

Motivations for Obtaining a Tattoo

The reasons that people choose to obtain tattoos are as varied as the backgrounds of the people who have tattoos. Armstrong et al. (2002) examined the purpose of getting a tattoo, perceived risks associated with tattooing, and barriers that prevented tattooing among a convenience sample of 520 college students. After administering The Armstrong Tattoo Attitude Survey, Armstrong et al. (2002) reported that the rationale for getting tattoos centered on establishing expressions of self-identity. Findings from their study showed that tattoos allowed college students to express themselves, to show independence, and to express a need for uniqueness (Armstrong et al., 2002). The researchers also found significant gender differences among individuals who received. Males were more likely to use tattoos as a way to celebrate a milestone or honor someone or something.

Armstrong and Murphy (1997) used a self-reported questionnaire to understand adolescent interest in tattooing and to understand the characteristics and health risks associated with adolescents with tattoos. The researchers distributed 3,650 questionnaires to participants recruited through school networks. Their findings show that the majority of the individuals with tattoos in their study got tattoos because of the need to “be myself” (Armstrong & Murphy, 1997). Individuals did not indicate a need to impress others by becoming tattooed (Armstrong & Murphy, 1997). Tiggemann and Golder’s (2006) study, which focused on the motivations associated with obtaining or not obtaining a tattoo among 50 individuals with tattoos and 50 individuals without tattoos, supported this notion. Using an instrument that measured appearance investment, need for uniqueness, and distinctive appearance investment, the researchers found a significant relationship between need for uniqueness and tattoo status. Individuals with tattoos scored higher on the need for uniqueness measure compared to individuals without tattoos (Tiggemann & Golder, 2006).

In another study, group affiliation and member identification were among the reasons that individuals gave for getting a tattoo (Millner & Eichold, 2001). To understand the reasons that individuals chose to get a tattoo or another form of body art and their perceptions of health risks associated with body modification, Millner and Eichold (2001) administered the Body Art Survey, a self-reported questionnaire, to 81 patrons of tattoo and piercing parlors in Florida and Louisiana. Participants in their study were more likely to report getting tattoos to show group membership.

In their research, Mallon and Russell (1999) discussed how tattoos on people seeking medical attention in the emergency room could provide relevant information to the attending emergency room physicians. Their research showed how tattoos identify gang member affiliation among Hispanic, black, and motorcycle biker gangs. Tattoos with themes that focused on time and clocks as well as barbed wire and watchtowers tended to signify former membership in the prison population (Mallon & Russell, 1999). Such membership tattoos could serve to alert emergency room physicians to potential disease risks.

In his research, Hill (2004) explored how the Yakuza, Japanese organized crime groups, have adapted to the changing socio-political and economic changes in Japan. The success of the Yakuza depended on the opportunities that are the result of a changing market and the abilities of the legal system in which the Yakuza operate. In his analysis, Hill (2004) discussed how the full-body tattoos of the both the traditional Yakuza and the *gurentia*, a non-traditional member of the Yakuza, made them recognizable.

Chapter Summary

The act of tattooing has elicited a variety of responses from people from deviance to self-expression. Opinions about tattoos and persons with tattoos, however, have begun to shift from negative reaction to. Some people now consider tattooing to be form of art (Blanchard, 1991), though motivations for tattooing vary considerably. The literature reveals that such motivations may include self-identity, self-expression, desire for uniqueness, or group affiliation. Tattooing has been associated with risk-taking, particularly among adolescents or college-age students. A need exists to learn first-hand

about the experiences, motivations, and stories of individuals with tattoos in order to contribute to the growing qualitative literature on tattooing and its significance in the lives of those individuals with tattoos. In the following chapter, the researcher will present the designs and methods associated with this qualitative research study, followed by a presentation of study findings and discussion of the findings in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 3: QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach was to explore and understand the perceived meaning of tattoos for participants as well as to gain an understanding regarding the decisions and dimensions related to the tattooing experience within the context of participants' lived experiences. Based on the nature of the research question, I used a qualitative methodological approach. Quantitative methodology is appropriate when the researcher seeks to determine causal relationships. In this study, participants talked about their feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions with respect to living as an individual with a tattoo and the meaning associated with the tattoos and the experience of tattooing. Because lived experiences of individuals with tattoos are subjective events, the nature of the research question dictated using qualitative approach. A qualitative approach helped to develop a thorough understanding of the lived experience of being an individual with a tattoo in a manner that created rich, thick data. Qualitative research was the most appropriate methodology to capture human behavior in people's own words.

A qualitative methodology provided individuals with tattoos an opportunity to share their personal stories and experiences. Societal marginalization has occurred among individuals with tattoos. Throughout history, society has labeled individuals with tattoos as deviants (Blanchard, 1991). Fenske (2007) stated that people still associated the heavily tattooed body with an act of social deviance. However, this view of individuals with tattoos is changing. This study empowered participants to share their experiences

and to talk about themselves. Creswell (2007) stated that the power of qualitative research is in providing a voice to individuals. Qualitative research empowers individuals to share their stories in a context that facilitates an equal power relationship between the researchers and the participant. In order to learn from individuals with tattoos, interaction between the researcher and the participant occurred in a natural setting. By learning from individuals in their own environment, the study created a forum for open dialogue in which participants felt comfortable discussing their experiences related to living as an individual with tattoos and decision points related to the tattooing experience.

Qualitative Approach

In this study, I sought to explore and understand feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions associated with the experiences of living as an individual with a tattoo. To explore and understand the perceived meaning of tattoos for participants as well as gain an understanding regarding the decisions and dimensions related to the tattooing experience within the context of their lived experiences, I used a phenomenological approach guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior. Below, I describe the many benefits of a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology is the most appropriate qualitative approach when the researcher hopes to describe the lived experiences of individuals, in this case individuals with tattoos. A researcher who seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the individuals that they are studying uses a phenomenological approach (Trochim, 2006). In this case, the goal of the research study was to describe the tattooing experience and its meaning for a group of individuals. When emphasizing the shared experiences among a

group of participants, phenomenology provides an optimal approach (Creswell, 2007). The study aimed to understand the differences as well as commonalities shared among individuals with tattoos in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the tattooing experience (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006).

My use of detailed, semi-structured interview strategies to gather data from the participant supported a phenomenological approach. Ploeg (1999) stated that the use of in-depth interviews is the most common form of qualitative data collection because the data is the actual life experiences of the participants. By using a phenomenological approach in the present study, the data generated produced a description of the experiences that individuals with tattoos shared in order to grasp how the participants felt about themselves and the practice of tattooing. This approach also allowed for the feedback from the study participants in order to ensure that the themes discovered accurately depicted the meaning associated with the tattooing experience (Ploeg, 1999).

Finally, a phenomenological approach allowed me to explore and describe the perceived reality of individuals with tattoos and the meaning of the tattooing experience (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006). I hoped to understand the experiences associated with having a tattoo and the factors in lives of the participants that influenced the way that the participants felt about their tattoo(s) and the tattooing experience within the context of their lives. In other words, the goal of the research was to understand the “what” of participants experienced and how the participants experienced it (Creswell, 2007). Richards and Morse (2007) stated that people and their behaviors are only understandable within the context of their lives. A phenomenological approach embraces

subjectivity (Crosby, DiClemente, & Salazar, 2006). Because the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos and the meaning associated with the tattooing experience is subjective, this is the best qualitative approach.

In order to understand how the participants felt about their experiences associated with tattooing (including health-related issues) and the meaning of their tattoo(s), a phenomenological approach provided the optimal research for these purposes. A phenomenological approach seeks to reflect the common experiences shared by a group of individuals. In this study, I wanted to describe the human experience of tattooing.

Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Planned Behavior provided the theoretical foundation that guided this study. Researchers who are proponents of the Theory of Planned Behavior view human behavior as the result of the individual's attitudes regarding behavior, subjective normative values, and perceived behavioral control, and intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Attitudes, subjective normative values, and perceived behavioral control influence intentions, which in turn, captures the motivation for engaging in specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Many studies utilized the Theory of Planned Behavior to predict health-related behaviors in individuals.

Attitudes are personal factors that affect the positive and negative beliefs that individuals have about the specific behavior (Archer, Elder, Hustedde, Milam, & Joyce, 2008). Conner, Sutherland, Kennedy, Gready, and Berry (2008) stated attitudes were the participants' evaluation of the behavior, which, in this case, was tattooing. Individuals with tattoos would examine their own feelings and thoughts about tattooing prior to

obtaining their tattoo(s). As a result, the individual seeking to obtain a tattoo will examine the beliefs about the consequences of getting a tattoo and the pros and cons of getting a tattoo.

Subjective norms are social factors that relate to the perceived societal pressure to engage in the behavior (Archer et al., 2008). Individuals who want a tattoo will try to make sense of the environmental factors that may encourage or discourage tattooing. The person will also ponder how friends, family, and other people will react to his/her tattoos. In the process of trying to determine how significant others will feel about tattooing, the individual will examine the approval of other people regarding tattooing prior to acquiring a tattoo.

Perceived behavioral control refers to individuals' confidence in the ability to carry out the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the case of tattooing, the ease or difficulty of obtaining a tattoo such as cost, location, time, tolerance of pain, and other issues corresponds to perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control could affect the preparation for getting the tattoo such as researching health concerns associated with tattooing, the shop, and tattooing regulations.

Intentions are the factors that influence the likelihood of engaging in a specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In fact, the stronger the intention of engaging in the behavior, the more likely the behavior will occur. Together, behavioral control and intentions are the strongest predictors of behavior. Individuals will engage in tattooing when they view it as positive, believe that significant others will view tattooing in a positive manner, and perceive that the act is under their own control.

In accordance with the principles of the Theory of Planned Behavior perspective, I aimed to explore the attitudes and behaviors of individuals with tattoos within the context of their lives. I sought to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos, how participants derived meaning from their tattoo(s) and the tattooing experience within the context of their lives. This exploration included motivations and intentions for getting a tattoo.

Addressing Rigor

No matter the type of methodology used to address a research question, the researcher's main goal is to create a study with a rigorous research design. As a qualitative researcher, I aimed to provide findings that were credibility and trustworthy. I will describe the strategies that I used to accomplish that goal in the section below, including member checks, peer review, an audit trail that included a research log and researcher's journal, and triangulation of data.

Credibility

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), qualitative researchers have an obligation to show that their research is credible. Qualitative research's credibility is the result of the ability and effort of the researcher (Golafshani, 2003). The researcher is obligated to ensure that the results obtained are believable from the perspective of the individual being studied (Trochim, 2006). In order to ensure the credibility of the observations and findings, I used several strategies to ensure the credibility of the observations and findings, including member checking. Member checking is a process in which the researcher allows the target population or participants to review the data,

interpretations, and conclusions for accuracy (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Creswell and Miller (2000) wrote that member checking contributed to the validity of the study in that it moved the findings from the hands of the researcher into the hands of the participant. In this study, participants confirmed the observations and findings. Participants determined whether the findings made sense to them, and they also examined the findings to determine if the descriptions accurately depicted their experiences. They provided feedback, and I revised the findings accordingly.

I also employed the strategy of peer review. I provided a copy of my observations and findings from the study to another graduate student as part of the peer review process. Peer review is the act of having a third party who is not involved with the study to review observations and findings to explore ideas that might only be implicit to the researcher (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

I also maintained an audit trail in order to document my contacts with participants and my decisions, actions, and procedures through the course of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The audit trail established a system to aid in the trustworthiness of the results by providing the reader with the opportunity to examine the process of inquiry (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The audit trail consisted of a research log and my researcher's journal.

I carefully maintained a research log, which was a comprehensive list of all participant contacts and researcher actions and decisions in an Excel[®] spreadsheet throughout the course of the study. Each contact, action, and decision recorded in Excel[®] had a corresponding date and time.

Journaling provided a reflexive method to document my biases, assumptions, and thoughts throughout the research process. By conveying my biases and pre-conceived ideas, I wanted to share with the audience my logic and personal influences to give them a sense of my position as a researcher. Journaling allowed me to bracket assumptions and biases in order to eliminate them from my research. Within my research journal, I actually placed my biases and assumptions within brackets in order to identify ideology that could influence my interpretation of the data, hence the term bracketing. According to Rollins and Relf (2006), bracketing allowed me to discover my biases and to put those assumptions aside in order to let the phenomenon stand on its own.

I utilized triangulation within the study in order to enhance study credibility by employing multiple data collection strategies and involving multiple participants. Creswell and Miller (2007) stated that triangulation was a procedure that ensured the validity of the study when the researcher examined multiple and different sources of information to create themes or categories within the study. Essentially, triangulation involves using two or more methods to measure the same concept (Kadushin, Hecht, Sasson, & Saxe, 2008). Triangulation contributed to the research process because the study findings reflected more than one source of data. Triangulation maximized the benefits of each research strategy used, thus reducing the effects of the weakness of each study method.

In order to describe the real-life experiences of tattooed individuals including decision points related to the tattooing experience, the meaning derived from tattoos, and the meaning associated with the tattooing experience (including health-related issues), I

used three data types: open-ended interviews, a lifeline document, and photographs. The methods offered research tools designed to gain insight into the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos. The methods provided an opportunity for participants to share their stories both verbally and visually.

Open-ended, In-depth Interviews

The primary method of data collection in this study was open-ended, in-depth interviews. Trochim (2006) stated that the design of in-depth interviews helped to facilitate an exploration the thoughts and feelings about the phenomena studied. Cohen and Crabtree (2008) stated that the use of interviewing creates an opportunity for a better understanding of life as it exists in a natural, uncontrolled setting.

The primary questions that I posed during the interview evolved from dialogue with the participants. However, my examination of the existing literature assisted in the creation of an interview guide to supplement the conversation. The nature of the questions were: a) designed to address topics of interest as they related to the objectives of the study and b) designed to address issues in existing literature that needed further development (Appendix A). Open-ended questioned permitted the participants to share their story. Topics addressed included decisions addressing the life experiences of the participants, the meaning derived from tattoos, and questions regarding the tattooing experience. To understand tattooing experience, the study examined the motivations, circumstances in which the participants obtained their tattoo(s), and other health-related issues associated with tattooing.

In order to document the information provided by participants, I audio recorded each interview with the participants after first obtaining their permission. The use of photographs served as an aid in facilitating the narratives regarding the participants' tattoo(s). Brief and expanded field notes taken during and after the interview sessions supplemented the audio recorded interviews.

The relationship established between the participant and myself generated during interview process helped to create interactive environment. When I interviewed the participants, I wanted the conversation to flow naturally as if two old friends were catching up. Witz (2006) called this "interviewing for feeling" (p.246). Initially, I asked the participants to share their experiences as an individual with a tattoo. Because of the flexibility of the qualitative design, the questions asked of the participants evolved from the conversation with the participants. The participant shared his or her story with little interruption. I used probes related to their stories to expand on specific ideas or notions. Richards and Morse (2007) stated the researcher must let the participant tell their story. In this research, the first interview was devoted to the lived experiences of participants and an in-depth discussion about the participant-selected tattoos.

According to Richards and Morse (2007), if the researcher does not learn about the areas of interest, then the research should ask questions after the participants complete their story at a second interview. A second interview addressed other issues related to tattooing. During the second interview, participant and I addressed other issues related to tattooing. I addressed questions previously unaddressed or that followed up something shared during our initial interview. I focused more directly on the experience of being

tattooed during the second interview. This focus included participants' health-related issues and concerns with tattooing. The interview guide questions helped me address topics of interest not discussed by the participant during the first interview.

Lifeline

Prior to the interview, I asked the participants to complete a lifeline (Appendix B). Gramling and Carr (2004) stated that lifelines are methods to depict a person's life history in a visual format in chronological order. At the same time, individuals have the opportunity to interpret the events depicted on the lifeline. I instructed the participants to document the major life events and milestones in their life on the lifeline. The instructions regarding the lifeline were very general to allow the participants to use their own, independent interpretations to come up with events significant to them. In several cases, the lifeline served as the starting point of dialogue for the participant. During the interview process, the participants placed when they obtained their tattoo(s) along the lifeline. An examination of possible themes or patterns in obtaining tattoos occurred during analysis of the lifeline document and other forms of data. An examination of possible relationships between major life events and tattoos occurred during analysis.

Photographs

According to Richard and Morse (2007), photographs are a means to record data within a specific setting or to provide illustrations for a topic of interest. The meanings of photographs are not inherent in the photograph itself, but the meaning derived from the photography by the individuals (Harper, 2002; Close, 2007). The photographs served to

help me: a) understand the participants' lived experiences in visual form, and b) captured their stories in a visual form to add to the text.

López, Eng, Randall-David, and Robinson (2005) stated photographs encouraged individuals to take the lead in discussing the meaning of their experiences. According to Harper (2003), photography has the power to reach “a different part of human consciousness than do word-alone interviews” (p.23). Photographs help create rich detail regarding the everyday experiences of individuals (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). Fenske (2007) reported that, because tattoos are ways in which people write upon their body, the art of tattooing enters into the dialogue. López et al. (2005) used photovoice and grounded theory to explore and capture the quality of life issues for 13 African Americans in rural North Carolina within their social environments. They found that photographs facilitated participants' discussions of important topics that they would not normally address. Photography helped to capture the participants' stories.

During the first interview after the participants shared their lived experiences, I asked the participants to tell the stories of their tattoo(s). At the beginning of this portion of the interview, the participants consented to having their tattoo(s) photographed to go along with their stories so we could view their tattoo image(s). Participants signed a photographic release (Appendix C) form in preparation for this segment of the interview. Participants also gave verbal permission to photograph tattoo(s) that they selected. I informed participants that they could refuse to have pictures of specific tattoos taken. Photographic images supplemented field notes taken during the interviews.

Transferability

Transferability equates to the idea of external validity. According to Trochim (2006), the transferability of research findings relates to applying the results to a different contextual situation. It is the “generalizability” of the results. To address the objectives of the study, I immersed myself in the experiences and stories provided by the participants. By using thick, rich description provided by participants, the findings captured the phenomena of living as an individual with a tattoo from the perspective of the individuals sharing their stories. Creswell and Miller (2008) characterized thick description as creating a feeling among readers they have or could experience the events in the study, similar to a feeling of *déjà vu*. During the analysis portion of the research, themes and patterns across data from multiple individuals emerged. By reviewing the findings within the context of the research settings and based on research decisions made, an assessment of the accuracy of the findings with respect to representativeness of the population studied occurred.

Reliability

According to Golafshani (2003), in a quantitative context, reliability occurs when the researcher obtains similar observations or results when the study is replicable. Because of the context-specific nature of the study and the subjective experiences of individuals with tattoos, the possibility of replicating the study and receiving similar results is limited. Multiple factors influenced the life experiences of the participants. These experiences are unique to the participants. Studying similar individuals with tattoos in a different part of the country or the world might produce different findings.

Dependability involves the researcher in accounting for the contextual instability in which research happens (Trochim, 2006). Because I served as the primary research instrument, my own personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences reduced the ability to replicate the study. However, I documented all of my biases and assumptions in the form of bracketing in my qualitative research journal. Creswell (2007) stated that the reliability of a design is part of the reflexivity of the study. By documenting my biases and assumptions within my research journal, I identified thoughts and ideas that could potentially affect the study. The audit trail I maintained in Excel[®] provided a history of every decision and action made throughout the course of the study. NVivo 8[®] software functioned as another source to back-up the audit trail. Documenting the interviews with audio recordings and detailed field notes as well as interview transcripts helped to establish the reliability of the study.

Researcher Qualifications and Assumptions

As pointed out by Pyett (2003), an individual's ideas about theory, political beliefs, and interests affect the research question studied, the methodology used, the method of data analysis, and the interpretation of findings. I acknowledge that many factors influenced my thoughts and perceptions about tattooing and individuals with tattoos. My thoughts regarding tattooing are complex and multi-dimensional. The examination of the existing literature influenced some of my thoughts about the scientific approaches used to study the practice of tattooing and those who engaged in the practice. My personal experience as an individual with tattoos had a direct impact on my views about the experiences of individuals with tattoos, including the significance of tattoos in

the lives of those who own them. My religious views also contributed to how I perceived tattooing.

My educational background, which affects my socio-cultural views, had an impact on my beliefs and thoughts about tattooing. My educational background is in psychology and sociology. Some of my experiences in academia trained me to think about tattooing as deviant behavior, and I had learned to associate individuals with tattoos as deviants, including myself. Referring to the population of individuals with tattoos as a subculture resulted directly from my educational background in sociology.

Research on the population of individuals with tattoos should not focus solely on the college student population, a group of individuals who are prone to risk taking. I believed that many researchers who had previously examined tattooing sought to observe a relationship between tattooing and engaging in risky health behaviors. Pitts (1998) examined the stories of six women with body modifications over the course of five interviews to understand how scarification and other body modification practices can empower women to reclaim their bodies. Pitts (1998) shared the story of Karen, a survivor of a sexual abuse and a horrible childhood, whose dragon tattoo symbolized leaving her past behind and the act of becoming herself. While studying the heavily tattooed body at the New York Tattoo Convention, Fenske (2007) discussed how one participant's leg tattoo was a way in which he reclaimed his leg after a serious accident and 15 leg surgeries. The act of tattooing can be cathartic to some individuals (Fenske, 2006; Pitts, 1998). Again, my thoughts and attitudes determined the research approach

that I selected to address the experiences of individuals with tattoos, the meanings derived from tattoos, and the motivation for undergoing the tattooing experience.

Throughout the entire research process, I recorded my opinions, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in my qualitative research journal; I noted those personal thoughts by using brackets within the research journal to identify personal thoughts and feelings that had the potential to influence the study. The use of bracketing helped me to suspend my biases as the research study continued. According to Richards and Morse (2007), researchers use bracketing to allow the researcher to experience the phenomenon in a new light and describe their perceptions. Bracketing contributed to efforts to maintain objectivity throughout the study in order to understand the common experiences shared among individuals with tattoos. Creswell (2007) said that throughout qualitative inquiry, the researcher desires to understand the meanings that participants hold about the phenomenon studied. Researcher reflexivity helped to increase the validity of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The knowledge and qualifications I needed to engage in this research resulted from coursework taken during graduate study within the Department of Health Education and Promotion, which included a course titled, Qualitative Research Methods and Evaluation. This course provided the experience of interviewing individuals as well as collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Other coursework taken during graduate study also provided the skills necessary to complete the research.

Protection of Human Subjects

I obtained written consent from each individual prior to his/her participation in the study (Appendix D). The University Medical Center and Institutional Review Board at East Carolina University issued an approval for the informed consent document. The language used on the informed consent form contributed to participants' ability to understand the document (Crosby et al., 2006). I read the informed consent document aloud while the participants read it silently. The SMOG reading level was no higher than the 12th grade. According to McLaughlin (2008), SMOG is a formula that determines the number of educational years needed to understand a piece of writing. At the conclusion of the reading, I addressed participants' questions or concerns.

While reviewing the informed consent document, I requested the opportunity to audio record each interview. I explained that audio recording helped to document accurately the narrative data. All participants gave permission to audio record the interview prior to beginning the interview.

At the onset of the interviewing process, I described the use of pseudonyms during the reporting of findings in an effort to ensure the participants' privacy and confidentiality. Participants had the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms but if they declined to choose a pseudonym, then I assigned one for them. I explained that I was the only person with access to such personal, identifying information. A locked, fire-resistant safe housed the personal information participants' provided during the study, and I had the only access to the information. I explained to the participants that after three years, I would destroy the information by shredding the paperwork and erasing the

recordings. I provided the participants with my email address and phone number as a manner to contact me. I asked for their email addresses for two reasons: a) to send reminders about our interviews, and b) to provide copies of the findings for further clarification and input. None of the participants expressed discomfort or reluctance to provide me with such personal, identifying information. All information provided by the participants correlated with the designated pseudonym.

In addition to the informed consent document, the participants also signed a photographic release approved by East Carolina University's University Medical Center and Institutional Review Board. The participants and I reviewed the photo release document, and I addressed their questions or concerns. Assigned pseudonyms served as the identifiers for all information, including the photographs, referenced to the participants.

During the informed consent process, a discussion regarding the objectives and goals of the research study took place. I discussed the importance of the study for the scientific community as well as the population of individuals with tattoos, including myself. During the discussion of the benefits of the study, I also talked about the possible minimal risks associated with the study. Conversations that explained the use of the data, including the possibility of the data appearing in publications, occurred. A discussion regarding the roles of the participants and my role as the researcher took place. A discussion about the estimated length of time to participate in the study also took place, including a discussion about two interviews and photo elicitation aspects. I explained to participants that no right or wrong responses existed. I encouraged participants to be very

honest, expressing their feelings and thoughts in any manner that they felt comfortable. I informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The interviews, including the informed consent photo release review, took place in a safe environment that ensured the privacy of the participant and the researcher. The location of the interviews was mutually agreed-upon by the interviewer and the participant in order to ensure the conversation occurred in natural environment for the participant. I emphasized the voluntary nature of the study. I shared with the participants that he/she could withdraw from the study at any point in the process.

At the conclusion of the first interview, I extended thanks to participants for taking the time to participate in my study. Discussions about the second interview took place, and we scheduled a second interview. I reminded the participants to use my contact information as needed.

Identifying and Selecting Participants

Identifying Participants

To recruit participants for the study, I selected appropriate venues to attract possible participants. The use of an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved advertisement helped to recruit potential participants (Appendix E). I distributed the flyer in places that individuals with tattoos frequent. For example, a local music venue served as a location to distribute several flyers during shows. The advertisement flyer served as a way to provide information about the purpose of the study, the qualifications for participation, and my personal contact information.

Snowball sampling techniques assisted in the recruitment of the participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a type of purposive sampling. In snowball sampling, the researcher asked the participants to identify other possible eligible participants who might be willing to participate in the study; the researcher may also ask the participant to contact others and provide the researcher's contact information (Crosby et al., 2007). A tattoo artist at a local tattoo parlor agreed to refer possible participants to the study. When I distributed flyers at a local music venue, I provided extra flyers to a person at the venue who was willing to share the flyers with potential participants. Individuals who were familiar with my thesis topic notified possible participants about the nature of my study. In order to maintain confidentiality and privacy, the potential participants contacted me via the telephone.

Selecting Participants

The research design of my study required a purposive sample of individuals with tattoos. According to Creswell (2007), phenomenological studies should utilize a sample size between 5 and 25 participants. For this study, six individuals comprised the selected participants in the study. The study involved two separate in-depth interviews to allow me the ability to achieve full immersion in the data. Selecting a large number of participants would have hindered the richness of the study. Sandelowski (1986) stated that sample sizes in qualitative research are usually small because of the massive amount of verbal data that the researcher must analyze as well as the close contact with participants. The sample consisted of a diverse sample population of males and females

from various ages representing a diversity of ethnic, educational, work, social, and religious backgrounds.

Data Management

According to Richards and Morse (2007), qualitative researchers handle a tremendous amount of data. A carefully documented data management system allowed others to examine the scientific procedures used and the decisions made within the context of my study. The implementation of the data management system was a method of providing accountability within the study. Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that formal audits provide a chance to determine the trustworthiness of the observations and results. In order to manage effectively and efficiently the data of the study, the development of a system of managing study data occurred. I utilized the following techniques as part of the process of managing my data.

Audio recording comprised the primary manner of managing the data for this study. The audio recording captured the stories of the participants in their own words. Before the interview began, participants provided written informed consent to acknowledge the recording process during the interview. After participants provided their permission, I recorded each interview session. The audio recordings supplemented brief and expanded field notes taken during and after the interview sessions. Transcription began shortly after the participants completed the interviews.

Research journaling was another tool to manage the data collected during the study. From the initial onset of the study, I maintained a research journal. The research journal created an opportunity for me to document my thoughts, feelings, perceptions,

and biases associated with my research. Because I served as the research instrument in this study, it was important to acknowledge factors that had the potential to influence the interpretation of the data. Journaling also helped to establish credibility of the findings because journaling allowed for bracketing my biases and opinions in an effort to eliminate them from data analysis.

An audit trail was another tool in data management system of the study. The audit trail documented all activities and decisions made throughout the research process to record the chronological history of events in my study. I recorded all correspondence associated with the study in the audit trail, including all email correspondence with committee members and participants. Each activity or decision recorded in the research log had a date and time associated with each entry. Each entry also had my personal comments and a plan of action (if applicable).

Field notes supplemented the audio-recorded interviews. Brief field notes captured important words or phrases stated by the participants during our conversations. Brief field notes also noted nonverbal communication shown by the participant, from changes in tone of voice to body language. Once the interviews were completed, I expanded field to capture complete details associated with the interviews, including details about the environment in which the interview took place. The expanded field notes illustrated the detailed, rich descriptions needed in reporting the findings of the study. Analysis involved examining field notes for themes in the data.

I constructed memos during the data analysis process. Memos were my thoughts about the data captured in a Word[®] document. As interview transcription began, memos

assisted with detailing the categories of data and provided a description of each category. Memos illustrated the rationale behind coding the data. I continuously evaluated my memos throughout the study. Memos provided readers with insight regarding the rationale for coding data in specific manners to form data groups.

Backing-up documents was a final but important measure used to manage the data collected during my study. I saved transcripts, informed consents, lifelines, and other forms of data associated with this study in three different locations: a) a zip drive, b) an external drive, and c) a network server. Richard and Morse (2007) discussed the importance of backing up your original work in another safe medium. NVivo 8[®] software helped to manage all of the data collected during the study, especially during data analysis.

I served as the primary source of data management within the study. The data included audio recordings, photographic images, transcripts, raw data, completed lifelines, and coded data. A file created specifically for each participant contained all pertinent data associated with the study and helped to identify and organize the data; the labels on each file had the assigned pseudonym of the participant. No distinguishing identifiers existed linking the participants with their information.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis began at the onset of the study. I examined the research journal weekly to find patterns of possible biases and perceptions that could affect the interpretations of the data and impact data analysis. Because of the nature of the research design, the process of data analysis resulted directly from the data itself.

During the interview process, I recorded brief field notes about my observations with respect to the participants. Brief field notes captured key phrases and ideas as well as changes in tone of voice. Brief field notes also captured non-verbal cues such as body language. Understanding verbal and non-verbal cues provided insight into events or circumstances that were of importance or upsetting to the participant. Immediately following the interviews, I completed expanded field notes. My expanded notes focused on trying to capture critical information from the interview, including contextual and environmental aspects.

After participants completed the interviews, I transferred the audio files with the recorded interviews to my computer as well as a back-up drive. I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim. After transcription, I verified the transcripts against the audio recording. The transcriptions incorporated the stories in the interview with my field notes and observations. Those steps helped with data immersion. I read and studied the data constantly and continuously throughout the research process.

Once I organized the data, the process of formally coding the data began. Coding resulted from full immersion in the data. Coding allows researchers to simplify the data and focus on specific characteristics of the data (Richards & Morse, 2007). I read and reread the transcripts and took notes in the margins about the data. The notes focused on meaning and significant dialogue. The notes assisted in identifying the significant statements made by the participants. As I created codes in the margins, I maintained a codebook describing the codes I utilized, and created a memo that captured my rationale for the code. The codebook ensured the consistent application of codes.

Throughout the coding process, I identified core categories in the data. Once I identified categories, I then searched for links between different categories. Crosby et al. (2006) stated that categorization related to data synthesis and interpretation of meaning. Categories helped to describe “what” phenomenon that the participants in the study experienced study and “how” the phenomenon came into being (Creswell, 2007). Memos and codes provided descriptions for the logic of creating categories.

Finally, themes discovered resulted from the created categories. According to Richards and Morse (2007), themes are pervasive, common threads or ideas through the data. Themes were useful in helping to interpret the data. As themes were uncovered, I was able to develop a description of the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos and the meanings that they attribute to tattoos and tattooing.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the details involved in conducting a phenomenological study for the purpose of exploring and understanding the perceived meaning of tattoos for participants. I sought to gain an understanding regarding the decisions and dimensions related to the tattooing experience within the context of the participants’ lived experiences. I also presented my reasoning for using qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach because this approach provided the optimal approach to studying individuals with tattoos. I also discussed the Theory of Planned Behavior as it provided the theoretical foundation of this study. I also addressed the strategies that I used to establish credibility with the study, including the use of open-ended interview, photographs, lifelines, researcher’s log, and researcher’s journal. I provided an overview

of transferability and reliability. I presented my qualifications and biases. I explained how the recruitment and selection process of participants and how I ensured their human rights. I also presented details regarding data management. I explained the data analysis process and how the process of generating findings in the study. In the following chapter, I present the findings associated with the study.

CHAPTER 4: LIVING AS AN INDIVIDUAL WITH TATTOOS

Six individuals from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds voluntarily agreed to participate in this qualitative study. Participants were at least 18 years old or older and had at least one tattoo. Study advertisement flyers and snowball sampling were the recruitment methods used for this study. Data collection strategies involved the completion of a lifeline document by each participant, photographs to document participant-selected tattoo(s), and two in-depth, open-ended interviews.

The data collected from the lifeline document, photographs of participants' tattoo(s), and the participant interviews created an in-depth description of the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos. The data also provided a rich description of the meanings that tattoo(s) held for the participants and the meaning of the tattooing experience (including health-related issues and concerns) within the context of the participants' lives. An analysis of the narratives of the individuals with tattoos revealed several prevalent themes. These themes included the following: a shift in thinking regarding tattoos, the tattooing experience, meaning of the tattoo(s), tattoo presentation, the benefits of tattoo(s), desire to continue getting tattoos, and tattooing advice.

The next chapter will focus on the participants' perceptions of what it means to live as an individual with a tattoo. Individuals' perceptions included the meanings that the tattoo(s) held for participants. The findings also addressed the decisions and intentions within the tattooing experience, which included the health-related issues and concerns associated with tattooing.

Participant Profile

Six self-selected study participants were English-speaking males and females at least 18 years of age or older with at least one tattoo. Three participants were male and three participants were female. The ages of the participants ranged from 27 years to 41 years, with the average age being 33 years. All six participants were college educated, with one female currently pursuing a master's degree. Five Caucasians and one African American participated in the study. Four participants in the study were heterosexual, and two participants were homosexual. Two male participants were married (one with a child); one male and female were in a relationship; one female was single. One female's relationship status was unknown.

The number of tattoos the participants possessed ranged from one to 17. One male participant had one tattoo. Two female participants and one male participant each had two tattoos. One female had three tattoos. One male participant had 17 tattoos. The majority of the individuals had possessed their tattoos for at least two years. I offered the participants the opportunity to self-select pseudonyms used in this study. Wild Bill selected his pseudonym while the remaining participants requested that I assign a pseudonym on their behalf.

Participants revealed that the primary reason that they participated in the study was the opportunity they had to help advance the scholarly literature that seeks to understand the tattooing experience. They also valued the opportunity to help a graduate student. Finally, participants said that they were excited about the chance to share their narratives regarding the meaning of their tattoo(s) and being tattooed.

Interviews

Individuals who met eligibility requirements for the study engaged in two open-ended interviews, facilitated by me using a UMCIRB-approved interview guide. The length of interviews varied, from approximately 30 minutes to an hour. Interviews took place in locations mutually agreed upon by the participant and me. Prior to beginning the first interview, I explained the protocol that I used to ensure their protection. I explained the informed consent document and photographic release document to each participant. I obtained the signature of the participant consenting to participate in the study, which allowed me to audio record the interview, to take photographs of the tattoo(s) they selected, and to take field notes during the interview.

During the first interview, participants completed the lifeline document. After the lifeline was completed, I invited the participants to share their experiences beginning where they comfortable. Participants were encouraged to share their stories, including experiences that resulted from being an individual with a tattoo. After the participants finished sharing their narratives, I asked the participants to address the events they had indicated on their lifeline if the participants did not discuss them while sharing their stories.

After the participants shared their stories and reviewed their lifelines, I asked them to select one or two tattoos of their most meaningful tattoos and, with their permission, photographed the tattoo(s) with a digital camera. I made every effort to limit the photograph to the image of the tattoo itself and exclude evidence of the body site where the tattoo(s) was located. I then uploaded the photographs onto my laptop so that

the participant and I could view the tattoo on a full computer screen. I then requested that the participants discuss their tattoo(s) with me. Participants discussed the meaning of their tattoo(s); the circumstances under which they got their tattoo(s); and how they selected the design(s), colors, and shading of their tattoo(s).

At the conclusion of the first interview, we chose a mutually convenient time to meet for the second interview. The second interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Inclement weather and illness led to the rescheduling of interviews with two participants. During the second interview, the participants related the experiences of the tattooing process, including health-related issues, concerns, and motivations for obtaining a tattoo.

A Shift in Thinking Regarding Tattoos

Perceptions about Individuals with Tattoos

Participants acknowledged that social perceptions about people with tattoos have been long lasting. In general, people have viewed men with tattoos as strong, tough, non-conformist, or criminal. People judged women with tattoos as noncompliant with traditional gender role expectations. Although society viewed women who had lower back tattoos as “trashy,” none of the participants mentioned tattooed men in a similar way. Participants also recognized that men and women with tattoos might be seeking a means of self-expression.

Strong, tough, bad asses. Most participants observed that, for men, tattoos connoted strength and toughness that, in some cases, could be intimidating or “scary,” or a consequence of a “wild past.” Some participants related this to the pain typically

endured during the tattooing process. Morgan, for example, commented people considered men to be “tough and bad ass ‘cuz he can sit there in a chair for four hours, four or five times to get a total sleeve done. Look how awesome and tough he is.” Participants, on the other hand, never discussed women in terms of toughness or strength despite them undergoing an equivalent tattooing process.

Non-conformists. Participants indicated that some individuals who had tattoos exhibited social non-conformity and a lack of concern about social acceptance. These tattooed individuals tended to be independent thinkers, doers, often viewed as rebels. Spring’s story of her tattooed uncle conveyed this notion of non-conformity.

He was the rebel of the family, and I always thought it was cool. I just remember thinking it was cool; it was different. (4 sec pause) But I did associate it with the whole rebel thing at that time. He rode motorcycles, and he got into trouble all the time so I definitely did associate it with that.

Criminals. Participants acknowledged the connection between tattoos and criminal activity, prisoners, gang membership, as well as “rednecks” or racists. Wild Bill, for example, shared that some individuals with tattoos had “the typical gang signs. Non-conformist slogans, statements or symbols stuff like that. Nazi symbols.... They’re a criminal; they’re a gangster or biker ganger.” According to Boss,

Like a lot of guys were just racists, skinheads or whatever with tattoos and whatnot. As far as black people go, anybody with a tattoo was in jail or prison (3 sec pause) especially certain ones [tattoos] that they get.

Boss then recounted the symbolic meaning of various prison tattoos.

Artsy. Tattoos can be a form of self-expression for their owners. Spring observed people who get tattoos might simply be those who are “artsy” and who come from all lifestyles. During our discussion about professionals with tattoos, Danny said, “it’s not just the military or prison people (2 sec pause) or bikers. It’s pretty much anybody who wants to express themselves.”

Promiscuous. Several participants identified women’s visible lower back tattoos as “tramp stamps.” Individuals directed this referral towards women who were, according to Boss, “a ho of some sort...or a strumpet.” Danny laughed when he mentioned the tramp stamp, “which everybody talks about.” Participants did not mention men as having a comparably negative brand or label in the form of a tattoo.

Participants in this study reported the social perceptions held about men and women with tattoos resulted from media exposure and personal experience. Perceptions about males with tattoos conveyed positive attributes with respect to masculine gender roles. Historically, society placed high value in male traits such as strength and toughness. The views of women with tattoos were more negative. Tattoo served as a way for women with tattoos to shun traditional feminine gender roles. The placement of visible tattoos on the lower back served as an erotic advertisement for women, thus earning them the reputation of being promiscuous or “tramps.”

Mainstreaming Tattoos

The individuals in this study observed that the prevalence of tattoos had surged in America since their childhoods. As Wild Bill put it, “it’s becoming more mainstream for people to have body modifications.” They said that the mainstreaming of tattoos had

occurred in two primary ways: a) increased visibility linked to commercialization, and b) the normalization of tattoos.

Commercialism. Many participants commented that tattoos were more visible at the time of the study than they had ever seen before. Several individuals believed that television played a role in increasing the popularity of tattoos among Americans in that television tended to glamorize tattoos and the tattooing experience. Wild Bill said that people today are getting tattoos because “they see it on TV a lot.” Boss articulated similar sentiments when he said that,

The media is putting it out there for more people to see.... If the media didn't put it out there for everybody to see, then I don't think that it [tattooing] would be as big as it is now. But because the media puts it out there on TV, everybody has one.

Several participants discussed how the constant bombardment of tattoos and tattooing in various media outlets resulted in the commercialization of tattoos. One participant remarked that, “Hollywood has promoted a lot of the body modifications...tattoos and all this other stuff.” Participants viewed television programs that focused on tattoos and the tattooing experience as contributing to the commercialization of tattoos. Autumn commented, “I don't know if it's like maybe some of the shows that are on TV, shows like LA Ink and stuff like that it's like just the cool thing to do because they've commercialized it so much.” Beyond television shows, participants credited celebrities such as hip-hop artists, athletes, and actors as reasons for the commercialization of tattoos. Boss's statement summarized it best when he said,

When 50 Cent [hip-hop artist] came out with his album and everything, he kinda made them [tattoos] commercial. People were seeing them more and more...kinda like on an everyday level. He started getting them, and the basketball players started getting them, and football players started getting them and everything. You see anybody with no sleeves on; you see a full arm tattoo...or something all on their neck. Even Jamie Foxx [actor] got a tattoo on the back of his head (laughs).

Autumn and Spring compared the commercialization of tattoos to that of a fashion trend that goes in and out of style. "It is becoming more popular but so are a lot of other things. Other things are going out of style too. I mean...it's just cyclical." Her best friend, Autumn, confirmed this idea.

Normalization. Participants repeatedly commented that tattoos had become a "normal" part of everyday life. According to Boss, "it's becoming more and more accepted when before it was like 'I don't think you should do that.'" Our conversations involving the types of people that now possess tattoos illustrated the normalization of tattoos within society. Embracing the shift in thinking about tattoos from taboo to "normal," participants commonly mentioned college students and professionals as consumers of tattoos.

Participants shared that the act of tattooing had become popular among college students. Autumn mentioned the popularity of tattooing among college students and that she managed to avoid getting a tattoo in college. "You know in college it just tends to be the thing to do; people just want tattoos." Boss and Morgan both received tattoos while in

college. In fact, Boss established a tattooing tradition for himself in college that he still practices to this day. Boss stated “every birthday I would get a tattoo,” thus resulting in at least four tattoos obtained while in college.

Professionals were among those who embraced the practice of tattooing according to the participants. Spring, a professional, shared that, “the people that I hang out with pretty much have them [tattoos].” She estimated that “85%” of her professional friends had at least one tattoo. Danny agreed, remarking that, “I’ve known professional people with tattoos up their whole arm.”

Although participants reported tattoos had become normal, one participant relayed his apprehension about the popularity of tattooing, continuing negative views of tattoos, and how the prevalence of tattooing could damage the American reputation on the global stage. As a result of watching the 2008 Olympics, Boss voiced his concern about the portrayal of Americans. He said,

Carmello Anthony had his tattoos out and during an interview at the Olympics...that’s the like the worldwide stage. Do we want other countries looking at us and saying, ‘This is the representation that America has.’ Do-rags, tattoos, and all this stuff.

Both the men and women in this study reported that tattooing was now mainstream. The high visibility of tattoos portrayed in the media resulted in the commercialization of tattoos and a common part of the American experience. The popularity of tattoos did not appear to be diminishing. Participants noted the association between popularity and acceptance. Morgan believed that tattoos would gain more

accepted as “our parents start to get older maybe they’ve mellowed out because we’ve been such a drastic generation but I think that tattoos are going to be more and more accepted.”

View of Tattoos as Artwork

Participants’ comments reflected a shift in thinking about the “status” of tattoos, not only in terms of who became tattooed and why, but also in terms of the tattoo design itself and the artist who rendered it. No longer considered just a tattoo, participants shared similar views of tattoos as artwork on the body. They repeatedly referred to their own tattoo(s) as art or artwork, in part because of the aesthetic appeal and expressiveness of the tattooed image and the creativity and talent needed by the artist to draw a tattoo on a living canvas.

They viewed tattoos as inherently visual. For Autumn, the visual appeal of her tattoos influenced her perceptions about her tattoos as art. She stated that, “I think for me...I’m just visually drawn to them. Like, I actually consider them art.” Danny echoed a similar notion when he talked about his love of art and the connection he believed existed between art and tattooing. According to Danny,

I appreciate art, I think of it [tattoo] more as art....I guess I’m (a) detail-oriented person or that’s why I like art because the amazing little detail in it so I didn’t want to sacrifice the details [of his tattoo].

Participants reported that, much like art that hangs up in a museum or gallery, tattoos had the ability to be expressive and convey messages about the owner, which

influenced participants' use of the terms tattoo and artwork interchangeably when referring to their own tattoo(s). Autumn expressed:

For me, I love the mental connections that it [tattoo] has to all of them and what they mean for me. I love the idea of kinda using your body as this template for like the things you believe in and the things that are really important to you. I love that idea.

Morgan also commented that the creativity required of her when she designed her own tattoos and the uniqueness of her own personal designs influenced her thinking regarding tattoos as art.

I just think that it's [tattoo] just such a unique form of expression. You know it's like your feelings and part of your history expressed in a piece of art. It's something that you wear with pride.

Participants mentioned that the artistic skill needed by the artist to create a tattoo on a living canvas contributed to the connection they saw between tattoos and artwork. They marveled at the tattoo artists' ability to depict a scene, person, or other image on skin and this prompted some of them to view tattoos as art. When Boss searched for a parlor to do his tattoos, he paid special attention to the portfolio of the artists at the parlor. "Once I saw the artwork that certain people did, I mean, yea, I went back to that place." He expanded on what he looked for in a parlor by saying "I go to the website to see some of the artwork that they did." Spring expressed her admiration for the talents and skills of the artists who tattoo for a living. She confirmed that the ability of the artists played a role in her identification of tattoos as living artwork.

It's artwork. That's what I see sleeves and things as. I mean, that's artwork too but it's more a symbol, and I think the one on my back is a symbol but when you start getting' into the sleeves and the bigger pieces, they're just like walking, living, breathing art to me. So, I get into it and try to see it all because there is some serious stuff going on in these things, especially that big. I mean, they're beautiful. It's insane.

All six participants in this study referred to their tattoo(s) as art throughout both interviews. They viewed tattoos as artwork for several reasons. The aesthetic appeal that tattoos held for the participants influenced their thinking about tattoos as artwork. In the same manner in which a canvas provided an artist with an outlet to be expressive, tattoos on the skin provided the participants with a venue to express themselves, including their beliefs or personal characteristics. The skill and talent needed by the tattoo artist to complete intricate tattoos was another factor that encouraged participants to refer to their tattoo(s) as art. Their view of tattoos as art reflected the dialogue and shift in thinking that has occurred within the tattooing community and society as a whole.

The Tattooing Experience

The tattooing experience was an event that was unique to each participant. Even those individuals with multiple tattoos experienced something different each time that they went back to get another tattoo. For the participants, the process of getting tattooed was comprised of the following: the tattoo decision; shopping for a tattoo parlor, design, and artist; health concerns; consequences of tattooing; safety precautions; the pain of tattooing; aftercare procedures; adverse reactions; and the shared tattooing experience.

To Plan or Not to Plan.

In this study, the participants explained the circumstances in which they acquired their tattoo(s). As their tattoo narratives unfolded, participants revealed that obtaining a tattoo was either a planned, scheduled event or something completely spontaneous. In some cases, getting a tattoo involved both planning and being spontaneous. For example, individuals may have carefully planned their next tattoos but the actual act of getting the tattoos might have been contingent upon factors such as finances, which made the act only seem more spontaneous or impulsive.

Planned event. Several individuals discussed that the act of tattooing was a controlled, planned event, and not a random decision. Many participants thought about the design of the tattoo and the act of being tattooed well in advance of actually getting the tattoo. Spring described designing and modifying her first tattoo [circle tattoo] as “24 hours of renditions of it and not sleeping that night.” Once she came up with the design that she wanted, it took her three months to get it done. “I can’t remember why it took me so long to get it. It took me over 3 months to go and get it. I don’t know why.” When Spring and Autumn went to get their star tattoos to celebrate a future music venture, it was a well-thought-out event. Spring said, “I think like a couple of weeks later we went and got it when our schedules worked out, and we got the tattoos together.” Later in our discussion Autumn communicated, “I’m not as random a person that I just go, ‘oh, I don’t really know. I’ll get something.’”

Spontaneous. On the other hand, the idea of getting a tattoo happened spontaneously for some individuals. Wild Bill never imagined that he would end up with

a tattoo, let alone two tattoos until “one day I was driving him [brother] to get other additional tattoos...I saw a couple of tattoos that I thought were cool; he pointed one out and I got that tattoo. Spur of the moment.” Until he got his first tattoo, Wild Bill “was not actually interested in getting one at all, totally not interested in getting a tattoo.” Danny’s tattooing experience was similar to Wild Bill’s experience. Danny told me about the strict tattooing regulations that had once existed in New York State. Once the regulations relaxed, “some guy came in and opened up a tattoo shop and just... one summer, I had the idea and was going to go in and get a tattoo.”

Spontaneous and planned. For some participants, the nature of tattooing could be both spontaneous and planned. In fact, participants may have planned the tattoo itself but the timing of getting the tattoo was random. Boss explained that he was “always planning some things (tattoos)” to get in the future. However, the time of the tattooing tended to be more impulsive. Boss commented about the issue of timing:

Depends on if I see something or if I’m feelin’ a certain way about something one way or another.... Other times, it’s generally spontaneous. I get the feeling...it’s kinda like getting an itch. I’m like ‘I wanna tattoo.’

Throughout her interviews, Morgan constantly reminded me that she was always planning ahead for her next tattoo. Like Boss, she planned in advance for the design but the act of tattooing itself was more random because factors such as finances determined the ability to get tattoos.

Those were spur of the moment things. It really was a “whenever I have the money” thing. ‘Cuz the second one [Mr. Wuf] I was working and it was the

summer time, so I was like “what better time.” The third one [black swan] I was working two jobs and going to school so I was like “I deserve something for me.” I gonna take my money and do it.

In summary, the circumstances in which the individuals got a tattoo were unique. As some shared, their tattooing experience involved them in planning down to the smallest detail. Other participants, on the other hand, made split-second decisions about getting a tattoo. While participants tended to carefully think about the tattoo design, the actual experience of being tattooed depended on the individual. While some individuals carefully selected the parlor and the shop in advance of getting the tattoo, other people’s experiences involved no planning at all.

Shopping for a Tattoo

Deciding to get a tattoo meant participants had to assess several factors regarding the selection of the place to get work done and the person to do it. To gain a sense of understanding about the thought processes involved in shopping for a tattoo, participants shared the systematic process they used in selecting a parlor. In general, participants first selected a parlor and then selected an artist working in the parlor.

Tattoo parlor. The participants described many factors or dimensions in deciding which parlor to use to get their tattoo work done. A convenient location influenced many people’s decision about what parlor to use. The reputation of the parlor and the physical appearance of the shop also influenced their decision.

For several participants, convenience played in a key role in determining which parlor to use to get tattoo work done. Autumn selected [name of parlor] because it was

close to home. She observed the parlor from “just from walking around down there, I had seen it open and kinda watched from the window a few times. I don’t even think that was deliberate as far as location.” Spring got her tattoo done at parlor as a way of “supporting the local artists and it was the oldest one [parlor] in the area.” Morgan got her first tattoo when she was still in college and had limited access to a car. She relayed, “I was still on the campus and [name of parlor] used to be on [name] Street so it was really convenient to go there.” Since Danny was also in college when he got his only tattoo, a convenient location also served as a catalyst to get his tattoo. “It was pretty much the only one in the town and my birthday was coming up so I did it on my birthday. He was the only one in town.”

The reputation of the parlor also factored into the decision-making process regarding selecting a tattoo parlor. As a college student, Morgan constantly encountered other people with tattoos. Eventually, the conversation came around to the place used to get a tattoo done. She explained, “It’s kinda just word of mouth. It’s like you hear who’s good...where...who does good work with this...who does good work with that. So you kinda go to different places.” The place Wild Bill selected was a referral. “We’d heard about the shop. My brother actually heard about the shop from a friend of his. This place was referred to him [brother] by other people who had tattoos.”

The appearance of the parlor helped solidify the decision to use that particular place to get a tattoo. The appearance of the shop led the participants to make assumptions about the parlor and its practices, particularly in the area of sanitation. When I asked her to talk about the criteria that she used to select the parlor, Morgan responded, “I wasn’t

concerned about the being clean and health thing because you're going to these places that are very visible and very known and they've got the sanitation grade up there. Everything's clean and everything's in good practice." Autumn also conveyed this same thought. She "wanted somewhere clean obviously....sterile and all that kinda stuff." Spring ensured that her parlor was "clean" before deciding to get her tattoo done there.

Many factors went into selecting a tattoo parlor. Convenience was a big factor in selecting a parlor but reputation of the parlor also brought participants to the shop. Finally, the appearance of the parlor helped to confirm to individuals that they had made the right decision about selecting that particular shop.

Tattoo artists. Along with the reputation of the parlor, the skills and credibility of the artists, and negative encounters with inexperienced artists comprised a major decision point when shopping for a tattoo. The ability to establish a sense of trust with an artist contributed to participants choosing one artist over another. The appearance of the artist also played a role in artist selection.

Participants viewed the professionalism of the artists as one of the main criteria to select the artist who created their tattoo(s). An ability to see the work of the artists also contributed to the selection process. Danny had "seen other people in town who he [the artist] worked on and he did some beautiful stuff." A few minutes later in our conversation, he further developed this thought.

It was a small town so if you see a brand new tattoo and you're working in the pizza place and people are coming in with tattoos...you see it firsthand. And then

of course you go to the shop and he has his portfolio so I'd seen his work so it's not like I just walked in (laughs).

Wild Bill had to make some judgments about the expertise of his artist, especially since he did not plan his tattoo. Wild Bill described his first tattoo artist as, "one of the owners of the tattoo parlor and had been doing it for a number of years so he had a lot of experience. He had seen a lot...done a lot...created a lot, so I felt comfortable." In our second interview, he shared that "they [artists] were very professional in their artwork and very professional with a business mind. So, I felt very comfortable with their shop." Boss felt a sense of loyalty to his tattoo artist who also owned a tattoo parlor. If his artist left a tattoo parlor, Boss followed the individual to whichever shop he worked or owned. "The owner has done the majority of my tattoos. He's a real cool guy. He's real professional." Later in our discussion, he explained that his sense of loyalty happened because his artist was "a good artist...he knows what he's doing." Morgan commented that she "wouldn't go to a novice to practice" on her.

A lack of skill deterred some participants from getting another tattoo from the same artist. Autumn recalled a negative experience with the artist who did her first tattoo. The artist's lack of skill affected her confidence in him. "Actually, I would probably never go back to the same guy who did this one [tattoo] ever again because I wasn't impressed with the quality of what he did versus the other guy who did this one [just breathe]." Spring had the same artist for her star tattoo. She said, "the guy who did the second one...I think we were guinea pigs. He wasn't that good."

Their interactions with the artists prior to getting a tattoo helped to establish participants' sense of trust in the artists that was beneficial to the tattooing experience. After getting to know her artists, Morgan expressed that she trusted them "as tattoo artists." The artist that completed Spring's first tattoo developed a sense of trust with her. In fact, she wished the first artist had worked on her second tattoo.

I wish he was there for my second one. I totally wanted him to do my second one 'cuz he just made me have complete confidence in him...the way he knew exactly what he was doin', his methodology of explaining it, and doin' exactly what he said. And just the fact that he told me up front that he didn't want to do it but he did it anyway and did the best that he could tells me a lot. I totally wanted him to do the second one but he wasn't there.

For Autumn and Wild Bill, the way in which the artist carried themselves and the physical appearance of the artist factored into their decision in selecting a tattoo artist. Autumn commented that "how they [artists] carry themselves to like what kind of tattoos they even had and how well their tattoo(s) were done," influenced her tattoo artist selection decision. Autumn compared selecting a tattoo artist to choosing a hair stylist:

It's even kind of similar to picking a hair stylist or somebody going to cut your hair. I look at their hair 'cuz, you know what I mean, if their hair looks nice...not that they cut their own hair...but they obviously pay attention to details like that so they're gonna choose someone who will do a good job too. So it kinda reflects the work that they're going to end up doing.

Wild Bill described his artist as someone who “look[ed] like someone who came out of prison” but who he found to be intelligent and professional.

He was a huge monster person. He was a very (2 sec pause) athletic individual, looked like a fighter...looked like a bruiser. He had a mohawk, had his earlobes expanded, tattoos all up and down his arms...He sounds pretty scary looking but if you turned and...if you closed your eyes and talked to the guy, you would think that he was a college-level graduate and had been around the world a few times, a very educated individual.

Although initially uncomfortable with the artist, Wild Bill acknowledged that his artist was “a very professional individual as far as how to run a business and how to run a tattoo parlor, being an artist.”

Once they decided to select a particular tattoo parlor, participants continued to make decisions regarding who would perform that task of creating and applying their tattoo. The professional credibility of the artists was a factor in their tattooing experience, including encountering an artist with a lack of experience. A lack of trust between the participant and a particular artist eliminated some artists from consideration. Finally, the physical appearance of the artist also played a role in selecting the artist.

Health Concerns

Before making the final decision regarding a tattoo, the individuals in this study looked within themselves to determine if they had any concerns about the tattooing process. To assess health-related concerns associated with tattooing in this study, the participants had the opportunity to talk about any concerns or apprehensions that they had

about the tattooing experience. Participants reported having health concerns and others reported no health concerns.

Health concerns. Spring was one of the few participants who reported having some health concerns regarding tattoos. She said that she “didn’t worry about contracting anything that I couldn’t get rid of. I didn’t worry about contracting anything.” However, she had concerns regarding the possibility of getting a rash because her friends had gotten rashes because of tattoos. She said:

They had rashes ‘cuz they used bacitracin back when they told you to use it and it would completely rash over. So, I was a little bit worried about how my body would react to a needle going into you however many times a second and what you had to put on (the tattooed area).

Morgan also reported having no concerns related to contracting an infectious disease or some other health problem. She said that she, “didn’t have any concerns” because she trusted the artists... Maybe it was a naïve trust.” Morgan, on the other hand, was concerned about bleeding. “The only thing I was really worried about was I didn’t want to bleed too much because...it’s weird. It was kinda like a more embarrassing thing on my part (chuckles).”

When Boss started getting tattoos, he did not give the health-related risks a second thought. Over time, he evolved from not having health concerns to now having developed them. He explained what led to this shift:

My concerns are that...the world’s a messed place and people do crazy things. It’s not a tough thing for people to lie about diseases that they have now. I mean, you

see in the news about a dude knows that he's got HIV but slept with people and didn't tell them about it. So, what's to stop him from going to a tattoo parlor and not saying that he has HIV and you know, get a tattoo. He's infecting whatever they're using. I'm always concerned about that 'cuz I don't get something that I can't wash off (laughs). I think about it a lot right now 'cuz of my safety.

No health concerns. Most of the participants reported that they had no health concerns before they received their tattoo(s). Autumn said that she did not have health concerns because the tattoo parlor “was clean,” which eliminate her concerns. Wild Bill reported that he did not have any health concerns, “'cuz I was going to make sure that he didn't...the guy who did my ink was clean and sanitary. So health wise, no.”

The decision to get a tattoo was a chance for the participants to examine their own personal health concerns regarding tattoos. Participants provided various responses regarding health concerns. Some people had some health concerns but others had no concerns or relied on an appearance of parlor cleanliness or trust in the artist to allay any concerns they might have had.

Consequences of Tattooing

While making decisions regarding the acquisition of a tattoo, participants examined the consequences associated with tattooing. Initially, participants had to consider the issue of permanence associated with tattoos. They also had to consider if the possibility of removal might be an option for them down the road.

Permanence. Tattoos are inherently permanent. Several participants noted that permanence was the main consequence of tattooing. During conversations, participants

indirectly shared their thoughts regarding the permanent nature of tattoos. When she mentioned how tattoos served as reminders to the individuals, Autumn shared that, “it [tattoo] can be something little but I mean you’re putting this permanent thing on your body.” Spring told me something similar to Autumn. “I made huge decisions to get them because they’re permanent. I think of them as permanent.” Wild Bill shared “The consequences were the fact that I would have this thing permanently attached to my body.”

Removal. Although people consider tattoos to be permanent markings, an individual with a tattoo could always opt to have his/her tattoo removed with a laser. To gain a sense of the participants’ thoughts, the individuals in the study addressed their thoughts about tattoo removal and the circumstances in which removal would be an option for them. Most participants stated that tattoo removal was not an option. When asked if he would ever get his tattoos removed, Wild Bill quickly replied “nope. Never. Nope. Nope.” Boss responded that removal of a tattoo would cause psychological distress because he would feel as though he was, “losing a part of myself...I guess losing a part of things that means something special to me.” Morgan felt the same way. She said, “I don’t think I can think of any reason that I would have them removed ‘cuz it’s something that I really wanted and I don’t ever want it to be gone.” A few minutes later, Morgan communicated that “I think it would hurt me emotionally and physically to get it removed.”

Danny was the only participant who said that he would consider having his tattoo removed. However, he cannot overcome the barriers associated with removal. “Yea if it

[removal] wasn't so expensive or they actually removed it 100% and not just make it look like a scar. I'd probably do it if it was affordable." For Danny, removal would be conditional. "So, if I could have it removed, chances are I'd remove it so that it would be a clean canvass for probably another one...or go a few years without it and see. I have no plans about it whatsoever."

Acquiring a tattoo required participants to examine the consequences associated with tattooing. Individuals getting a tattoo had to consider the permanence associated with tattoos. Participants also had to assess the conditions in which removal would be an option and the possible effects of tattoo removal.

Safety Precautions

Because researchers have documented the health-risks associated with tattooing, it was important to conceptualize the safety precautions implemented by the parlor and artists to ensure the safety of the individuals seeking a tattoo. As soon as a person walked into the parlor seeking a tattoo, artists typically asked individuals to document their age and any possible current or past health issues, such as illness or pregnancy. From there, safety precautions included the use of new needles, surgical-grade gloves, sterilization/disinfection, and other precautions. The precautions used reminded the participants of surgery.

Proper documentation. Prior to sitting in a chair to be tattooed, participants typically completed a waiver-type form that ensured they were of legal age and that they did not have medical conditions that could potentially harm all parties involved in the experience. Boss described the purpose of the form. He shared that, "you have to get your

id and check if you have a cold and make sure that you don't have this disease and that disease before you sit down to do it." Morgan commented that, "when you go, you gotta show them your ID, you gotta be 18. You gotta be legit. You're signing a waiver."

Brand new needles. One of the main criteria noted as a safety precaution was the use of brand new needles to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Wild Bill noted that he "saw where each and every blade came from. I saw it come out of the wrapper." Danny made sure that the artists used "the brand new fresh needles. He didn't reuse them." Morgan referenced the meticulous nature of the artists who had "needles laid out" from new packages.

Surgical-grade gloves. The use of gloves was the first line of defense for the artists and the individual getting the tattoo since exposure to blood could pose a risk to both. Participants were very conscious of the fact that the artists used gloves when working on their tattoo(s). At the beginning of the tattooing process, Morgan's artist "laid out... obviously very thick, surgical-grade gloves." Spring said her artist had on "gloves 24-7." Autumn mentally documented every time her artist got new gloves. She said, "Even during the switching of colors, if he ever had to use a different instrument or something like that he was very careful to, you know, change his gloves." Boss believed that wearing gloves was a sign that artists were concerned about safety. He said, "The fact that they [artists] wear gloves to do everything show that they're concerned about their safety as well because not only can it pass from wound to wound...I mean they can get stuff too like everybody else can."

Sterilization/disinfection. Sterilizing and disinfecting instruments and surface areas was another manner in which the artists ensured the safety of the person getting the tattoo. Danny noticed that “the equipment that he [artists] used he took out of a sterilizing bin.” Throughout the process, Boss commented that he liked “the fact that they disinfect, wipe off, and spray while they doing it.” Morgan explained that “you’re going into a room so it’s private. It’s clean. There’s tissue laid down; there’s sanitizer. There’s paper towels. There’s hand washing stations. There’s instruments laid out on towels.”

Miscellaneous. Miscellaneous procedures were precautions taken by the artist to prevent cross contamination. When Morgan’s tattoo(s) required more than one color, she noted that “the colors that they’re gonna use are individually out” to prevent mixing of the pigments. She further elaborated that “there’s individuals sized things [ink holders] so nothing gets cross contaminated.” Spring noticed that her tattoo artists “had covers on the handles on the lights even though they had gloves on that they changed” to help prevent possible germs from the light from getting on the tattoo.

Surgery. Because of the meticulous procedures used by the artist to reduce the health risks, several female participants compared their tattooing experience to surgery. Autumn was impressed with the safety protocol in place at her parlor and stated,

They were really sterile, which was I was really impressed with. They even cleaned the chair that I was going to sit in. It almost sorta reminded me of a hospital situation but they cleaned the chair and then he definitely had clean, sterile instruments. I was paying attention to that.

Morgan articulated similar sentiments by comparing tattooing to a visit to the dentist. “It looks very meticulous. It looks kinda like a surgeon or dental set-up, you know, like when you get your teeth cleaned.

Participants were aware of the health-risks associated with tattooing. To look out for their own safety, participants observed the safety precautions used by the parlor and artists to ensure their own personal safety. From signing a tattoo waiver to strict adherence of protocols such as using brand new needles, the use of surgical-grade gloves, sterilization/disinfection, and other miscellaneous precautions, participants felt confident in the regulations and practices used by the artists, comparing the safety measures of the artists to the measures used by surgeons.

The Pain of Tattooing

Because pain is subjective, everyone in the study experienced it differently. In order to gain an understanding about the pain associated with getting a tattoo, I asked participants to describe the pain experienced (if any) during the process of getting their tattoo(s). Most of the participants acknowledged that getting a tattoo was painful while two participants stated their tattooing experience did not hurt. For those who experienced pain, they characterized it as stinging or like a “slow scrap[ing].”

Stinging. Several participants described the pain of tattooing as a stinging-type sensation. When the first lines of her tattoos were completed, Autumn remembered “just that part was stinging.” Wild Bill’s perspective of tattooing pain was similar. He said, “I would say that it feels like a very slow scrape with a very sharp object. Like a scrape that doesn’t stop.” Because he now has 17 tattoos, Boss no longer feels the pain of tattooing.

However, in the beginning, he described the pain as “kinda like a bee sting but it keeps going down in a line and it curves. Now I kinda wanna say it’s like sharp into your skin but don’t penetrate it.”

Dull Scraping. For some, the pain was more like a dull scraping feeling. Wild Bill compared the tattooing pain to “a very slow scrape with a very sharp object...like a scrape that doesn’t stop.” Morgan articulated the tattooing pain for her:

When I remember getting the tattoo, it’s kinda like someone scratching you with a very tiny tool. It feels kinda like a little rug burn or maybe somebody scraping you with a paperclip or something. You know. It’s kinda...it’s uncomfortable but it’s not excruciating. When you go through maybe like the first 10 or 15 minutes especially when they’re outlining, it’s kinda like your body’s response. It’s kinda like the pain dulled out to me. I kinda felt like a dull scraping pressure ‘cuz your body reacts to pain and you release endorphins and it kinda feels good.

No pain. Danny and Spring were the only participants who reported that the tattooing experience was not painful. Spring shared that she did not experience any pain and was completely in-tune with the tattooing process. Spring commented that she knew “a lot of people think it’s painful but it doesn’t. I felt like I was in the zone from the middle to the end.” Danny responded, “I didn’t think it was painful. I think it depends on location.” Danny also admitted that he had a high threshold for pain. However, the process of wiping the tattoo was painful to Danny. “After a while, you get a little raw. I didn’t mind buzzing of the needle but when wiped down I felt like he wiped with sandpaper.”

For those who reported experiences of pain, the pain of tattooing compared to a stinging feeling or a dull scraping sensation. Some did not experience any pain during their tattoo process. However, participants viewed the pain of tattooing as well worth it. Autumn said that the pain was “not like any other kind of pain you’ve ever experienced.” Morgan stated, “I mean it’s painful but it’s joyful pain to get a tattoo.”

Aftercare Procedures

Following proper aftercare procedures can ensure that tattoos heal in a timely manner. As Morgan discussed, after a person gets a tattoo “the artists give you a sheet and lays out step by step what to do and what not to do.” Because aftercare procedures can vary from place to place and can change over time, participants elaborated on the aftercare procedures that they used to care their tattoo(s). The most common strategies used to promote healing were keep the tattoo covered, clean, and moist. The individuals also discussed how they adapted the aftercare procedures to meet their lifestyles.

Keep it covered. Danny got his first tattoo in 1993. The aftercare procedures that Danny used have changed since then. Now, artists tell people who get a tattoo to keep a bandage on the tattoo for the first hour only. However, when Danny got his tattoo, the instructions were different. At the time, the artists told Danny to keep his tattoo covered at all times. Danny shared that “the aftercare instructions were to keep it covered which at the time we weren’t putting on a bandage but a piece of saran tape over it and then duct taped to you or medical taped to you.” At the time, Danny’s advice included changing the dressing “every couple of hours.” Because of his tattoo’s location, he needed help. Danny recalled:

I remember being at work and it was time to change the bandage (laughs) and one of my guy friends at my job changed it for me and had to wipe me down so. Other than that, that's all it took. Keep it covered.

Keep it clean. Another step that helped speed up the healing process was keeping the tattoo clean. In order to promote healing of his tattoo, Wild Bill “kept it clean and kept it washed and used the antibiotic ointment on it to keep it from getting infected.” Autumn’s experience mirrored that of Wild Bill. She kept her tattoo “clean... really well.” Boss told me his process for keeping his tattoos clean: “I wash it with soap and water, not with a rag or anything...just with my hand and soap and water.” Spring had a similar process for keeping her tattoo clean. Autumn “could put a little soap on my hand but no scrubbing with a wash cloth.” Morgan also washed her tattoo “two or three times a day,” and took her cleaning procedures to the next level by buying “Ivory soap with no dye.”

Keep it moist. Participants applied various lotions and ointments on their tattoo(s) to prevent heavy scabbing. Back in 1993, Danny could not remember exactly what he had used on his tattoo but he said that it was, “probably not Vaseline because it’s oil-based but I guess a kind of Neosporin kinda stuff.” Autumn’s artist advised her to “rub lotion on it a lot” so she did. Morgan’s artist suggested that she could “get sensitive skin Lubriderm lotion” so she “got the Lubriderm that had no dyes, no perfume, no irritants in it” and applied it “two or three times a day.”

Adaptation. Over time and with experience, several participants adapted the aftercare procedures to meet their individual needs. After 17 tattoos, Boss had his own

method for taking care of his tattoos. As the years passed, Boss found “that different things work. I might just put coco butter or something on it. Before, I would be the whole bacitracin on it every three hours or whatever it asked for. Now, it’s just lotion and keep it clean.” Morgan also adapted the original aftercare instructions that she received to meet her tattoo(s). Her logic for making changes to aftercare instructions was,

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it...just making sure you’re using stuff that doesn’t have any irritants in it because you definitely spend a lot of money on this and they take a lot of time going into it so I don’t wanna do anything that could cause an adverse reaction.

The artists at the parlor provided tattoo aftercare instructions to participants after the completion of their tattoo(s). The three guiding principles of aftercare were: keep it covered initially, keep it clean, and keep it moist. Over time, many participants tailored the original instructions to meet their needs. By following the instructions, the participants increased the likelihood of proper healing of their tattoo(s).

Adverse Reactions

Because tattooing involves tampering with the skin, there are some risks associated with them. To understand any medical complications or adverse reactions that resulted from their tattoo(s), participants discussed any medical issues that occurred as a result of obtaining a tattoo. The medical issues that resulted from tattooing were scabbing and scarring along with inflammation. One participant experienced no issues at all.

Scabbing. The most common medical issue reported among participants was scabbing, which was anticipated by some participants since being tattooed involved

bleeding. When asked about any problems that she experienced, Spring responded, “I mean, it scabbed over but what do you expect, you know.” Wild Bill referred to the scab on his tattoo as a “...crust on all over the whole thing.” He experienced heavy scabbing on his first tattoo but “the second one ... had scabbing on the lower end of it and on the edges, and very light scabbing on that.” Morgan stated that washing it and putting lotion on her third tattoo resulted in “scabbing that was gone within a week.”

Scarring and inflammation. One participant reported having an adverse reaction as a result of getting a tattoo. Autumn has a scar permanently embedded in her tattoo. She was the only person who experienced a more serious reaction as a result of tattooing. Autumn explained how she got her scar. “The one on my wrist, the guy actually cut me so I have a scar right in the middle of my tattoo. It will probably always be there and be a little more faded than the rest.” Autumn reported inflammation after getting her tattoo. “This one [star] got really, really, really red after afterwards but that was just probably because it was really inflamed since he cut it; he cut my skin.”

No issues. Danny had what others might classify as a perfect tattooing experience. Danny shared that he had no adverse reactions. “No infection. No fever. No scabbing. No raised scarring. It healed perfectly fine, yea.”

In summary, although the participants knew the health risks associated with tattooing, the individuals in this study report minimal medical issues that result from tattooing. People with new tattoos commonly experienced scabbing. One female experienced scarring and accompanying inflammations because of her tattoo. One male had no issues with his tattoos.

Shared Experience

According to the males and females in the study, the tattooing experience was a highly social event. The decision to get a tattoo was an experience that all participants shared with a significant other in their life during the process of getting at least one of their tattoo(s). The participants experienced getting their tattoo(s) with friends most often. When Danny got his only tattoo while living in New York, he “went with a friend.” Both males received tattoos during that visit. Autumn and Spring got their tattoos together. The experience helped them to capture what they considered their everlasting friendship and the hope of their mutual dream of opening a music venue. Wild Bill used his trip to the tattoo parlor to help repair and reconnect his relationship with his brother, who was a tattoo collector. Wild Bill explained, “I went with him just to go to a tattoo shop to see what they’re all about and to hang out and try to re-bond with my brother because there was a time when we didn’t get along.”

For the study participants, the tattooing experience was multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. They described their experiences as either planned, spontaneous, or both planned and spontaneous. Their tattooing experience involved: shopping for a tattoo, addressing health concerns, analyzing the consequences of tattooing, assessing safety precautions, tolerating the pain of tattooing, following aftercare procedures, overcoming adverse reactions, and the sharing the experience with another significant person in their lives.

Meaning of the Tattoo

Why Ink

Participants offered a variety of reasons for getting their tattoo(s). They cited such reasons as fulfillment of a childhood fascination with tattoos, signifying pride in someone or something, serving as a memorial, reminding the owner of something of important, or just because tattoos were “cool.”

Childhood fascination. Several participants reported a fascination with tattoos that typically began in childhood. Morgan said, “The thing about tattoos is that I always thought about tattoos when I was young... [and] was always really tempted” to get one. Similarly, Danny recalled, “I always wanted a tattoo. I remember always enjoying putting the Cracker Jack tattoos on my arms when I was a little kid.” Because of his early attraction to tattoos, Danny hypothesized that “there are people who always know that they are a tattoo type of person and they just don’t know what type of tattoo they’re going to get. They just know.”

Pride. Participants commented that being proud of something was among the reasons to get tattoos. The “Block S” and “Mr. Wuf” (Appendix F) tattoos that Morgan owned represented her pride in her father and the State University from which she graduated. “People talk about their first love being a person but my first love was ...State as a university, as a place, as an idea.” She said the other tattoo was the result of feeling “really proud of my dad.” Boss proudly wore a Maltese cross (Appendix G), which “represented his profession.” He clarified, “I like what the fire department stands for...fire and rescue. It’s not just...it’s not all about just going and kicking down doors

and putting out fires. It's about helping people out because the majority of our job is EMS [emergency medical services]."

Memorials. Individuals with tattoos used their tattoo(s) to permanently commemorate or memorialize people or events that were significant to them. Boss possessed several tattoos that honored friends or members of his family. Boss's second tattoo honored, "a good friend of mine I've known since kindergarten [who] died the day before high school graduation.... And the tattoo that I got of him was a memorial, where I had a friend...an Asian character, and it has his initials." Boss also got a tattoo to memorialize his marriage to his wife with a tattoo of her name on his neck. It symbolized his commitment to being with his wife for the "long haul."

Reminders. Because of their permanence, tattoos provided the participants with constant reminders about aspirations, shared bonds, and life lessons learned. Autumn and Spring, for example, shared a life dream and a tattoo with many different meanings behind it. Both Autumn and Spring shared a goal of owning a music "venue" or something related to music. Both women reported that their tattoo served as a reminder of where they have been and where they hoped to go. Spring commented,

It's just to always know...even though it's been really hard for us to get to where we want to be and obviously, we're not there yet. It keeps reminding me not to forget about it, which is why I wanted it there so I could always see it.

Tattoos also marked the body with a symbol of a shared bond. As previously mentioned, both Spring and Autumn had a tattoo in common. Beyond serving as a reminder of career ambitions, the tattoo represented an unbreakable bond between the

best friends. Autumn suggested that the tattoo, “represents our bond as best friends and kinda our thing to each other...no matter where we are in life.” Spring expressed similar sentiments regarding the nautical star by saying, “It’s like between Autumn and me. It’s a friendship thing.”

Tattoos had the potential of capturing life lessons or experiences on the participants’ bodies. Autumn overcame some health issues that she battled throughout her life. For Autumn, her tattoo was a reminder to herself that she could conquer anything that life threw at her. “I can get through anything if I just, you know, breathe...relax and feel my way through it. Take a deep breath.” Spring’s tattoo signified the lesson that “life is not all black and white. There are some shades of gray.”

Just because. While most participants conveyed specific motivational reasons for getting a tattoo, several participants stated that they got a tattoo because they thought tattoos were cool. Wild Bill, for instance, said that, with the help of his brother, he saw several “cool” tattoos and simply chose those. He also indicated that having tattoos gave him, in his words, “something interesting to have on my body.” Danny always knew that he wanted a tattoo. As he got older, Danny felt people who embraced the heavy metal music just got tattoos. He explained, “I got into heavy metal music, I think heavy metal, long hair, tattoos, and leather go hand-in-hand (laughs).”

Tattoo Design

In this section, explanations provided by the participants tell their stories about how they selected their tattoo designs and the significance their chosen designs held for them. Some tattoo designs reflected such things as first loves, symbolic meanings, life

journeys, or family. Several tattoo images identified ambition, professional allegiance, and aesthetic appeal as motivations for their choices.

First love. Morgan associated her sense of self with the State University she attended. Morgan's first tattoo was her "Block S" tattoo with Victorian wings, which came to her by a vision in a dream. After experiencing the vision, Morgan remembered "waking up the next day and saying 'I have to go to... [name of the tattoo parlor] right now and draw it up. I have to have this on my body.'"

Morgan's second tattoo was similar to her first tattoo in that it followed the same theme. Her second tattoo, "Mr. Wuf," had "big fluffy wings and the angelic kind of symbolism." Morgan wanted her "Mr. Wuf" tattoos to be "very Victorian."

I mean, it's weird that I have these two tattoos of a university but to me growing up, my dad was [an] alum. And just the stories that he told and just being a State fan. I was the only State fan that I knew growing up and getting hated and picked on for it... And just romanticizing about that. I was like, I want every part of this to be. .. [the] State [University].

Symbolism. Two female participants had tattoos that were symbolic in nature and significant to their mental health. Autumn envisioned her "*just breathe*" (Appendix H) tattoo as located on the side of her body. She said,

I wanted something like really fluid. You know, not masculine at all, kinda just clean and neat. And I knew that I wanted some kind of script, almost as though if I had written it or something.

Morgan's third tattoo was a black swan (Appendix F) that embodied her evolution from an insecure child to a confident adult.

Growing up, I was always really awkward (2 sec pause) and just hated myself...hated my body. And kinda feeling like after college that I had grown into myself and had become the person that I wanted to be. I like the whole swan symbolism. I like the idea of the black swan because they're different and unique. They're like a genetic variation on the perfection of the white swan so that's why I got the black swan.

Life journey. The creation of an original tattoo design provided one participant with a venue to document the events in her life. Spring's circle tattoo (Appendix I) combined her love of "curves in architecture" with the culmination of the events in the life. The design of her circle tattoo was the result of her, "ending a relationship I really thought was going to go somewhere and I was very just frustrated at the time just sorta (sighs) down on everything." Her circle tattoo represented that she was "coming out of that stage and how life is just cyclical." She further explained:

Each one [circle] of these sorta represents a journey and how they all have beginnings and ends. It can be either way. The beginning and the end can be the same, and when we go through the journeys of life, we always have these points where we get to decide. I mean, pretty much every thing is a decision if we let it be if we don't let life take us over. So, and every decision that we make takes us to our destiny. And there will always be energy in the middle of things. Along our journey sometimes we have more room to breathe and sometimes we don't. It's

just life in general. It's me remembering that things are not always going to be great but things are always going to be bad. It's just life. It's just so I can remember it. I wanted it ON me.

Family. Tattoo designs provided participants with the chance to show love for family. Boss designed his tattoo on his back that spans his shoulders to show his devotion to his family (Appendix G). Selecting the graffiti lettering was a way to establish that Boss was “a little bit different” from his family. Because of his love for his family, Boss felt that he could overcome any challenge or obstacle because he’s “a damn... [family name].” He described this tattoo:

In general, I love my family. I'd do anything for my family. To me, that wraps up the memorial that I have for my uncle, what future tattoos that I might have for my children, my wife, and everything. Family is so important to me. I can't get no plainer...I love my family. I'd love to get together with my family everyday...have a cookout or do whatever. Drink or play cards or whatever.

Ambition. Both Autumn and Spring shared the same tattoo design that served as a constant, visible reminder of their music ambitions (Appendix H and I). Although both had the same tattoo, each described it slightly differently. Autumn researched the meaning of the design prior to getting her tattoo. Although Autumn acknowledged that she had a “very commercial design,” both she and Spring selected the colors to make their tattoo(s) fit their personalities. Autumn selected an existing design because:

It was a symbol for sailors because it means hope and guidance. It was kinda a way of getting back home when they [sailors] were on some trip, you know, on

the seas or whatever. So, I really like the meaning behind it...the hope and guidance part. And it's actually part of the logo for the side job that we have going on, which is why Spring has it too. So, she and I are best friends so there's probably like three layers of meaning behind this one.

Although Spring shared the same tattoo as Autumn, her description of the meaning of her tattoo differed somewhat from that of Autumn. The design was, in her words, "the graphic used in conjunction with [music venue name] endeavors," which was the music venue that she and Autumn hoped to operate in the future. She commented on what the tattoo meant to her:

For me, it's not for any of the ones that you can like find online or anything like that. It's totally everything to do with [name of venue]. It's a like between Autumn and me. It's a friendship thing and a [name of venue] thing for me.

Professional allegiance. As a mark of identity, tattoos had the ability to convey professional allegiance. Boss explained that his Maltese cross, "pretty much characterizes...every firefighter," and had gotten his tattoo to celebrate his initial hiring in the field. Although the Maltese cross was a standardized design, he discussed how he had personalized it.

Every firefighter has a Maltese cross on their helmet or on their gear or on their shirt or something like that. The... [number] in the middle of it was the number of our academy. I talk to members of my academy on a regular basis; it was a...the fire department is a big family, but the... [academy] was like my immediate family because we spent so much time together. We ran together; we did pushups

together; we got in trouble together. Everything that we did, we did together (laughs).

Aesthetic appeal. Individuals in the study disclosed that the selection of specific tattoo designs resulted from their visual appeal. Wild Bill selected both of his tattoos from the canvases displayed in the parlor without any forethought of design. For the skull tattoo (Appendix J), he liked the design but he ensured that the artist modified it to make it unique by telling the artist “to take some liberties with drawing [it].” As Wild Bill recalled,

The bands around the hilt of the sword or the dagger are actually several shades of yellow...not one color yellow and there's some orange in there to darken up a little bit. And he did that unique. And the color inside the cross was different than the original artwork. And when he was done, he was like “oh, I colored the eyes in flames, is that cool?” I was like, “dude, that's alright (laughs).

Wild Bill followed a similar process when selecting his second tattoo. Again, he selected “cool artwork” from the shop wall and had the artist personalize the design by modifying colors and shading to make his snake tattoo (Appendix J) more realistic.

Danny selected his tattoo from “a tattoo book” that the artist had in the parlor. He said he did not put a lot of thought into the design, although the snake-like qualities of the designed appealed to him and influenced his selection of the design (Appendix K).

I guess I call [the tattoo] the ‘dragon lady’. She's got like dragon wings and a snake tail, something like that. I kinda liked it but I didn't think that it was going to be that big (laughs). I thought that it was going to be small, and then when he

told me that it had to be pretty big if I wanted the details of the scales and everything... It's supposed to be in color; it's black and white now. I never got around to any coloring but anyway (laughs)... I was like, 'do it big' (laughs).

In summary, the designs of participants' tattoos depicted first loves, symbolism, the journeys of life, or family. Other tattoo designs represented ambition, professional allegiance, and aesthetic appeal. Regardless of the source of inspiration for the tattoo designs, the participants asked the artists to create pieces of art that were individualized.

Tattoo Placement

Many factors influenced the participants' decisions about where to locate tattoos on their body. The ability to conceal the tattoo(s) was the most reported criteria for determining tattoo placement. Size and pain considerations also contributed to participants' determination of tattoo location.

Concealment. Most participants decided to place their tattoo(s) in locations where they were able to conceal them from others. Danny considered professional appearance when making a decision about his tattoo placement. He thus placed his tattoo on his back "so when I go to work, no one would ever see it. And any job that would ever see it (laughs)...I wouldn't worry about having to hide it." Like Danny, Spring chose to locate a tattoo on her back. She explained that, "it was my first one because it was completely personal. It was just for me (emphasis), and I didn't want a lot of questions about it." Other participants had selected hidden locations because of the personal nature of their tattoo(s). Wild Bill put his tattoos on areas of his body that were only visible to him

because “it’s something that is very personal artwork that not many people get to see...’cuz they are hidden most of times.”

Size. In addition to personal considerations, the size of his tattoo played a pivotal role in determining where participants decided to place their tattoo(s). A bigger tattoo required more surface area. Professional considerations as well as size posed issues for Danny. He selected his back to place his tattoo because “it was the bigger surface area ‘cuz it’s a damn big tattoo.” Because of the complex nature of her circle tattoo, Spring chose her back for the tattoo because she needed a place “...where it would still look like a circle.”

Pain aversion. Because of the painful nature of tattoos, two participants selected body locations to put their tattoo(s) based, in part, on reduced pain perception in some areas. Morgan chose to place two of her tattoos on her hip “because it’s some place (laughs) that’s really meaty as the tattoo guy said. It won’t hurt as much as if you put it on bone.” Morgan’s aversion to pain was her “...reasoning for that.” Boss placed his larger familial tattoo on his back because he perceived his back to be “the strongest part of my body,” which he thought would help with the pain.

Meaningful Tattoos

Participants in this study acknowledged that their tattoo(s) held powerful meanings to them. For most, owning tattoos meant possessing something meaningful permanently etched into their skin forever. However, not all participants believed that tattoos needed to have deep, personal meaning.

Throughout my conversations with the participants, one thing kept coming up repeatedly. Regardless of design, most participants perceived that tattoos needed to be meaningful to the individual. Spring stated that, “I think it is the meaning behind it. I think I was old enough in my life to have not made a whimsical mistake about it. I mean there was a lot of thought put behind it; it has meaning.” Autumn commented that carefully planning her tattoos was essential because, “I want them to mean something before I do it first and foremost.” When Morgan shared her advice to those considering a tattoo, she suggested that tattoos needed to be, “something that means something to you.”

Not all participants in the study believed that tattoos needed to be meaningful. Wild Bill admitted that “neither one of them have deep, emotional meanings to me personally,” but the fact that he shared the tattooing experience with his brother was important to him.

For most participants, the meaning behind the tattoo often but not always played a significant role in their decisions to get a tattoo. A love of artwork or a shared tattooing experience, for example, was the only requirement for two participants getting a tattoo.

Personal Tattoo Standards

All who participated in the study expressed a desire to get more tattoos in the future. However, they had also developed professional standards of or criteria for conduct and quality in their personal lives and related to the tattooing process itself concerning any future tattoo work completed.

The regulations of the professional working environment affected the participants’ decisions regarding their tattoo(s). Professional considerations played a role

in determining tattoo placement. Morgan shared, “I think the only thing that I limit is that, because I work in a professional setting, I won’t get anything below my sleeve line or anything visible like neck or anything like that.” Autumn agreed that working in a regulated business affected her decisions about her tattoos.

I think for me, right now, tattoo stuff and even body piercing stuff...body art in general is really job-related. You know what I mean. I do right, anyways, have to be a lot more specific as far as even where I choose to put one. It can’t be like ‘oh I don’t care. I’m just gonna (get) one here.’... If I’m ever out of like the corporate world, I might feel free to get more.

Spring stated her future tattoos would be located “in places that are less conspicuous” if she decided to remain employed in her current industry. If she changed to the music industry, she believed that her future tattoos would “probably be more visible for sure.” Boss would avoid tattooing his face or including messages that would be offensive to his employers.

One participant disclosed that quantity limited his future tattooing plans. Danny disliked like the thought of having more than one tattoo. Danny exclaimed, “I just don’t want multiples! I’d rather have just one.” He felt as though it was easy to end up with multiple tattoos.

Regret

Five participants directly or indirectly reported having no regrets in deciding to get a tattoo. Autumn’s deliberate planning eliminated the possibility of regret. “I don’t think that I’d ever get a tattoo that I think would be a mistake as far as regretting that the

particular design or whatever ‘cuz I think about it so much.” Wild Bill indirectly communicated that he had no regrets about his tattoos when he said, “tattoos rule.” As Autumn simply put it, “I love it [tattooing].”

One participant stated that he had no regrets about getting a tattoo. However, our conversations indicated that Danny might have been unhappy with some aspect of the tattoos he had gotten. Danny replied,

No. I don’t regret getting it, but if I could have bought a five-year ink (laughs), I think that’d be great.... If I could have it removed, chances are I’d remove it so that it would be a clean canvass for probably another one...or go a few years without it and see.

Again, although convinced the he did not regret being tattooed, his comments suggested that he might have liked to change his current tattoo or experience a period of time during which he was tattoo free.

Tattoo Presentation

Show and Tell

Participants in this study divulged that, contrary to popular belief, deciding to share their tattoo(s) with another individual was a complicated decision. Participants assessed the appropriateness of the circumstances prior to showing their tattoo(s) to other people. The process of deciding to unveil a tattoo differed depending on whether the participant was in the private or public sphere of interaction. Sharing a usually hidden tattoo with significant others under conditions of privacy involved a willingness to

expose something important about themselves, essentially letting others into their lives.

Revealing a tattoo in public places required additional considerations by the participants.

Letting people in. Female participants in the study affirmed that deciding to share their usually hidden tattoos with people in their private lives helped to establish a connection with them. Morgan conveyed that she needed to establish a sense of trust with somebody before she decided to share her tattoos with individuals. She said,

I'm very dedicated. I'm very loyal but I think it's harder for me to get to know people. I think the people that I really let into my world...it's important for me. I mean, these tattoos are my story and if they know me, they know my story and I like to share it with them.

For Spring, the process of revealing her tattoo was associated with being in an intimate relationship. Spring commented that "I don't wear anything where you can see this [circle tattoo] on my back. So only people who've seen me (2 sec pause) disrobed have seen it, and they think it's cool."

Tattoos in public. Displaying a tattoo in the public presented specific issues for participants that revealed their tattoo(s) to the world. Both men and women participants acknowledged that formal settings were not appropriate places to show a tattoo while informal places such as the public pools and beaches were acceptable.

Participants considered the workplace to be an inappropriate venue to expose tattoos. They understood that corporate standards offered no place for tattoos. Wild Bill believed that displaying his tattoo while at his place of employment was disrespectful to his employer. He stated that, "most of the time, professionally, I have on pants because I

don't want people to know in the profession that I have tattoos. That's out of professionalism and respect for the company." Boss expanded on this notion. Boss commented, "In the professional world, the business world, I think they look down on it [tattoos] as a whole. Cover it up because they want you to be clean, crisp, and ready to go."

The participants with visible tattoos were very aware of how other professionals reacted to their tattoo(s) in the work environment. The tattoos on Boss's forearm caused some initial concern for him as he was entering the teaching workforce. His highly visible tattoo made him "conscious of that [tattoo] when... taking jobs." Boss expressed concern that other professionals would see his tattoo and conclude that he was not "goin' to be good enough to do certain things" as a teacher. For Autumn, concealing her tattoo was sometimes necessary in her job in order to secure new business for the company. She told me about such an instance:

I do end up covering this one [star] up on my wrist sometimes at work depending on what kind of meeting I'm in. I remember very vividly last year I was at a bid defense so I had to give a presentation in front of this client so we could get the work. Those kind of things are totally dependent on how you present yourself and the company. Nobody told me to do it and I think if hadn't it may not have even been a big issue but I just didn't want to find out. So, I remember wearing like a long sleeve shirt, you know what I mean, and I didn't take my jacket off so. I had a suit on and jacket and I never took it off 'cuz I didn't want the client to see it.

Participants often reported the heat of the summer season provided good opportunities to expose or display their tattoo(s) to the public if they chose to do so. Wild Bill wore pants most of the year, especially at the office. While wearing shorts gave him relief from the summer heat, the tattoos on his legs also drew people's attention. Participants felt comfortable showing their tattoo(s) at swimming pools or beaches. Regarding his tattoo, Danny commented that "people see it at the pool of if I wear a tank top it sticks out the top and the sides." Some people were "shocked" that he had a tattoo. For Spring, swimsuit season was the only time people saw her *just breathe* tattoo because of its location. Spring explained:

I've gotten a lot of compliments about the one on my side during the summer when people see that one [*just breathe*]. Especially when I'm walking up and down the beach, I'll actually see...its kinda funny...it's vertical down my side and so I'll actually see people tilt their head to read it (laughs). I mean they immediately go like this [tilts head to the side].

Morgan summarized her decision to present tattoo(s) to others as a chance to, "choose the way for people to see you (2 sec pause) even if it's for a reaction." The decision to display one's tattoo involved considering many factors for the participants. Participants based their decision of disclosing tattoo ownership on many factors, and their decision required many considerations. When participants shared their tattoo(s) in their private lives, it gave participants the opportunity to expose themselves under the conditions they chose and on a personal level. Participants viewed visible tattoos as

inappropriate in formal settings, such as work or a wedding, but acceptable at places such as the beach or pool.

Reaction to Tattoo(s)

While tattoos and the tattooing experience had a positive effect on the participants, not all individuals encountered by participants reacted positively to their tattoo(s). They reported a variety of responses and reactions after showing others their tattoo(s), characterizing these reactions to tattoos as “mad props,” the “freak out,” surprise, or no reaction at all.

Mad props. Participants experienced positive reactions to their tattoo(s) from some people, particularly friends and family, to the extent that, as Morgan reported, “my friends love it.” Morgan’s State University-inspired tattoos garnered cheers and rave reviews from fellow fans. Her compliments included, “like, ‘you ARE the State fan.’” As a result, Morgan got “mad props [compliment that conveys respect and appreciation] for that a lot” from both friends and strangers. Autumn perceived that her *just breathe* tattoo created a positive reaction among pool and beach goers that ranged from “oh wow” to “that’s awesome.” Boss believed that his tattoos were what initially attracted his significant other. He said, “My wife loves my tattoos....I think that’s one of the things that drew her to me.”

The freak out. Several participants reported strong negative experiences, particularly from parents, because of their tattoo(s). Because of her mother’s religious beliefs, for example, Morgan’s mother “freaked out” when she found out about her tattoo. According to Morgan, her mother was “totally mad for a good couple months about it.”

Wild Bill's mother reacted similarly. When he first shared his tattoo with his mother, she initially reacted positively because she thought the tattoo was fake. Upon discovering the truth, "she flew all around, threw my legs up in the air, and ran out of the room...totally ticked off. She didn't talk to me until the next day."

Negative reactions to tattoos sometimes occurred in the work place. When Morgan started her job as a professional, evidence that she had a tattoo upset a co-worker.

I just remember that I dropped something and I went to pick it up and my shirt picked up a little bit and this guy... goes, 'hey, your tattoo's showing.' He got really upset about it. I mean, I didn't know this guy from like Adam's housecat and he decided that he was going to comment on MY tattoo, you know, like he saw some skin, like it was scandalous. That was really upsetting.

Boss received "grief" at his job because of his tattoos; however, he perceived the teasing he received as playful in nature. His co-workers said, "Hey, what happened to you? You let someone draw on you when you were asleep (laughs)?" Boss humorously responded "yea man. They get me with permanent marker all the time."

Surprise. One participant experienced reactions of astonishment when others saw his tattoo because he did not fit stereotypical notions about who would choose to have a tattoo, particularly one so large. As Danny explained, "I'm not the heavy metal kid that I used to be so they see me with short hair now and in professional setting so if they ever do see me with a tattoo, it's more of a surprise." Spring surprised a few of her friends

when she got her tattoo because it seemed uncharacteristic of her “personality type,” in that she was “an introvert, a little more guarded.”

No reaction. Some participants described receiving no reaction from those who saw their tattoo(s). Danny and the three women participants received no strongly positive or negative reactions from their parents. Even when his mother noticed his tattoo for the first time, Danny commented that there was “no negative fallout other than my mother saying, “Danny, what did you do?” Parents of the female participants had little or no reaction when they had their first tattoos because the participant had prepared them for it, a sibling had already had one or more tattoos, or a parent did not want to overreact to it. Morgan, for example, said her father probably intentionally expressed no opinion when he received news of her tattoo.

I think he purposely did not have a reaction so I wouldn’t react to his reaction.

You know. ‘Cuz I think if he would have overacted and (I would have) been like “well, whatever it’s my body and I’m gonna keep doing it.” If he was supportive, it might have weirded me more or maybe he thought if he was supportive I would have got more tattoos, you know (laughs).

Tattoo(s) as a “Common Link”

Participants who decided to show their usually hidden tattoo(s) to other individuals viewed the opportunity as a potentially unique chance to establish a relationship with others, depending on their reactions. Danny remarked that tattoos “can be a common link between two people...whether you like the same music or whatever.” In essence, it afforded the person with a tattoo a chance to establish a sense of belonging

among brethren. In addition, the process of showing their tattoo(s) with strangers often proved to be a catalyst for conversation.

Belonging. Tattoos served as a marker or “unspoken code” for identifying membership in the tattooing subculture. Wild Bill felt an instant connection to others who appreciated tattoos. He often found such individuals while he hung out at his favorite tattoo parlor and showing his tattoos. “I enjoyed meeting the people with tattoos before and the artists themselves. It was kinda neat meeting people who were very unique and getting into that quote-unquote subculture of people who get tattoos is interesting to see.” Boss believed that his tattoos opened the door to membership:

I guess it’s kinda like a...I guess it’s kinda like a camaraderie among folks who have tattoos. You know what I mean. It’s like, “I know what you’re talking about; I know what you’re going through.” I mean, if you have to deal with certain people out there...it’s kinda like an unspoken code. Now that you have a tattoo, you’re part of this. You’re part of something a little bit bigger.

Conversation piece. Sometimes, participants needed a little inspiration to establish a connection with a stranger. In this case, tattoos provided a catalyst for the small talk dialogue between the participant and the stranger. When Danny first got his tattoo, for example, he showed it to people when he wanted to strike up conversations with them in places like bars. Boss found that his tattoos helped him establish a connection with his students when he was teaching. His tattoos led to positive interactions because “the kids thought it was cool.” In fact, Boss felt as though his tattoo set him apart from other teachers because he “wasn’t just like the plain old, plain old

teacher who doesn't care about what is... hip." Wild Bill explained the reason that he believed tattoos were a great catalyst for establishing a relationship with others.

I think people like to share their artwork. I mean, people like to share good artwork. People like to share good CDs. People have unique artwork on their body and they wanna show it to you. Most of the people who have tattoos are not intimidated by stuff so most of them are outgoing.

Deciding to reveal tattoo(s) to others facilitated the chance to initiate conversations and possibly relationships with other people. Displaying tattoos helped to form a unique bond and sense of belonging among those who also had tattoos. During interactions with others without tattoos, the participants found that showing them their tattoo(s) precipitated conversation.

The Benefits of Tattoo(s)

Study participants tended to believe that tattoos positively influenced their lives and benefitted their overall health, although two individuals reported no tattoo-related benefits. Those who acknowledged benefits believed that tattoo(s) contributed to positive feelings about their bodies, confirmed self-identification, and created a sense of empowerment.

Positive Body Perceptions

Individuals in the study commented that tattoos influenced the way that they viewed and felt about their body. Boss remarked that just a peek at his tattoo while he is working out makes him feel good about his body and "kinda boasts (his) self-esteem a little bit." He told me "say I have on a wife beater [a kind of sleeveless undershirt-type

tank top] and like the wife beater is all white, but then you got the colors on my tattoos that are sticking out that is contrasting against it. I think it looks cool.” He later boasted

When I’m sittin’ at home and everything, I wear tank tops or don’t wear a shirt at all, and I like to look at ‘em when I walk around and in the mirror and everything. It just makes me feel good ‘cuz they’re cool lookin’.

Autumn believed that one of her tattoo indirectly contributed to a positive view of her body. Admitting that she was a “health nut anyway,” Regarding the tattoo on her side, Autumn stated that “I think that I would probably be less likely to get out of shape, knowing that this one [she called ‘just breathe’] is here in an area that could...where I could get extra things [body fat] around there (laughs).”

Self-Identification

Participants reported that tattoos helped them to confirm and solidify their sense of identity. Spring experienced many challenges during her life: a mother who dealt with depression, having to “come out” to her Southern Baptist family, and the deterioration of her first intimate relationship. She viewed those events as contributing in significant ways to the person she became. When she got her first tattoo, Spring commented that “it was a culmination of all this stuff all put together.”

Morgan’s tattoos conveyed a sense of self, grounded in her identity as a NC State alumna.

I was really proud and really proud of my dad [who went to State]. When I went to State, I was really proud and that’s the feeling that I carry. I think he [Mr. Wuf] really embodies that just ferocious, mean...that’s pretty much me (laughs).

Morgan also identified herself as a unique individual. She commented that her tattoos were “three pieces of art that are very different from anything that I’ve ever seen and that gives me a source pride ‘cuz I like being unique and different.” Morgan also shared that “it [tattoos] was part of my process of becoming myself. She mentioned that her third tattoo was a way to reflect her identity.

I like the black swan because it’s different. Darwin actually studied the black swan because it’s only native to Australia. All the other swans are white and these swans are black and different...unique. I always thought about myself. I always felt weird growing up and awkward, but now in my life I really embrace that...being different. That’s really important to me because I don’t like following the flock. It’s calm...it’s serene in it’s natural environment, and I feel that way especially when I’m at home in ... [hometown]. I feel like it’s really my place to be in the world. And that’s what the swan’s like for me.

Tattoos had a powerful effect on Boss as well. Boss expressed that “the reasons why I keep my tattoos is because they are a part of me. I’ve had them for so long; they’re mine (laughs).” He suggests that his tattoos reveal his identity.

I wear who I am on my arm...on my sleeves and everything else because that’s what you see. You see the tattoos; you see everything. You see my family all over me. You see my friends all over me. You see what I stand for all over me.

Empowerment

Tattoos empowered several participants and created a sense of control over their circumstances. Spring’s tattoos contributed to the sense of control she felt in her life,

including the work place. Spring felt getting a very visible tattoo empowered her at her place of employment and established her control over her work environment.

I just...first day came in wide open, you know. So in that way, it was powerful.

‘I’m doing this,’ not that I don’t care what you think, but it’s totally my decision (laughs). And I felt it gave me a teeny bit of power because there’s nothing they can do about it. You know.

Later in our conversation, Spring said that her tattoos increased her confidence.

Maybe it has to do with looking less...not like a women but more of the male side coming out in women ‘cuz males are deemed as more powerful. I don’t know.

That’s not why I did it but I definitely felt more confident. Because I had the balls to get tattoos, I just feel more confident.

No Benefits

Two male participants in the study felt as though their tattoo(s) had no benefits as far as how they felt about themselves or their overall health. Danny adamantly contended that his tattoos had no impact on how he feels about himself. Wild Bill’s comments were similar to those offered by Danny.

No, having tattoos has not affected me in that way at all. It’s just something I just chose to do and I don’t think that it changed my personality or made me think of myself more differently. I mean, I think it was an interesting experience but I don’t think that it changed me. I don’t think it made me more brave or more confident in who I am.

In summary, some but not all participants believed their tattoo(s) contributed positively to their identities or health. Participants for whom tattoos were beneficial stated that their tattoo(s) made them feel good about their bodies, confirmed or reflected their self-identity, or empowered them. It was obvious that having tattoos or being tattooed could have a potentially positive impact on the individual.

Desire to Continue Getting Tattoos

Tattoos Are Like Potato Chips; You Can't Have Just One

The excitement and enthusiasm for tattooing was apparent during conversations with participants. Their passion for tattoos manifested itself in changes in body language and animated facial expressions when they talked about their tattoo(s). They also revealed a desire to continue getting more tattoos. Participants attributed their desire for more tattoos to a tattoo “addiction,” an opportunity to capture and signify meaningful events in their lives, a joyous tattooing experience, and the opportunity to cover a current tattoo.

Tattoo “addiction.” Many participants reported a “natural” affinity for tattoos. In fact, many participants stated that it was easy to become “addicted” to tattoos. Wild Bill joked that the artists put “crack in the ink” to keep people coming back for more tattoos. Later, he communicated, “My first tattoo was supposedly my last tattoo, but you know that what they say, ‘Tattoos are like potato chips; you can’t have just one.’” Danny concurred. He revealed while laughing that “it’s just so easy to start it [getting multiple tattoos].” As Autumn put it, “well, pretty much immediately after I get one, I start thinking about the fact that I would like another one at some point...whenever that might

be.” Morgan brought up this notion when she said, “I think once you get one you just can’t stop.”

Capturing or signifying a meaningful event. Obtaining another tattoo presented another opportunity for participants to document and to capture more important things in their lives. For Wild Bill, his past tattooing experiences were spontaneous. He selected tattoo designs that he saw displayed on the wall of a tattoo parlor because “they were cool.” Wild Bill commented that a future tattoo would be different for him from this point forward. Now, instead of selecting a design off the wall, his future tattoos “would actually have more emotional meaning... in reference to my family and my child.” He credited his change in image selection from “cool” to meaningful to having “more life experiences.” Boss discussed several ideas about his future tattoos. Because of his closeness with his family, Boss constantly planned memorial tattoos for his family. Since some of his mother figures were of advanced age, Boss began thinking about their mortality. Boss lamented, “I think about what I might get if my great-grandmother passes away or if my grandmother passes away what I might get in memorial to them because they’re not goin’ to live forever.”

Although Danny wanted another tattoo, his rationale for another tattoo differed slightly from the reasons given by other participants. Danny stated that any future tattoo would afford him the chance to eliminate via cover-up the presence of his current tattoo, a huge “dragon lady” tattoo between his shoulder blades on his back to get a tattoo that was more meaningful to him.

If anything, I would get this one covered up if I could get a cover up job, and I would change it to something a little more personal. My family crest...I'd take my family crest and then cover it because then at least it would be a little more meaningful than the dragon lady (laughs).

Enjoyable situation. Another reason given by participants regarding their desire for another tattoo had less to do with the tattoo itself, and more to do with the experience. Boss said that getting more tattoos involved "the thrill of getting something that is considered taboo or whatever" even though "it's more accepted now." A few minutes later, he further elaborated, "...it's just the thrill of sittin' somewhere...sittin' in a parlor just getting' this dude or women putting' something on your body that goin' stick forever (laughs). A lifetime of pleasure for an hour or so of pain or whatever (laughs)." Wild Bill attributed his desire for another tattoo to a love of art and an opportunity to meet new people during the tattooing experience.

I think it's 'cuz you're getting a new experience that's interesting, and it's [tattooing] an enjoyable situation. I like getting the body art and I like meeting new people, and I think that once you do that you'll come back for the same experience that you had the first time, or the second time, or the 13th time that you've had a tattoo. You're coming back for the art, and you're coming back for the people...the people that you're exposing yourself to while you're doing it I think it's just something people enjoy, and I think that most people who have tattoos or do get tattoos a lot on a regular basis are pretty interesting people and decent people. And you like hanging out with people like that.

Barriers to More Tattoos

Although all participants acknowledged a desire to obtain more tattoos, several also reported barriers that hindered them from getting another tattoo. The barriers reported included finances, lack of a tattoo design idea, and the negative reaction of significant others.

Finances. Some participants reported that their current financial situation deterred them from obtaining another tattoo. Although Morgan had already planned her next tattoo, a lack of money prevented her from getting it. Boss also encountered economic hardship that prevented him from getting his next tattoo. He traditionally received a tattoo on his birthday every year but was unable to get one to signify his most recent birthday.

Lack of idea. Sometimes the lack of an idea for a meaningful tattoo prevented some participants from getting their next tattoo. Spring said, “I will be getting another one. See, it’s just gotta mean something.” A few minutes later, she commented, “I just haven’t had that... I have a couple of ideas of things that I do want but one of the things that will mean something to me.” Autumn knew that she wanted another tattoo, for example, but was waiting for inspiration. Autumn shared, “I knew I wanted one but I wasn’t exactly sure what, you know. I was waiting for something to like hit me.”

Negative reaction of significant others. The reactions of significant others prevented at least one participant from getting more tattoos even though he wanted more. During both of our interviews, Wild Bill continued to joke about going to get tattoos together. However, the opinions of his wife prevented him from “getting cut.” “I’d like to have more tattoos...yes! I would get more tattoos if I could, but my wife does not really

appeal to them. So, she doesn't mind the ones that I got but she would not want me to have more."

In summary, all participants wanted more tattoos, likening their desire to a tattoo "addiction," the signifying of something meaningful, the opportunity to cover a current tattoo, or the enjoyment of the tattooing experience itself. They disclosed several barriers that prevented them from getting another tattoo, including finances, a lack of a meaningful tattoo design, and the negative reaction of significant others.

Tattooing Advice

As my second interview with the participants concluded, I presented them with one last opportunity to share anything about their experiences regarding tattoos that we had not previously addressed. Several participants used the opportunity to share advice to those individuals who were considering a tattoo. Advice given regarding tattoos and tattooing included: a) consider the permanence of tattoos, b) select a meaningful design, c) research and select the best artist for the type of art desired, and d) ensure the safety of yourself and the artist.

Participants suggested to any person considering a tattoo to think about the permanence associated with tattoos, i.e. tattoos last forever. Deciding to become tattooed was not a casual event or circumstance. Morgan advised, "Take the time to think about 'do I really want this on my body? Can I live with this the rest of my life?'" Autumn communicated,

I would always tell people to probably give it [tattooing] some thought 'cuz it is permanent. Your parents always say that and they're right. You know what I mean. You're never getting that off unless you have the removal thing.

Participants also commented that people considering a tattoo should select a design that was meaningful to them. Participants believed that tattoo should be unique and personal. Autumn commented that people should "just think about it and think about what it means to you and the connection." Morgan commented,

Don't get something because you think it's cool, in fashion. Like how many people got tribal armband tattoos. Now that's played out. Played out. Don't just go and pick out something in the store or go to a website and say I gotta have that. Find something that is unique to you or something that really means something to you.

One participant suggested that someone considering a tattoo must do some research find the best artist for the type of artwork that he/she is considering. Morgan recommended that those interested in a particular kind of tattoo should, "find out who does the best...find a good portrait person if you want a portrait. Find a good color person if you want color."

One participant advocated considering the health risks associated with tattooing in order to ensure the safety of all the parties involved in the tattooing process. Boss shared his thoughts with those considering a tattoo about how to select a place to get tattoo work done.

Just make sure you're clean and don't have any diseases. Don't lie about that stuff. When you go to a tattoo parlor, make sure they're certified. Make sure their health rating is good when you go in there. You don't wanna go anywhere dirty and sketchy.

Participants in the study wanted people thinking about getting a tattoo to consider the following things: remember the permanence of tattoos; tattoo design selection must be meaningful; seek out the best tattoo artist for the type of tattoo desired; and ensure that the individual, the parlor, and the artists are taking the necessary health and safety precautions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported the qualitative findings from two one-on-one interviews with six participants who addressed various aspects of the living with tattoos and the meaning they derived from their tattoo(s) and the tattooing experience. The use of photographs and a lifeline document supplemented the one-on-one interviews into this study. Photographs visually captured the tattoo(s) of the participants and the design and significance of the tattoo(s). The lifeline documents visually depicted the most significant events in the lives of the participants in chronological order. The lifeline provided prompts for discussion with the participants regarding their lived experiences as an individual with a tattoo. By examining the lifeline, I was able to place the tattooing experience within the larger context of the lives of the participants.

Through analysis of the interview transcripts, the photographs, and the lifeline document, themes emerged from the narratives shared by the participants regarding their

lived experiences as an individual with tattoo(s). Themes that emerged included a shift in thinking regarding tattoos, the tattooing experience, meaning of the tattoo, tattoo presentation, the benefits of tattoo(s), desire to continue getting tattoos, and tattooing advice. The emergent themes provided the framework for understanding the experiences of individuals with tattoos, the meanings associated with tattoo(s), and the decision that encompassed the tattooing experience, including addressing the health concerns and adverse reactions associated with tattooing.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Introduction

As the popularity of tattoos continues to increase among adolescents and adults across all socio-economic backgrounds, there is a need for health education professionals and other educators to design and implement effective educational programs to meet the needs of a growing population of people interested in becoming tattooed. Such health program planning and communication requires an understanding of the target population. In the case of tattoo-related programs, insight into the experiences and perceptions of individuals with tattoos is an essential prerequisite to planning and implementation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand tattooing from the perspective of persons who had tattoos. Of particular interest were the meanings that tattoos held for individuals, their decisions and intentions related to the tattooing experience, including health-related issues and concerns associated with tattooing, and the contextual experience of being tattooed.

In order to accomplish the goals of this research study, each of six participants with tattoos, three males and three females, willingly and voluntarily engaged in two in-depth, open-ended interviews. They also completed a lifeline document on which they indicated the major milestones, turning points, and most significant events in their lives. The researcher took photographs of their tattoo(s) in an effort to capture the aesthetic images of their tattoo(s) and then discussed the images with them. The participants were college-educated, English-speaking adults with a least one tattoo. Their ages ranged from 21 to 47 years, and they represented diverse ethnic and sexual orientations.

The Theory of Planned Behavior provided the theoretical framework for this study. The researcher used the Theory of Planned Behavior to inform findings related to the behavior of tattooing. According to Ajzen (1991), the Theory of Planned Behavior includes the individual's attitudes regarding a behavior, subjective normative values, and perceived behavioral control, and intentions. Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control affected intentions, which capture the motivation for engaging in specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Modifying intentions can result in either increasing or delaying engagement in a specific behavior.

Not only does the Theory of Planned Behavior provide a foundation for understanding tattooing behavior, it also may assist health educators and other professionals in developing educational programming strategies that lead to specific outcomes. In the case of individuals under age 18 years, such strategies may contribute to delaying getting a tattoo until age 18 years or older. For all individuals, strategies that lead to increased knowledge and decision-making skills may facilitate individuals being informed tattoo consumers.

Researchers and educators who want to assist in the development of effective strategies for modifying behaviors associated with tattooing can use the findings from this study to guide their efforts. The study also addressed the health-related implications and psychosocial implications related to the tattooing experience. The study provided suggestions for future research regarding tattoos and the tattooing experience.

Discussion of Research Findings

During the course of this study, participants presented their stories regarding their experiences as individuals with tattoos. This segment of the chapter presents the major themes that emerged from the study. These themes included: a shift in thinking regarding tattoos, the tattooing experience, the meaning of tattoo(s), tattoo presentation, the benefits of tattoo(s), desire to continue getting tattoos, and tattooing advice. In this section, the researcher will present a synthesis of the findings and discuss the findings within the context of existing literature and the Theory of Planned Behavior.

A Shift in Thinking Regarding Tattoos

The participants in this study revealed that social perceptions about individuals with tattoos resulted from long-standing gender role expectations. Participants agreed that society viewed males with tattoos as tough and strong, both of which reflect positive masculine traits. Bell (1999) discussed how tattoos were associated with masculinity because of the stereotyped image of an individual with tattoos and the pain endured to get the tattoo. In their examination of reasons that people got tattooed, Kang and Jones (2007) stated that men typically got tattoos to reinforce masculine gender roles.

Participants also contended that society tended to characterize negatively males with tattoos as non-conformist or criminals. DeMello (1993) examined how tattoos signified class and status among convicts. Once outside of prison, DeMello (1993) found that prison tattoos conveyed meanings associated with imprisonment and affiliation with criminal activity and had a profound effect on ex-convicts after they left from prison.

Participants reported no positive social views of women with tattoos. They reported that society saw women with tattoos as rebelling against feminine gender roles. Specifically, participants believed that society associated women with visible lower back tattoos with promiscuity. Research (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn, 2004; Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008) supported participants' assessment of the negative implications of tattooing for women. Resenhoeft et al., 2008, for example, found that individuals viewed women with tattoos as more physically unattractive when compared to women without tattoos. They also observed that study participants viewed women with tattoos as less caring than women without tattoos. Armstrong, Roberts, Koch, Saunders, and Owens (2008) reported that most women sought tattoo removal because of the negative experiences and stigma that they experienced because of having a tattoo.

The participants also observed the growing popularity of tattoos in America and linked that popularity to the commercialization of tattoos. As Kosut (2006) stated, "America has become a tattooed nation." The participants in this study credited the media and celebrities such as athletes and actors for influencing the popularity of tattooing and garnering more acceptance of the once-deviant act of being tattooed. Several participants equated the surge in tattoo popularity to fashion trends. In his research that studied the popularity of tattoos and body piercings, Sweetman (1999) reported that tattoos were decorative to some individuals and functioned as an accessory for several women that he interviewed.

The commercialization of tattoos may account for the growing number of middle and upper class professionals that acquired tattoos. Participants in this study were

working professionals who had professional friends with tattoos. Research by Johnson (2006) revealed that tattoo artists reported tattooing people from all lifestyles.

For participants, tattoos were much more than just a tattooed image. They regarded their tattoo(s) as artwork that captured different parts of their personalities or life experiences. During the interviews, the participants used the terms, “artwork” or “art” and “tattoo” interchangeably. The existing literature supported the participants' thinking regarding the changed “status” of tattoos from taboo to art. Bell (1999) discussed how tattooing had changed over the last fifty years, with the creation of a tattoo now seen as a collaborative effort between the artist and the person getting the tattoo with the resulting product a piece of art for the tattoo owner. In her study, DeMello (1999) reported that many middle-class individuals classified their tattoo(s) as “artwork,” in part as a way to distinguish them from the traditional “biker tattoo.”

The shift in thinking regarding tattoos showed how society as a whole has begun to view tattooing less as deviant and more as acceptable. The changing demographics of individuals with tattoos from historically working class people to professionals reflected a change in the attitudes regarding tattoos, with professionals having a more positive view of tattoos. The Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that social acceptance of tattoos will continue as long as people hold positive attitudes about them and subjective norms no longer classify tattoos as images associated with marginalized groups of people.

The Tattooing Experience

Participants' revealed that the tattooing experience was not a single act (the act of getting a tattoo) but was, instead, comprised of all the events that ultimately led to acquiring a tattoo. Decisions regarding the purchase of a tattoo tended to occur long before the individual sat in a chair to be tattooed. Consistent with participants' descriptions, Irwin (2001) observed that deciding to get a tattoo involved finding the right artist, shop, and perfect design.

Armstrong et al. (2004) reported that barriers to getting a tattoo included pain, risk of disease, and reactions to being tattooed and the tattooed image by significant others. When participants believed that they controlled their decisions, they went through with the actual tattooing process. Specifically, when participants believed that they could trust the major elements involved in the tattooing experience, particularly the expertise and safety practices of the tattoo artist, they followed through with getting a tattoo.

While some participants reported physical concerns such as excessive bleeding or a rash at the tattoo site, they generally reported no health concerns related to infectious disease or complications related to tattooing. In response to what they perceived to be safe practices at the parlor by the artists or others, participants felt confident that they would not contract any type of infectious disease or experience adverse reactions after getting a tattoo. Consistent with findings in the present study, Armstrong et al. (2002) reported that individuals with and without tattoos believed that health risks such as Hepatitis B and allergic reactions were not problematic. Huxley and Grogan (2005) found that 20% of participants with tattoos in their study never considered health risks prior to

getting a tattoo, showing that health concerns were not a factor in deciding to get a tattoo. Participants in this study reported procedures such as the use of surgical gloves and new needles, and frequent sanitizing or disinfecting actions to be signs that the artists and parlor were safe. Like the participants in this study, Huxley and Grogan (2005) reported that individuals getting tattoos assessed safety risks associated with tattooing by observing the practices of the tattoo artist to determine the cleanliness of the parlor.

The participants in this study rarely went alone to a tattoo parlor for the purpose of being tattooed. In this respect, getting a tattoo tended to be a social event that was shared with significant others. Research by Fisher (2002) found that tattooing was a peer activity in which 64% of people who sought to be tattooed brought a friend or family member with them. In their study of the tattooing practices of cadets attending an all male university in the United States, Coe, Harmon, Verner, and Tonn (1993) reported that tattooing experiences were commonly shared with significant others, who planned as a group to get tattoos and went together to be tattooed as a form of “male bonding.” For some participants in the present study, being tattooed represented an opportunity to re-establish the broken bonds of relationship or strengthen an existing bond between the individual getting the tattoo and his/her “support” person. Thus, the experience of getting tattooed potentially held meaning beyond the application of the tattooed image itself.

Many different decisions and actions comprised the tattooing experience for participants in this study. Participants’ decisions about their tattooing experience helped to create in them a feeling of control over the situation that preceded and ultimately led to being tattooed. The Theory of Planned Behaviors supports the notion that a greater sense

of perceived control increases the likelihood of engaging in behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the case of tattooing, as long as participants had control over their tattooing experience, they went ahead and got a tattoo. In this case, control included overcoming concerns and the pain related to the tattooing experience.

Meaning of the Tattoo

The participants in this study reported numerous reasons for getting a tattoo. Their decisions to be tattooed resulted from a childhood fascination with tattoos; pride in their accomplishments or occupation; desire to memorialize a loved one, marking a milestone in their lives, or as a reminder of a personal goal or life lesson, or because tattoos were “cool” and looked good.

The research literature reflected some of the participants’ reasons for becoming tattooed. Like the participants in this study, Coe et al. (1993) found that the participants in his study got tattoos reflecting their pride in their particular occupation. Johnson (2006) reported that a reason for tattooing including a desire to honor a loved one who had died or to simply express affection for that individual. Sometimes tattoos served as permanent reminders of some important experience (Johnson, 2006). According to Irwin (2001), the first tattoo that a person acquired often served as a reminder of life experiences, relationships, personal milestones, or growth gained through life experiences.

The aesthetic appeal of tattoos also contributed to participants’ decisions to get a tattoo. Johnson (2006) reported that women that he interviewed enjoyed having tattoos for aesthetic reasons. Kosut (2006) presented the use of the body as a living artistic

medium using the skin-as-canvas metaphor. For many individuals in this study, the connection between tattoo and meaning created a sense of awe because of the deeper connection the participants felt for their tattoo(s). Likewise, Johnson (2006) stated that tattoos had the ability to reach into the soul of individuals and affect the way they intended to lead their lives.

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, intentions significantly influenced the likelihood that a person would engage in a specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). An understanding of the motivations informing individuals' decisions to get a tattoo may be useful in predicting the likelihood that a person would actually go through with the act. Particularly for underage individuals, understanding their intentions may provide an opportunity to modify their behavioral intent in order to assist them to delay getting a tattoo until they became adults and thus legally able to become tattooed.

Participants' life experiences and personality characteristics played a significant role in determining the design of the tattoo(s) they selected. The tattoos they chose or designed included representations of first loves, symbols of a personally meaningful concept, life journeys, family connections, ambitions, allegiance to a group, or aesthetic imagery. Tattoos provided an opportunity for participants to display characteristics, feelings, and experiences that were unique to them. For example, several participants in the present study found meaning in past experiences such as health problems or life trials and expressed these meanings in their tattoo(s). In this manner, their tattoo(s) marked the day-to-day experiences that defined the participants. Tattoos allowed participants to overcome the limitations that imposed on them by physical problems or societal pressure.

They also had the power to reflect a sense of self only gained through experience and personal comfort with ones self.

Bell (1999) found that individuals with tattoos selected images that were symbolic, honored family, or suggested an association with a specific group. Irwin (2001) discovered that tattoo designs selected by individuals often represented their achievements or symbolized their attributes. Whether it was a 24-hour designing session or making a design hanging on the wall more personal, the tattoo(s) that the participants in this study selected represented who they were. It is possible that the personal nature of tattoos and the personalization of every image they selected to be tattooed led participants to report they did not regret being tattooed. In any case, their lack of regret was in keeping with Vail's (1999) notion that tattoos were part of the owner, not easily removed from his or her identity.

Regardless of the motivations or the designs, tattoo(s) served as a way for participants in the present study to convey visually at least a part of their identity to the outside world. Tattoos captured characteristics of the participants' personalities and presented them outwardly, typically reflecting the individuals' experiences. According to Irwin (2001), tattoos had the ability to display visually the favorite characteristics of their owners. The participants in the present study used tattoos to present themselves to the world reflected. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), positive attitudes regarding a specific behavior increases the chance of engaging in the behavior. Since participants viewed tattooing as a positive experience and tattoos as meaningful, they may be more likely to get another tattoo.

Tattoo Presentation

Participants in this study reported that, while tattoos increasingly gained acceptance over several years prior to conducting this study, they were still very aware of possible negative reactions from others when they revealed their usually hidden tattoo(s). Therefore, the decision to make visible their tattoo(s) to others was not a decision taken likely by participants. The participants carefully scrutinized the circumstances before presenting their tattoo(s) to others. Bell (1999) commented that there was a time and place where tattoos were appropriate. Individuals with tattoos were most comfortable around others who shared their love of tattooing and tattooed images.

Based on the participants' data, tattoo(s) placement on the body was a strategic decision since it would affect their control of when and under what circumstances the outside world would view their tattooed image(s). According to Coe et al. (1993), male cadets placed their tattoo(s) in areas covered by uniforms or hidden by certain types of clothing. Concealed tattoos had the potential to become visible but only when the owner made the decision to reveal them. All participants in the present study reported that they concealed their tattoo(s) as much as possible in the workplace. If the tattoo was visible to others in the workplace, then individuals avoided drawing attention to their tattoo(s).

Kang and Jones (2007) reported that many individuals covered their tattoo(s) when seeking employment and while in the professional workplace. Participants in this study were apprehensive about displaying their tattoo(s) in a professional setting and probably with good reason. Bekhor, Bekhor, and Gandrabur (1995) surveyed employers regarding employees' visible tattoos. They found that individuals' ability to acquire a job

in an office setting decreased by 70% or more if the individual had visible tattoos. Places deemed appropriate to reveal publically tattoos included locations such as beaches and swimming pools.

Due to the perceived personal nature of tattoos, most individuals in the present study reported sharing their tattoo(s) only with those who were important to them since they considered tattoos personal and not meant for the world to see. Women shared their tattoo(s) with others only under the condition of a trusting relationship. This might suggest that women were cautious about the possible negative feedback that they might receive as a result of exposing their tattoo(s) in public. As Armstrong et al. (2008) suggested many members of society still viewed women with tattoos in a negative light.

Understanding how participants perceived other people's beliefs and attitudes regarding tattoos resulted from exploring the circumstances in which they revealed their tattoo(s) with others. Several participants in the study reported no negative experiences as a result of sharing their tattoo(s) with others, though that may be the result of carefully choosing to whom and when they would reveal their tattoo(s). Using the Theory of Planned Behavior to understand perceived norms about tattooing might provide educators and researchers with insight about the likelihood of an individual getting a tattoo or getting another tattoo. For example, if an individual considering a tattoo perceives that he/she will experience negative treatment because of a tattoo, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that the individual will be less likely to become tattooed.

The Benefits of Tattoo(s)

Participants in the present study reported some anticipated positive consequences of being tattooed. Their data revealed that tattoos had the ability to contribute to positive feelings about their bodies, provide of means of establishing self-identity and a positive self-image, and create a sense of self-control in their lives. In terms of enhancing self-image, Kang and Jones (2007) reported that women used tattoos to overcome feelings of unattractiveness that they experienced in their daily lives. Among participants, tattoos helped to confirm and solidify a sense of self-identity. In other words, tattoos provided a means of wearing one's identity on one's sleeve. Bell (1999) affirmed the ability of tattoos to reflect a person's identity. Irwin (2001) stated that people were attracted to tattoos because they fulfilled a person's desire for a specific identity.

Tattoos created a sense of empowerment for individuals to help them to establish a sense of control over seemingly impossible to control life experiences. Participants in the present study used their tattoo(s) to symbolize freedom from the societal constraints imposed on them. Because of the permanence of tattoos, participants saw acquiring a tattoo as one aspect of their lives over which they had control. The tattoo artists that Johnson ((2006) studied contended that some people decided to get a tattoo in order to "claim themselves" and establish control over a situation.

The findings from the present study suggest that the benefits associated with tattoos experienced by the participants in the study contributed to positive attitudes they held about tattoos and the tattooing experience. As long as participants viewed tattoos as a positive aspect of their lives, the intention to get tattoos should still exist. The Theory of

Planned Behavior informs outcomes associated with the benefits of tattooing, including intention to get another tattoo.

Desire to Continue Getting Tattoos

According to participants, one of the most unanticipated consequences of tattooing that they experienced was the development of a desire to get another tattoo. The desire reflected for one participant a tattoo “addiction.” Participants offered reasons for this urge that ranged from enjoying the artistic aspect of tattoos to using tattoos to convey personal stories and beliefs that accompanied their experiences. The existing literature supports the difficulty that individuals might have stopping at just one tattoo (Armstrong, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Vail, 1999). Johnson (2006), for example, found that one participant in his study instantly wanted another tattoo as soon as her first tattoo was completed. His participants shared that they often started planning for their next tattoo while still sitting in the tattoo chair. Armstrong et al. (2009) reported that women who sought tattoo removal expressed concerns about becoming addicted to tattoos and thus elected to have a tattoo removed rather than add to their current collection of tattoos. Vail (1999) reported that so-called “collectors” were constantly making decisions about the addition of their next tattoo.

Although the participants in the present study did not classify themselves as collectors, they reported a desire to continue getting tattoos. The desire to get more tattoos indirectly revealed the participants’ attitudes about tattoos and the tattoo experience. Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior to their behavior, participants’ strong intention to get another tattoo and their positive attitudes regarding tattoos would

suggest an increased likelihood they would get another tattoo. Participants reported wanting another tattoo; however, many barriers prevent them from moving forward with their desire. The Theory of Planned Behavior would suggest that barriers reduce perceived behavioral control over tattooing, which reduced the intention to get another tattoo.

Tattooing Advice

Participants wanted share the result of their experiences and knowledge about tattoos and tattooing in the form of advice for those considering a tattoo. Participants felt compelled to teach future “tattooees” about lessons they had learned in order to help recipients avoid some of the same issues that they had encountered. They were particularly adamant that individuals needed to select meaningful tattoos and make the tattooing experience meaningful. Participants highlighted the importance of examining the consequences of tattooing such as the permanence of tattoos and wanted recipients to be sure the tattoo was something that they could live with the rest of their lives.

Armstrong et al. (2008) found that reason given for tattoo removal included growing tired of the tattoo and being embarrassed about being tattooed. Participants wanted potential tattoo buyers to be informed consumers about all aspects of the process.

Summary

The present study found that tattoos, while growing in popularity in American culture, played a significant role in the lives of the participants. The study revealed that getting a tattoo was an action-oriented process that required many decisions along the way. Decisions made in preparation for being tattooed resulted from experiences and

personal preferences. Although some participants had initially chosen personally meaningful tattoo designs and other did not, all participants personalized their designs and reported a meaningful tattooing experience before, during, and after the application of the tattoo. While individuals had different motivations for getting tattoos, the end result was the same: a unique piece of artwork that reflected the personalities of the participants.

Because of the personal nature of tattoos, participants carefully selected the circumstances under which they would reveal their tattoo(s) to others. While owning a tattoo can potentially be negatively perceived by others, tattoos were beneficial to the participants by contributing to their self-esteem, positive body image, sense of identity, and sense of empowerment. Because of the meanings they associated with their tattoo(s) and the personal connection they felt with their tattoo(s), participants expressed a desire to continue to get tattoos in order to capture various aspects of themselves or their lives. Individuals with tattoos believed that it was important to consider the long-term consequences associated with tattooing and felt that people considering a tattoo should be sure that the tattoos they selected were meaningful to them. For the participants in this study, tattoos had a positive impact on their lives.

The Theory of Planned Behavior provided a foundation for understanding why people engaged in tattooing behaviors. Ajzen (1991) stated that human behavior resulted from attitudes, subjective norms, and attitudes influencing intentions, which affected behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior provided a framework for understanding the experiences of the individuals in this study. By understanding the meanings associated

with tattoos and the decisions involved in the tattooing experience, researchers will be able to understand the attitudes and beliefs held about tattoos, which can help determine the likelihood a person will get a tattoo or continue to get tattoos.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this qualitative study. This study needed a purposive sample of participants. As a result, the findings were not generalizable to a larger population of individuals with tattoos. Participants who voluntarily choose to participate may be atypical of all individuals with tattoos. However, the findings associated with the study provided insight into the lived experiences of individuals, including the meaning(s) associated with tattoo(s) and the decisions related to the tattooing experience from the perspective of English-speaking adults at least 18 years of age who have experienced similar life circumstances.

A lack of diversity was another limitation of this study. Because the sample was comprised of college-educated individuals, diverse experiences resulting from different socio-economic conditions was lacking in this study. The participants were between the ages of 27 to 41 years. The experiences of traditional college-age students and older adults were not captured in this study. These groups of individuals may have different values, perspectives, and experiences than the group of participants selected.

The method of data collection used may have limited the study. Because the interviews occurred in a comfortable, private, one-on-one setting, participants may have felt obligated to answer questions in a manner that they felt was pleasing or “correct.” While I explained that there were no right or wrong answers, participants may have

shared their perspectives or experiences in a manner that was contrary to the way they truly felt.

Finally, my knowledge and experiences regarding tattoos and the tattooing experience may have influenced the responses of the participants. While I let the participants teach me the language they used to describe their experiences, the possibility existed that I used my own language, resulting in my influence on how participants voiced various components of their experiences. Although I documented my biases and assumptions in my journal, the findings of this study were within the context of my interpretation. Another researcher may have interpreted the data in a different manner.

Health-Related and Psychosocial Implications

Health-Related Implications

Understanding and exploring the meaning of tattoos and the aspects that comprised the tattooing experience for individuals within the context of their lives is essential for the design of public health educational programs tailored to various populations. By gaining insight into the experiences shared by individuals with tattoos, educators can create programs that comprehensively address issues of tattooing.

Armstrong and Murphy (1997) advocated the development of health education programs that address issues of tattooing start in elementary school. However, health education programs that address tattoos and tattooing issues need to target adolescents and college students since these populations are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including tattooing, that lead to injury or death (Roberts & Ryan, 2002). Programs for adolescents should aim to delay the decision to get a tattoo until adulthood since law

prohibits tattoo artists from tattooing individuals under age 18 years. The message for adolescents should include how to reduce the risk of infectious disease by receiving tattoos in a regulated shop and how adolescents need to be at least 18 years of age to be eligible to get a tattoo at a reputable tattoo parlor. It is important that adolescents understand about health concerns regarding tattooing, including the problem of infectious disease.

Tattoo-focused educational programs could incorporate the following components: health-related issues, selection of parlor and artists, and post-tattoo care. The health-related issues included in the program could address things such as risks associated with tattooing including the potential transmission of infectious disease. This component of the program could also discuss the possible allergic reactions and medical complications that can result from tattooing.

The findings in this study showed that participants reported a lack of concern about the health-related issues associated with tattoos. Individuals often made assessments about the safety of tattooing based on the appearance of the tattoo parlor. In the component of the program that deals with the selection of the parlor and artist, educators could provide individuals with information about protocols for assessing parlors and tattoo artists. There also is an opportunity to develop pamphlets or brochures that provide individuals with questions to ask the artist about the practices of the parlor, such how artists dispose of waste material, compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations, and the use of disposable instruments or the presence of an autoclave to sterilize instruments. A brochure could provide tips about

how to determine the parlor and artists credibility by asking questions about membership in Alliance of Professional Tattooist (APT), OSHA certifications, and other forms of licensure. A brochure could also provide suggestions of questions to ask about the artist's experience and qualifications. The use of videos could help to explain how to research tattoo parlors and artists.

The post-tattoo care component could provide information about how to take care of tattoos after application to increase the chances of proper healing and provide information about the circumstances in which to see medical assistance if complications arise. Although health programs could continue to emphasize the possible health risks associated with tattoos, programs could incorporate components to foster “informed consumers” of tattoos.

When individuals are considering a tattoo, health educators could emphasize the permanence of tattoos and the consequences of tattoo permanence. Educators could highlight the fact that bodies change over time. Individuals need to realize that as the body changes so will the tattoo. The possible result is a tattoo that has lost its original shape and size, resulting in a distorted tattoo. Educators could also address how personalities may change while a tattoo remains the same. Programs could have components that remind individuals how the meaning of tattoos can change over time.

Health educators have the opportunity to understand the motivations and factors associated with the tattooing experience within Theory of Planned Behavior framework. Using the Theory of Planned Behavior as a guide, health educators can engage in dialogue with individuals who are considering a tattoo and determine the likelihood that

they will actually get a tattoo. By understanding the person's attitudes regarding tattoos and their perceived situational control, health educators may understand the likelihood of getting a tattoo and design programs to foster informed consumers of tattoos.

Health educators have an opportunity to become advocates for establishing uniform tattooing regulations. A need exists to establish consistent nationally recognized tattooing regulations (Armstrong & Murphy, 1997). Raymond, Halcón, and Pirie (2003) examined the regulations and practices of several tattoo parlors. They found that the safety practices among the tattoo parlors within the same state varied by city because the application of ordinances was inconsistent. Because health educators have access to diverse populations of people, they can educate politicians at the federal, state, and local levels regarding the potential risks associated with tattooing and explain how uniform regulations and enforcement can reduce the risks. Health educators can organize a grassroots movement aimed at notifying agencies such as FDA on the increasing the urgency of studying the chemicals used to comprise the pigments used in tattooing. Collaborations between health educators and other community-based organizations that focus on health-related issues could bring attention to the inconsistencies in practices and regulations among tattoo parlors.

Psychosocial Implications

This study revealed that social perceptions regarding individuals with tattoos were socially engrained and at times hard to overcome. It is important to examine the social attitudes and beliefs about people with tattoos in order to understand the obstacles that

individuals with tattoos may encounter in their daily lives. Examining social attitudes also provides a chance to document changes in social values associated with tattoos.

Educational programs could raise awareness about the negative social consequences that individuals with tattoos can face in their lives and prepare individuals considering a tattoo for how to address the various reactions that they may encounter. Educational programs could emphasize the need for individuals to consider carefully the tattoo design and placement on the body since both design and placement affect the reactions of others. A component of any educational program about tattoos could address the potential professional and financial limitations that can result from having a readily visible tattoo.

While tattoo-related educational programs undoubtedly benefit adolescents, the message could also target college students. College students need to understand how others perceive individuals with tattoos and how perceptions can affect their career success. Females also need to be aware of how tattoo placement can affect other's perception of them. Misconceptions held by individuals may affect how women with tattoos are treated and can result in unwanted attention. In addition to risk reduction messages, the goal of such education could include increasing the awareness of people who are considering a tattoo about possible negative reactions that they may encounter in their personal and professional lives. The program could also provide strategies for coping with possible negative reactions.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings from this study, an opportunity exists to expand the existing literature by focusing on several areas for future research. While quantitative data has traditionally examined the relationship between tattooing and other risk-taking behaviors among adolescents, researchers may consider using qualitative methods to explore tattooing among adolescents. Since it is illegal for parlors to tattoo an individual under the age of 18 years in the United States, it would be of interest to understand the conditions under which adolescents obtained their tattoo(s). The benefits of examining the tattoo practices adolescents may provide an opportunity to educate this population about the risks associated with tattoos obtained in less than optimal conditions.

The participants in the study reported that tattoos had become more mainstream because of the commercialization of tattoos. It may be beneficial for researchers to examine the role that the media has played in the surging popularity of tattooing among all groups of people. Beyond Hollywood celebrities, musicians, and athletes with tattoos, there is a need to examine how advertisements use tattoos to sell products or messages. It is also important to understand how the media portrays individuals with tattoos in advertisements and to what extent media's portrayals contribute to misconceptions about individuals with tattoos. Researchers may specifically want to explore how the use of temporary tattoos influences children's views of tattoos. Researchers may consider the use of a longitudinal study to assess the relationship between the use of temporary tattoos among children and the possession of tattoos later in life.

This study identified both benefits and barriers associated with tattooing. Further research could seek to explore the health benefits and risks of tattooing by studying populations such as survivors of medical illnesses or survivors of assault or accidents where individuals feel a need to “reclaim” their body. Researchers could also explore the phenomenon of prison tattooing and the potential benefits and barriers that tattooing has had on prisoners in an environment that can stifle creativity and self-expression.

The participants in this study did not report or discuss concerns about their tattoo(s) and the aging process. Research could investigate how individuals’ perceptions of their tattoo(s) change over time. Researchers could use longitudinal studies to examine the attitudes of a cohort of individuals with tattoo(s) over time from college until their 70’s or 80’s. Researchers could also retrospectively survey older individuals with tattoos to determine how their perceptions and meanings of their tattoo(s) persisted or changed over time. Researchers could also use qualitative methods to explore individuals’ tattoo-related perceptions and meanings over time.

There is an opportunity to expand upon the existing research that examines the association between having tattoos and personality characteristics. Some studies have examined the relationship between the presence of body art and personality characteristics among college students (Forbes, 2001; Skegg, Nada-Raja, Paul, & Skegg, 2007). Researchers could design studies that examined the personality traits of individuals who obtained their first tattoos after the age of 30. It may be of interest to compare the personality characteristics of adults over 30 with tattoos with college-aged students who have tattoos.

Because tattooing regulations originate at the state and local but not federal level, qualitative researchers could design studies to explore the regulations and regulation adherence by tattoo parlors. Researchers may seek to gain an understanding regarding the safety practices of tattoo parlors and artists. There is an opportunity to examine the perspectives of tattoo artists and their perceived role in ensuring the safety of their clients and themselves as well as how artists feel about government regulation of their profession. By studying several different parlors within a concentrated area, researchers could determine the regulation practices within a geographical area. Research could also assess how artists perspectives about tattooing regulations and enforcement.

Findings from this study revealed that women participants were more selective compared to men regarding revealing their tattoo(s) to other individuals. Women had to feel a sense of trust before they revealed their hidden tattoo(s) to another person. Males in this study did not discuss these concerns. The findings present implications for further research in terms of the role of gender and social norms in tattooing. Researchers have an opportunity to investigate how women and men view their tattoo(s) with the context of traditional gender role expectations

Because the participants in the present study revealed their desire to continue getting tattoos, it may be beneficial to expand research efforts to understand the motivations and reasons that individuals continue to get tattoos after receiving their first tattoo. Research studies may want to explore how people think about collecting tattoos.

Summary

The need to express one's personal identity probably has existed in humans since the beginning of time. Inscribing the body is one of the oldest practices known to humankind (Braverman, 2006). Although the findings from this study are not generalizable to a larger population, the findings provide insight into the lived experiences of individuals with tattoos, including the meaning(s) associated with tattoo(s) and the decisions related to the tattooing experience from the perspective of English-speaking college-educated adults at least 18 years old. Participants acknowledged that there was a changing in thinking regarding tattoos, leading to tattoo visibility, and the commercialization of tattoos.

The narratives shared by the participants revealed that deciding to obtain a tattoo was complex and involved much consideration. Individuals had to consider criteria for selecting a parlor and an artist, the design selection and its meaning, the pain, the possible risks, the aftercare, and how the reactions of others. Although the participants acknowledged the potential risks associated with tattoos, most individuals reported that they did not have any concerns regarding the spread of infectious diseases during the tattooing experience. Regardless of the motivations for getting a tattoo, the participants wanted to ensure that their tattoo(s) were individualized and unique to them, a piece of art that elicited pride in its owner. The decision to present his/her tattoo with others was a strategic decision made by the participants in which they had to consider the possible reactions to their tattoo(s). Participants revealed the power that tattoos hold for them. Tattoos had the power to: establish a sense of belonging among others with tattoos while

serving as the topic of conversations among individuals without tattoos, create a sense of identity; promote a stronger self-esteem, and empower with a greater sense of control in the lives of the individuals. Although the participants reported the desire to continue getting tattoos, they offered specific considerations before deciding to get a tattoo.

The Theory of Planned Behavior can provide the framework to examine and understand the motivations and thoughts regarding the decision to obtain a tattoo. Using the constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior, educators can design programs that address attitudes about tattoos, the subjective norms held by the person with a tattoo or considering a tattoo, as well as understanding the perceived control over the tattooing experience. By understanding the person's intention who is considering a tattoo and their sense of perceived control, health educators can gauge the likelihood someone will obtain a tattoo and provide programs that alter the decision to obtain a tattoo for those who are underage or train all people to become informed consumers of tattoos.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals with Tattoos

Research Question: What are the lived experiences of tattooed individuals and the meaning they derive from their tattoos?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experiences as a person with tattoos beginning anywhere you feel comfortable.
2. Tell me the story of the tattoo(s) that are most important to you.
 - a. What were the circumstances in which you obtained the tattoo(s)?
3. What did you think about when choosing the tattoo shop/parlor that you use/used?
 - a. How did you make decision to use the tattoo shop/parlor?
 - b. Did you have any health concerns?
 - i. If so, what were they?
 - c. What health problems have you experienced as a result of your tattoo(s)?
4. Please describe what the tattooing experience itself was/is like for you.
5. How did your tattoo(s) impact how you felt about yourself?
 - a. How did you feel about yourself before getting your tattoo(s)?
 - b. How did you feel about yourself after getting your tattoo(s)?
6. How does (do) your tattoos(s) contribute to the way you feel about your body?
7. How did you decide where to place the tattoo(s) on your body?

8. How have your perceptions of your tattoo (s) changed over time?
9. Under what circumstances (if any) would you have your tattoo(s) removed?
10. What differences (if any) have noticed in how people treat you as a result of your tattoo(s)?

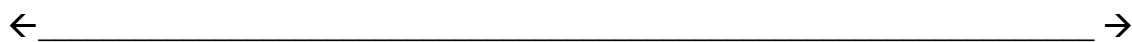
Final question: Is there anything else you want to share about your tattoos or your experiences as an individual living with tattoos that we have not talked a

APPENDIX B: LIFELINE DOCUMENT

Please indicate the important times, events, transitions, and milestones in your life (and your approximate age or year they occurred) along this line.

Birth

Today



APPENDIX C: PHOTOGRAPHIC RELEASE FORM

Title of Research Study: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals with Tattoos

PHOTOGRAPHIC RELEASE FORM**Consent and Release**

I hereby give my consent to East Carolina University to permission to prepare, use, reproduce, publish, copyright, distribute and/or display photographic images of my tattoo(s) without capturing my likeness, created as part of the ***Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals with Tattoos*** research project. The photographic images of my tattoo (s) will be associated with my assigned pseudonym (alias). Any photograph or any audiovisual illustration may be used without my prior examination of the finished product.

By signing below, I acknowledge the following: I have read all of the above information, asked questions and have received satisfactory answers in areas I did not understand. (A copy of this signed and dated consent form will be given to the person signing this form as the participant or as the participant authorized representative.)

I hereby release, discharge, and agree to hold harmless all the parties to whom this consent is given from any liability whatsoever and agree that this consent and waiver will not be made the basis of a future claim of any kind against staff and administration of East Carolina University.

Participant Name (printed or typed)

Signature of Participant

Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Researcher's Contact Info: Tesha Lucas; East Carolina University, 919-880-3337.
 Research Supervisor's Contact Information: Dr. Sharon Knight, College of Health
 Education and Promotion; East Carolina University, 252-328-4637.

APPENDIX D: CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Research Study: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals with Tattoos

Principal Investigator: Tesha Lucas

Institution: East Carolina University

Address: c/o Dr. Sharon Knight, East Carolina University, Department of Health

Education & Promotion, Minges 79, Greenville NC 27858.

Telephone #: 919-880-3337

INTRODUCTION

You have been asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Tesha Lucas. In order to participate in the study, you must possess at least one tattoo and be willing to contribute to an understanding of individuals with tattoos. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and understand feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions associated with the experience of living as an individual with a tattoo. This study also seeks to explore the meaning that tattoos hold for those individuals who have them.

PLAN AND PROCEDURES

You are asked to participate in two (2) one-on-one interviews that, with your permission, will be audiotaped. Prior to the first interview, you will be asked to complete a lifeline document that highlights the major life events and transitions in your life. During the first interview, you will be asked to talk about your life experiences as an individual with a tattoo. You will also be asked to discuss your most significant tattoo(s) and the meaning that tattoos hold for you. During your discussion about your tattoo(s), the researcher will photograph your tattoo(s) with your permission. The second interview will explore additional questions associated with your experiences as an individual with a tattoo. If you choose to volunteer to participate in this study, your responses during both interviews will be audio-recorded in order to accurately capture your perspectives on living as an individual with tattoos. The researcher will also document your comments by means of handwritten notes. Pictures of your tattoos will also be taken with your permission for use during the interviews and for later use in publications associated with

Version date:

Participant's initials

this study. In order to maintain your anonymity, you will be assigned a pseudonym (alias) to use instead of your real name. The pseudonym will be the identifier in the study. The researcher anticipates that your total participation will require no more than two (2) hours per interview session, for a total of no more than four (4) hours.

The researcher will transcribe the audio-recorded data from both interviews and will analyze, synthesize and write a report written report. It is possible that the data provided by the one-on-one interviews, your lifeline and the photographs of your tattoos may be combined with data from other one-on-one interviews and published or presented. Your name will never be associated with the data; pseudonyms will be the only identifiers associated with the data in this study. Any additional identifying information will be changed in order to protect your anonymity.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Any risks associated with this study are anticipated to be minimal. You may experience some emotional discomfort due to recalling previous life experiences that were distressful and unpleasant. The discomfort should not be significant. Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and can be terminated at any time.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

There are numerous potential benefits associated with this study. You may derive some benefit from your study participation as a result of having an opportunity to reflect upon tattooing and the meaning that your tattoos hold for you. The experiences and perceptions that you share will contribute to researchers' understanding insight into tattoos and living as a person with a tattoo. This study will also help health educators design more effective programs targeted to those interested in tattoos.

SUBJECT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS

Your privacy will be maintained in this study. In order to participate in the study, you must be a willingly volunteer. You will be asked to use a pseudonym (alias) during the interviews. Your name will not be associated with any data obtained during this study. The principal investigator is the only person who will be collecting the data. She and her thesis committee members may be involved in the analysis of data but all identifying information will have been removed from the data. All information collected during the study will be stored in a locked safe for three years. The principal investigator will be the

Version date:

Participant's initials

only person with access to the locked safe. After three years, the recordings, photographs, and signed informed consent forms will be destroyed.

Any information obtained for this study in the form of records and data may be inspected by my faculty supervisor, Dr. Sharon Knight, members of my thesis committee, and/or the East Carolina University and Medical Center Institution Review Board. The previously mentioned individuals and groups will keep your information confidential as permitted by law.

COSTS OF PARTICIPATION

There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participating in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to skip or ignore any questions that you wish. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

PERSONS TO CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS

The investigators will be available to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the investigator, Tesha Lucas, at phone numbers 919-919-880-3337 (days, nights and weekends). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Chair of the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board at phone number 252-744-2914 (days) and/or the ECU Risk Management Office at 252-328-6858.

Version date:

Participant's initials

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Title of research study: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals with Tattoos

I have read all of the above information, asked questions and have received satisfactory answers in areas I did not understand. (A copy of this signed and dated consent form will be given to the person signing this form as the participant or as the participant authorized representative.)

Participant's Name (PRINT)	Signature	Date	Time
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PERSON ADMINISTERING CONSENT: I have conducted the consent process and orally reviewed the contents of the consent document. I believe the participant understands the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Principal Investigator's (PRINT)	Signature	Date
---	------------------	-------------

Version date:

Participant's initials

APPENDIX E : RECRUITMENT FLYER

Participants Needed for Study on Individuals with Tattoos**Do You have at Least One Tattoo?**

Volunteers with at least one tattoo wanted for a research study on the real-life experiences of individuals with tattoos and the stories of their tattoos.

I am seeking English-speaking individuals with at least one tattoo, 18+ years old willing to participate in one-on-one interviews to discuss their experiences.

The study involves the completion of a lifeline and two (2) interviews. The study also includes photography.

Benefits include providing insight into the motivations for obtaining a tattoo and living as a person with tattoos.

Another benefit includes helping health education professionals design programs targeted at those interested in obtaining a tattoo become effective decision makers.

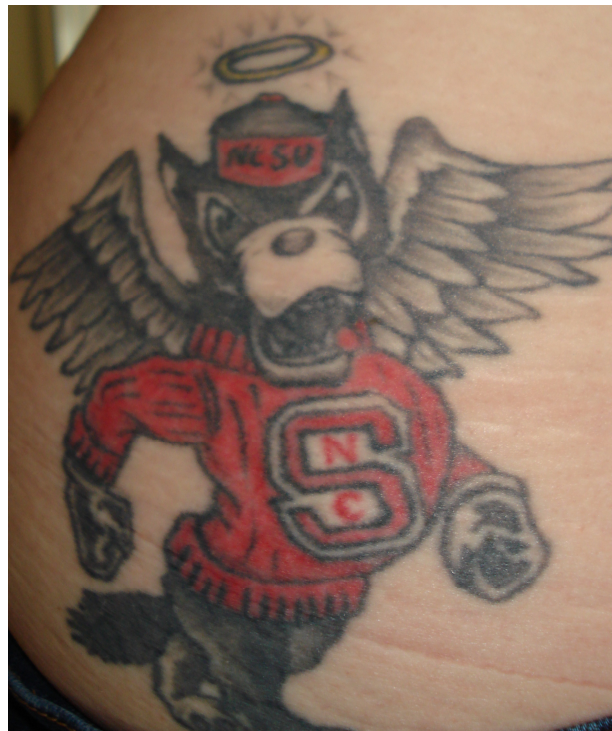
Confidentiality of participants maintained throughout study.

For more information call 919-880-3337, Tesha Lucas, East Carolina University, Department of Health Education and Promotion.

APPENDIX F: MORGAN'S TATTOOS



Block S



Mr. Wuf

APPENDIX F, CONT.: MORGAN'S TATTOOS



Black Swan

APPENDIX G: BOSS'S TATTOOS



Yarborough



Maltese Cross

APPENDIX H: AUTUMN'S TATTOOS

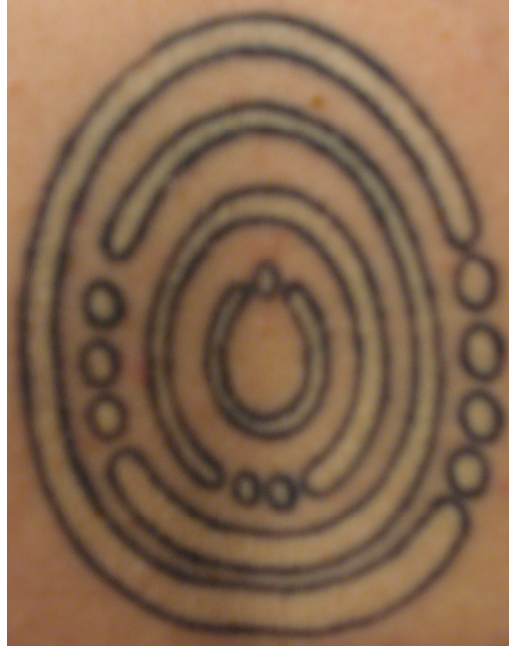


Nautical Star



Just Breathe

APPENDIX I: SPRINGS TATTOOS

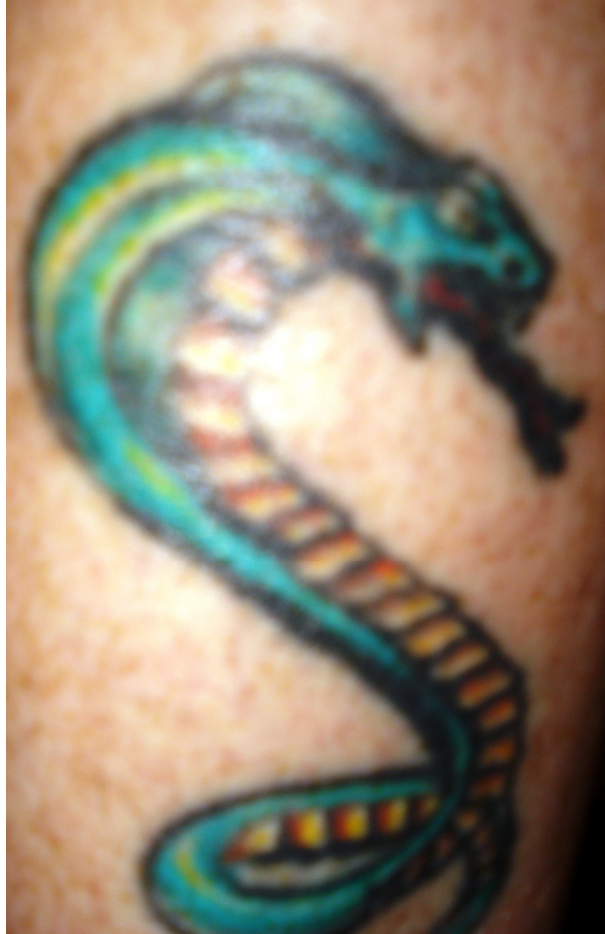


Circle



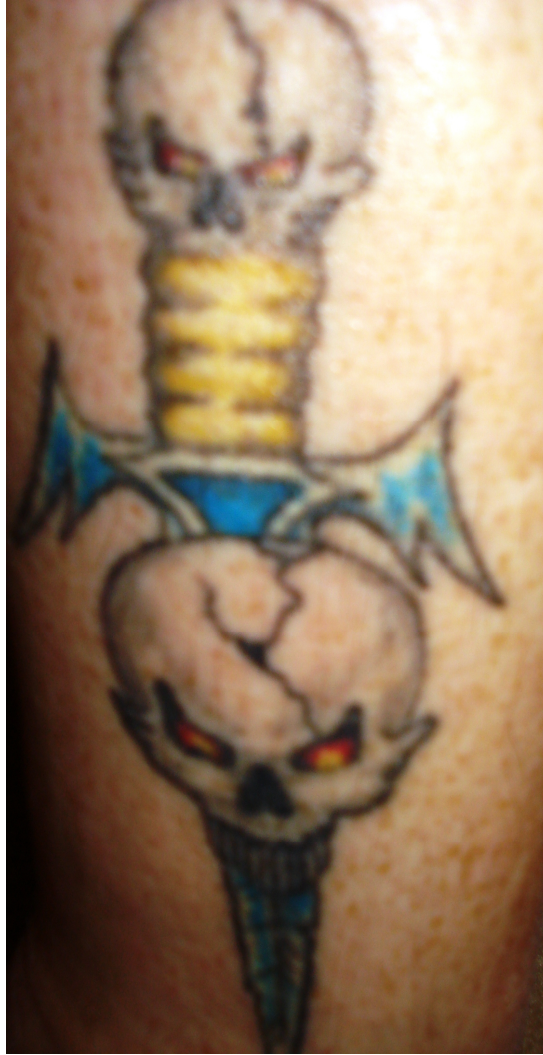
Nautical Star

APPENDIX J: WILD BILL'S TATTOOS



Snake

APPENDIX J, CONT.: WILD BILL'S TATTOOS



Skull Dagger

APPENDIX K: DANNY'S TATTOO



Dragon Lady

APPENDIX L: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board
 East Carolina University
 Ed Warren Life Sciences Building • 600 Moye Boulevard • LSB 104 • Greenville, NC 27834
 Office 252-744-2914 • Fax 252-744-2284 • www.ecu.edu/irb
 Chair and Director of Biomedical IRB: L. Wiley Nifong, MD
 Chair and Director of Behavioral and Social Science IRB: Susan L. McCammon, PhD

TO: Tesha Lucas, Graduate Student, Dept. of Health Education & Promotion, ECU

FROM: UMCIRB 

DATE: January 7, 2009

RE: Expedited Category Research Study

TITLE: "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Individuals with Tattoos"

UMCIRB #08-0774

This research study has undergone review and approval using expedited review on 12/31/08. This research study is eligible for review under an expedited category because it is a collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes and it is research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.). Dr. S. McCammon deemed this **unfunded study no more than minimal risk** requiring a continuing review in **12 months**. Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

The above referenced research study has been given approval for the period of 12/31/08 to 12/30/09. The approval includes the following items:

- Internal Processing Form (dated 12/15/08)
- Informed Consent (received 12/19/08)
- Photographic Release Form (received 12/31/08)
- Lifeline Document
- Advertisement
- Interview Questions

Dr. S. McCammon does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

The UMCIRB applies 45 CFR 46, Subparts A-D, to all research reviewed by the UMCIRB regardless of the funding source. 21 CFR 50 and 21 CFR 56 are applied to all research studies under the Food and Drug Administration regulation. The UMCIRB follows applicable International Conference on Harmonisation Good Clinical Practice guidelines.