(TH)INK CULTURE:
MOTIVATION AND MEANING MAKING IN MODERN TATTOOS

by

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ABSTRACT

Tattoo culture and the community it has created have undergone a renaissance since the 1980s. Persons with tattoos now account for an estimated 34% of the North American population between the ages of 18-30. Despite this relatively recent surge towards acceptance of tattoos in the current social context, much of the academic literature and media portrayals of tattoos characterize social deviancy among tattoo enthusiasts. Tattoo enthusiasts are pushed to the periphery of society and marginalized as bikers, criminals, and people with psychological problems. The purpose of this study is to describe and understand tattoo culture in a way that is accessible to non-members of that culture, particularly teachers and parents. The primary research questions proposed by this study include what motivates people to become tattooed, what motivates members of the tattooed community to stay minimally involved in the culture or to increase their involvement, and how members of the community perceive their tattoos within the current social context. To answer these questions, this study focuses on the lived experiences of six tattoo enthusiasts from one small community. Through the study of these shared experiences, this study questions the nature of tattoos in this small community and whether these acts can be considered deviant or culturally normative.
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Last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge my support group of friends Tammy Chen, Ted Christou, Bob Darwish, Rob Horgan, Tessa Mueller, and Eric Webb. I would especially like to thank Toni Thornton for convincing me to follow my passion as well as offering a spare bed whenever it was needed. To all my friends and family, thank you from the bottom of my heart.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother Brenda, and my father Jake, for teaching me to always walk my own path in life with my chin held high.
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This research took a drastic shift with my travels to Peru. I had been touring the world from tattoo convention to convention. I first went to London, United Kingdom. I stayed with a very close friend who was the first person I met when I first taught there 4 years ago. We initially became friends because we appreciated each other’s tattoos, eventually becoming flat mates.

After London I travelled to Barcelona, Spain. This convention, like the one before it, was run by the Hells Angels. They had booths selling t-shirts, as well as a heavy presence from “all over the civilized world,” according to the President of the England chapter of the bike club. I counted 11 (London) and 7 (Barcelona) different international Hells Angels patches in attendance.

Then I travelled to Lausanne, Switzerland. I decided I was going to go meet Pierre [a pseudonym] at his street shop. After I had finished checking out Pierre’s portfolio, he entered the shop and greeted me. I told him of my travels, my research, and my profession. He only had a small tattoo to do that day, so we spent the afternoon discussing politics, religion, and tattooing. He let me look at his shelves of reference books; he only asked that I mind “the Japanese section” and “the English section.” After watching him tattoo a fellow tattooist from Japan, we had an interview where we discussed the motivations behind tattooing, society’s views towards tattooing, and his life as an artist. He would raise his own questions during the interview, such as when discussing how the growth in popularity has led to a sharing of knowledge that has developed the art strongly, “Imagine what tattooing would be like if society was 100%
accepting of it. Can you imagine what that society would be like?” When discussing the deviant image that tattooing has, Pierre would ask, “Why do tattoos have such a bad image? Is it the criminal thing? Because criminals also wear sneakers.” I learned so much that day; about tattooing, about the lives of an entire family dedicated to the art, but most of all about myself.

The next day I travelled to Evian, France with some tattooists I had met at Pierre’s shop. This was quite a difference from the previous European conventions because it was very small and had virtually no bikers present. It was a completely different vibe from everywhere else. It felt like there was less emphasis on image, and more focus on the art itself. It was not long before I returned to Canada and three days later I was off to Lima, Peru.

The day of the tattoo convention was November 1, 2008 (Day of the Dead). I had gone out for lunch, and when walking down a street had two men approach me with guns. They demanded that I get in their car. I was taken from ATM to ATM. They eventually made me max out my bank account and VISA at $1500. As this amount did not meet their $2000 demand and I could not extend my limits anymore than I already had, they threw me out of a moving car while snatching my backpack with my cameras, research notes, interviews, and tape recorder inside. I was in a daze. At the beginning of the hour-long ordeal, I looked out into the streets and honestly thought that I would never see my family or friends again. Afterwards, I went to the only place I knew, the tattoo convention. When I asked a fellow enthusiast for $3 so I could get a cab home he agreed but asked why. When I told him what had happened, he told me “you gotta tell somebody.” I watched as he went off to tell someone about what had happened. I met
with Luis [a pseudonym], the organizer of the event. When the appropriate time came at
the tattoo contest, Luis awarded me with 1st place for my leg tattoo and gave the crowd a
5-minute speech about how far I’d come and what had happened to me. After that, I had
everyone in the room come and pat me on the back. I also had tattooists giving me money
out of their pocket to help out. There was a Canadian girl there, and she helped me out as
well. The rest of the weekend I paid for nothing. I had people approach me to take my
picture. This practice is not uncommon at conventions, and I never refuse a photo
because I take many photos of other people’s tattoos at conventions and I understand.
The difference here in Peru was that rather than focussing on my leg, creating a
dismembered portrait of a tattoo, the Peruvians took photos of me showing my tattoo.
Parents took photos of me standing next to their children. As a fellow tattooist said to me
at the after party, “You came here and knew no one. Now you are friends with everyone.”
I had more than a few enthusiasts tell me that I was “one of them,” with others offering a
room if I needed it. I was so embraced by this tattoo community. This was one of the
driving forces behind my research, looking for a tattoo “community.” I found it, and am
forever thankful for those people.

After visiting Machu Picchu and Cusco (where children begging outside of
cathedrals were entertained by my tattooed right leg), I returned home to nurse a severely
infected left leg (I didn’t wear bug spray) as well as the worst sinus infection I have ever
had. I literally could not hear for over a week. Two weeks after arriving home, I was off
to Tokyo, Japan. I toured around Tokyo for a week making sure to drop in on Tokyo
Hardcore Tattoo, but also making sure I got out to Mt. Fuji, the Hakone Valley,
Kamakura, and Yokohama. While in Yokohama, I visited one of the most internationally
renowned tattoo studios and met the tattooist Takashi [a pseudonym]. Luckily his client was fluent in Japanese and English, and I was able to have a brief discussion with Takashi. I have been a fan of his work for several years. After a few pictures I was off; literally to the airport.

While I was away in Japan, my local tattooist Von Scotch had put an ad in the local paper. After he heard what had happened to me, he posted on the internet the same ad he ran in the paper stating that anyone who purchased gift certificates for the upcoming Christmas season would be making a 100% donation to me. I didn’t know anything about the ad. On December 13, 2008 I visited Von Scotch’s shop to get the final section of my leg sleeve done. He handed me a thank you card with $1800 stuffed inside of it. He told me that some people had come in and just gave the money, without taking the certificate, because they just wanted to help me out. I told him that I thought it was “probably” the coolest thing anyone had ever done for me, but now that I am not slack-jawed surprised I can confirm it is the coolest thing anyone has ever done for me. My mom cried when I told her. It helped me pay my bills and get some presents for my family, none of which would have been possible without my local tattoo community. I had travelled the world to find a tattoo “community” and I had found it, but I never really had to leave my local area.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When deciding what I would write about as the topic of my thesis, I was advised by a close friend to choose something about which I was passionate. My supervisor agreed with this idea and suggested that a master’s thesis was a good outlet for discovering more about one’s self. I am passionate about tattoos. I have travelled the world to experience how tattoos are received in different cultures. Tattoos act as an immediate conversation starter, and I have met some of my best friends through interactions based on our tattoos. These people are good people. I have also been an active member in my local tattoo community for nearly a decade. I have grown alongside several others through my tattoo experiences and theirs. A tattooist who recently moved to Waldemar (a pseudonym) commented that he could not get over the fact that no one made a big deal about his heavily tattooed body in the local community. He could go for a meal and drinks at the local pub without any anyone staring or making rude comments in his direction. He told me how he felt he really belonged in Waldemar. I feel this way as well.

I had never really considered such a feeling until I entered the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University. Instead of being surrounded by people with tattoos, I was on my own. I became ‘that tattooed guy.’ I was an outsider, a deviant. Although I never felt discriminated against in any way because I was tattooed, I was still different from everyone else. I did not enjoy this feeling. I constantly felt as if I had to prove to everyone that I was just like him or her, a teacher who had come to this institution to further his understanding of education. When I decided to write my thesis on tattoos, I
became ‘that guy doing the tattoo thesis.’ As only one other person in the history of the Faculty had written a thesis involving tattoos, even my thesis was considered deviant.

I have been discriminated against in the past because of my tattoos. I have been the victim of police harassment because of my tattoos. I have been profiled and labelled ‘suspicious.’ When people meet each other in our society, it is customary for the first question to be in reference to their profession. When I meet people, the first questions I am asked all revolve around my tattoos. Rather than being asked what I do for a profession, I am often asked if I am a tattooist. When people learn that I am in fact a teacher, the look of surprise takes quite some time to dissipate from their faces. As a teacher, I have had my employment threatened because I rolled up my long sleeves on a humid June afternoon. As a tattooed teacher, I cannot express how many times I have been approached by students (and staff) regarding tattoos.

As I was once a high school student with tattoos, I remember feeling as if I was misunderstood by my teachers and by the parents of many of my peers. It was for that reason that I felt it necessary to explain the tattoo community in which I live. I wanted to create a text for parents and teachers to better understand tattooed students. Perhaps because of my passion for tattoos my ears are more attuned to the magic ‘T’ word, but, while I was analyzing the data for this thesis during a quiet time in class one day, I overheard one student say to another “I’m getting my tattoo for $25.” I immediately approached these students and asked them if they were aware of blood borne pathogens. After educating them about the dangers and risks involved with tattooing, I informed them that tattoos are like anything else in life; you get what you pay for. Your life, as well as a happy ending to that life, is worth more than $25. It was at this point that I
realized I needed to write an educational text not only for parents and teachers, but for the kids themselves (and anyone else intent on procuring a tattoo).

I am a punk rocker, and one of my favourite bands is Pennywise. I have a Pennywise logo tattooed on the inside of my right bicep. I had this logo tattooed on the anniversary of a close friend’s death in remembrance of our shared experience as punk rockers and our friendship. The lyrics from a Pennywise song, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” inspired me to become a teacher. “So let the children grow to be what they want to be, put them in the right direction to build their own reality.” I became a teacher so that I could help kids to think, and ultimately live, for themselves. Pennywise also wrote, “You don’t like my tattoos, how does this dishonour you? Don’t you know what’s inside of me?” I view my tattoos as an outward expression of inner emotions. My tattoos tell you what is inside of me.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe and understand tattoo culture in a way that is accessible to non-members of that culture, particularly teachers and parents. The primary research questions proposed by this study include what motivates people to become tattooed, what motivates members of the tattooed community to stay minimally involved in the culture or to increase their involvement, and how members of the community perceive their tattoos within the current social context. To answer these questions, I conducted interviews with members of my local tattoo community. The participants selected were representative of both genders and of varying levels of involvement in the tattoo community. It is the motivations and lived experiences of these
participants that are described to gain a better understanding of the tattoo community in Waldemar.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The title of this thesis is (TH)INK CULTURE. In his work entitled *The Aims of Education* (1929/1959), Whitehead defines culture as “activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling” (p. 192). This study is an examination of the thought processes related by the participants in regards to their motivations to become tattooed. Through examination of the context in which this tattoo community was developed and stands today, this study examines the receptiveness to what could be described as a specific aesthetic in the tattoo community of Waldemar. In this manner, this study examines the receptiveness of the participants to what they consider beauty and humane feeling. This study of the tattoo community within the community of Waldemar is an examination of Waldemar’s tattoo culture.

Our modern, Western culture has been described as “a culture of body modificationists” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 3). Atkinson describes body modification in four subcategories: camouflaging, extending, adapting, and redesigning. Camouflaging body modifications are “attempts to hide, cover, mask or aesthetically enhance the biological body” (p. 25). These modifications understand the body as something to be cured. These modifications are predominantly temporary and non-invasive, undertaken largely on a daily basis. Examples of such modifications include using mouthwash, wearing deodorant, and applying makeup.
Extending body modifications are “geared towards compensating for or overcoming limitations of the natural (i.e., biological) body” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 25). These modifications involve semi- or non-permanent modifications of the body, and are incorporated into one’s overall sense of self in varying degrees. Examples of such modifications range from tennis rackets and running shoes to contact lenses and prostheses.

Adapting body modifications are more permanent modifications made to repair the physical body for aesthetic or medical reasons. The adapting body project is guided by the overriding goal of physical maintenance—reducing or eliminating parts of the body that do not translate well in our every day interactions, or removing pathologies that jeopardize health and longevity (Atkinson, 2003). Examples of adapting body modifications include hair removal, weight loss, as well as preventative mole removals.

Redesigning body modifications are the most invasive, dramatic, and least common body projects. These modifications can be performed for aesthetic purposes (breast augmentation, rhinoplasty, hair transplant) or medical purposes (pacemaker, replacement joints). These body projects literally reconstruct the body in lasting ways and require the highest level of commitment (Atkinson, 2003).

The type of body modification discussed in this thesis can be categorized as a redesigning body modification; specifically this thesis examines tattoos. Tattooing, according to Health Canada, is “the act of permanently depositing pigment into the skin to a depth of 1-2 mm to create a design” (CBC, 2004).

People who acquire tattoos are called by several names. In the literature, they are predominantly referred to as collectors or enthusiasts. A tattoo enthusiast is defined by
Atkinson (2003) as “a person who has a personal/cultural fascination with tattoos and at some point in the life course decided to become tattooed” (p. vii).

A tattooist is a person who applies tattoos. This term is interchangeable with other terms used to describe these people including tattoo artist and tattooer. A negative slang term for a tattooist is *_scratcher_* as it is meant to denote little or no artistic skill.

A tattoo studio is the place of business where tattoos are applied. This term is interchangeable with tattoo shop, tattoo parlour, or tattoo gallery.

Rationale

North America is currently experiencing what many scholars refer to as a ‘Tattoo Renaissance’ (Atkinson, 2003; De Mello, 2000; Sanders, 2008). A recent Harris Poll indicated that 34% of Americans between the ages of 18-30 now have one or more tattoos (Harris Poll, 2008). This is a significant increase from 20 years ago when the estimated percentage of the same age group bearing tattoos was 5% (Sanders, 2008). This rise in popularity is evident in popular culture as there are several television shows depicting the ‘reality’ of tattoo studios (Miami Ink, LA Ink, Inked). This rise in popularity has also been noted in the academic community, although many academics view tattoos through a similar lens: associating the practice with deviance. It is critical for academia to pursue several different perspectives to offer new insights into a subject matter that is gathering as much attention as tattooing is today. These insights could prove beneficial to many.

The rise in tattoo popularity is also evident in our schools. Students are becoming interested in tattoos without any structured knowledge to assist them in their decision-
making. One example of this interest and the way it is treated in schools comes from an article written for the Ottawa Citizen (June 16, 2006) in which Bruce Ward describes how a 6-year-old girl was sent home from school for wearing temporary tattoos. The Grade 1 student had received the temporary tattoos at a birthday party that occurred over a weekend. Upon arriving at the school the following Monday (with the temporary tattoos still intact), the student was told by her principal that the temporary tattoos were offensive and not tolerated at school. Returning home, the little girl (visibly upset) asked her mother if she was bad and what the word offensive meant. This situation, and the lack of any communication between the school and parent, disturbed the mother of this student and influenced her contacting the media and questioning how many teachers within the Ottawa-Carleton school board were tattooed. It is apparent through stories such as the one I just described that there is a conflict between interests of students and the policies enforced by school principals. It is critical for those involved in Education to be aware of current issues and to respond to them appropriately. If our students are interested in tattoos, and likely to become tattooed, we as educators must ensure that they are informed of all the risks and benefits of tattoos. We teach about safe sex in schools to prevent the spread of fatal diseases because we are concerned for the health of our students and see our role as educators to prepare students for life after Grade 12. The same blood borne pathogens are involved in tattooing but we turn our heads because the practice is found to be ‘offensive’ to many members of society (including educators)? It is time for a change in how tattoos are perceived and understood.
Overview of Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. In chapter 1, I introduced the subject of this thesis, tattoos in our current social context. I stated the purpose of this study, as well as defining the key terms involved. I concluded the chapter by discussing the rationale for this study. The relevant literature for this study is presented in chapter 2. This literature pertains to the motivations behind modern tattooing, the tattoo experience itself, the lived experience of being tattooed, and current tattoo education. In chapter 3, I describe the methods I used to conduct this qualitative study. I begin by describing the phases of development involved with this study. I continue by relating my role as researcher and giving descriptions of the participants involved in this study. Next, I discuss how I collected the data and the manner in which I performed interviews. I then describe the steps I took in analyzing these data and conclude with my concerns for the study.

In chapter 4, I present a profile of the tattooist responsible for the tattoo community in Waldemar. This profile assists in setting the context for the tattoo community in Waldemar. The fifth chapter presents six participant profiles of tattoo enthusiasts from Waldemar. These profiles give insight into the motivations for tattoo enthusiasts from this community, as well as the tattoo experience itself, and the lived experience of six individuals with tattoos in Waldemar. The final chapter discusses the results of the interviews I conducted with the participants of this study. I connect these results with the literature presented in chapter 2 to advance theory pertaining to tattoos. I also acknowledge the limitations of this study and provide suggestions for future research in this area. I conclude this chapter with my final thoughts.
As a heavily tattooed person, I often have people approach me to discuss tattoos. Quite often these people are thinking about procuring their first tattoo. After asking what it is he or she had in mind as a design, I always ask what his or her motivation for the design is. More often than not, this beginning will lead to very serious discussions where this person will relate deeply personal stories of his or her life. I always find these revelations to be quite interesting and, as they are the beginning point for most of my conversations involving tattoos, motivations for tattoos is the beginning point in this chapter.

After discussing motivations, the person who has approached me will usually ask questions about the actual tattoo experience. The discussion of the tattoo experience then flows naturally into the idea of living with the tattoo. These two topics are interrelated in that there are still some consequences of getting a tattoo in our society (with visible tattoos on necks, hands, and faces still being largely frowned upon). At this point in the conversation, I share my personal experiences of living with tattoos.

Before our conversation ends, I always try to impart upon this person what I describe as tattoo education. I discuss what to look for in terms of health and safety when choosing a tattoo studio. I also discuss the importance of looking over the artist’s portfolio and encourage the person seeking a tattoo to meet the artist in person to get a feel for the artist’s personality. I personally believe this information to be necessary and critical in any understanding of tattoos.
Motivations for Tattoos

What motivates a person to become tattooed has been of academic interest for decades. In his pioneering study of tattoos, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art Practiced by the Natives of the United States*, written in the early 1930s, Albert Parry (1933/1971) attempted to explain how he viewed tattoos in his current social context and the motivations behind such actions. He related these ideas through chapters entitled “Women and Love,” “Men and Love,” and “The Youth.”

In his chapter entitled “Women and Love,” Parry (1933/1971) described motivations to become tattooed as a “primitive desire for an exaggerated exterior” (p. 1). He stated that tattooing is mostly the recording of dreams and that a large element of dreaming, in a Freudian fashion, is the “repressed sexual world fighting its way to the surface” (p. 2). After describing the act of tattooing as a sexual act (long, sharp needles; liquid poured into the pricked skin; two participants involved with one being passive and the other active), Parry made reference to women in native tribes in Samoa and Japan. In these references, he made note that tattoos in these cultures represented “women’s desire to attain the men’s power” (p. 3). The tattoos signified that the women had achieved puberty. Moving to accounts in England and America, Parry made the relation to these primitive tribes by focusing on this physical stage of development commenting that, “American girls who are tattoo-addicts get their first tattoo-designs at about the same time that they have their first sexual relationships” (p. 3). Parry illustrated this point by discussing a rape case that had occurred a few years before his study in Boston. In this case, the prosecutor, the jury, and the judge decided that the men accused could not be convicted because the girl had been guilty of “contributory negligence” (p. 4). Because
this woman had a tattoo, she was characterized as misleading the men into thinking she was a “loose character” (p. 4). Parry concluded his chapter discussing the motivations of women to become tattooed by comparing tattoos to clothing. He stated that, more so for women than for men, clothing acts as a decorative sexual adornment meant as bait for the opposite sex.

In his next chapter, “Men and Love,” Parry (1933/1971) continued his description of the sexually based motivation for tattoos. Based on the knowledge of Professor Jack, a former New York tattooist, Parry contended that in four of five cases the real reason for tattooing was “love fever” (p. 15). Men would procure tattoos of affection (usually the lover’s name) and, if the relationship turned sour, the bearer would have words such as “Traitress” or “Deceived” tattooed underneath (p. 16). Parry described how sailors, being lusty men and perhaps trying to disprove their “frequent homosexuality” (p. 17), would often have pictures of nude women tattooed. These designs were usually ‘hula-hula’ girls strategically placed on the bicep so that the bearer could flex his muscles and create the appearance that the hula-hula girl was dancing. Parry contended that many men felt a sense of guilt because of the homosexual character of tattooing. The proof of this homosexuality was in the abundance of tattooed sailors, “the most womanless group of all” (p. 22). This grouping extended to miners in California and loggers in the Northwest, all considered frontiersmen living far from the presence of women.

In his chapter entitled “The Youth,” Parry (1933/1971) began with a warning to parents:

If your janitor’s children take pen and ink, and draw wrist-watches on their wrists, faces on their fingernails, rings around their fingers, and circles around their knuckles, the chances are that by the time they are fifteen they will find their way
to the waterfront, there to acquire a tattooed snake on the arm or a butterfly on the thigh. (p. 29)

Youth often went to tattoo shops in groups of three or four, representative of a “herd-motive” (p. 29), their “puny, undersized figures” (p. 29) supporting the idea of an inferiority-motive. The principal motivation for tattooing amongst the youth was the desire to attain manliness and strength through the tattoo wound and to identify themselves with some worshipped adult (p. 29).

Parry (1933/1971) continued his chapter on the youth by studying the sexual significance attributed to tattooing. He began this sexual theme by relating the story of a youth who compared his tattoo experience to his first experience having intercourse (with a prostitute). The youth described a guilty feeling afterwards from which he simply wanted to run away. Parry contended that the guilt feeling involved with tattooing stemmed from the Freudian “castration complex” (p. 35). This fear reflected a dread that the father would punish a boy for his sexual activities. As the boy developed sexually and contended for his mother’s love, the father’s only adequate revenge was the castration of the sexual organ. The remorse and fear felt by most boys engendered by masturbation was a representation of this castration fear. Thus when a father was upset with his son for getting a tattoo, his rage was actually sexual jealousy. The father was actually upset about the homosexual elements of tattooing, stating, “Darkly they feel as if the tattooers had raped their sons” (p. 36). Parry further emphasized this sexual nature of tattooing by stating, “Tattooing is often done when the subject is under the influence of liquor, and it is well known in clinical psychiatry that drinking releases latent homosexual tendencies” (p. 36).
Parry’s (1933/1971) account for the motivation behind tattoos continues for several chapters, although they are geared towards certain groups of individuals that are not represented in this study. Such chapters include “Prostitutes and Perversion,” “The Circus,” “Sailors,” and “Low Herd-High Society.” The sexual nature behind the explanations provided by Parry is evident throughout this work.

Although the views expressed by Parry no longer seem relevant today, a clear majority of the psychology-based studies seem to replicate negative cultural stereotypes that have been prevalent in North America for decades (Atkinson, 2003; Sanders, 2008). Such studies are centered on the notion that people who become tattooed demonstrate at-risk behaviour (Hicinbothem et al., 2006). Such at-risk behaviour includes substance abuse (Deschesnes, Fines, & Demers, 2006), tendencies towards violence (Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts, & Myhre, 2002), self-injurious behaviour (Houghton, 1996), suicide (Carroll & Anderson, 2002), gang affiliation (Struyk, 2006), unprotected sex (Bradley & Wildman, 2002), and eating disorders (Carroll et al.). Many studies also attempt to make the connection between tattoos and body issues reflective of low self-esteem (Carroll & Anderson; Roberti & Storch, 2005).

Hicinbothem et al. (2006) focussed their study on the possible connection between suicide attempts and body modification. For this study, the researchers posted a survey on a website made exclusively for participants of body modification. Four thousand seven hundred (4700) participants responded to the survey. Although Hicinbothem et al. claim that this survey is available on this body modification website, only paying members (who must have body modifications to join) can view this website. Of the 281 questions asked on this survey, the only question mentioned in the study is
“how many times have you attempted suicide?” (p. 355). Studying the tables provided demonstrate several inconsistencies between male and female results. The researchers were interested in studying how different types of body modification (piercing, tattoos, scarification, and surgical procedures) affected suicide attempts amongst men and women, although many unisex locations were not included with one or the other sex. In their discussion, the researchers describe several discrepancies (such as a pierced septum revealing increased prior suicide attempts in depressed males but not in non-depressed males) without any detailed explanation.

Deschenes et al. (2006) focussed on substance abuse as a motivation for becoming tattooed. Data for this study were directly collected from 2180 students aged 12-18. Questions in this survey focussed on drug use, gambling, suicide attempts, gang involvement, and rave party attendance. Although there is quite often drug use at rave dance parties, it seems redundant to label rave party attendance as at-risk behaviour as drug use is already questioned. It is not clearly stated how preference for live electronic music is an at-risk behaviour. The results show that many of the students surveyed did not actually participate in at-risk behaviour. One figure shows that 50% of females who consume cocaine are tattooed, but these are still only 6 girls of 1125. The study does not seek to understand why these 6 girls are doing cocaine, or why any of the participants participate in at-risk behaviour. There is no inquiry into the home lives of these students whatsoever. This study sought to make connections between suicidal tendencies and low self-esteem, but the results pointed quite to the contrary. The results do not mean that students with tattoos are necessarily likely to participate in at-risk behaviour.
There are three major limitations to these psychological journal articles: representativeness of sample, cause and effect assumptions without cause and effect methodology, and over-reliance on quantitative methodology. In regards to representativeness of sample, in some cases, the sample used has been severely skewed by an overrepresentation of females. Such overrepresentations have led some to claim that tattooing is more popular among females than males without any detailed explanation. Furthermore, many of these articles that strive to show a link between tattoos and deviance conduct their studies in prisons or mental institutions.

In regards to studies that produce cause and effect assumptions without cause and effect methodology, much of this research aims to portray tattooing as an indicator for future deviance; as described by McKerracher and Watson (1969):

Many Westerners do not belong to particular groups where tattooing is expected, yet they resort to this primitive method of emotional expression. Many of these individuals congregate in institutions that cater for disordered social behaviour. This suggests that in our culture there may be a greater likelihood of tattooed persons having an abnormal personality than persons who are not tattooed. Emotional immaturity is the personality factor nominated as the primary trait associated with the urge to mutilate the body with tattoos. Tattooed men are usually of two types: the exhibitionist, and the young man seeking to compensate for inferiority feelings. (pp. 167-168)

Due to measurement and design issues, psychologists fail to distinguish between cause and effect in the tattooing process creating unflattering and empirically unfounded discussions (Atkinson, 2003).

Another limitation consistent among many psychological journal articles is that by looking at the subject in a quantitative manner, many articles neglect to examine the actual tattoos and what they mean to the wearers. This focus severely limits a broader understanding of tattooing as a culturally meaningful experience (Houghton et al., 1996).
The current study selects its sample from a small community where the participants are contributing members to society. It also has a balanced representation of both sexes. There are no cause and effect assumptions made whatsoever, as all data analyses were derived strictly from the data collected. This current study also examines who is tattooed and why, on a personal level in the participants’ own words. In this way, the current study is congruent with a shift in the study of tattoo motivations to study the actual tattoos and their meanings by sociologists who are tattooed themselves (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; Sanders, 2008).

Three researchers who sought to understand and describe what the psychological articles view as deviant motivations behind tattooing were Steward (1990), Vail (1999), and Sanders (2008). Steward viewed tattooing as a conduit for cohesion among small groups. He argued that it built bridges between an individual and a set of mutually identified others. Tattooing was also argued by Steward to be a form of ritually transforming the self as enthusiasts symbolically marked passage from one self to another. Steward offered a list of 28 reasons for tattooing stemming from what he described as psychological pathologies including homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, and excessive ego compensation. These psychological pathologies were largely unconscious and unknown to the enthusiast.

Vail (1999) similarly examined becoming a collector of tattoos as a form of deviance. Vail hypothesized that deviance of tattoo collecting follows three stages of deviance: affinity, affiliation, and signification. Affinity refers to the individual’s personal desire to become a deviant. Although tattoos are not considered as they once were, being heavily tattooed falls outside of social norms. To be a collector or a heavily
tattooed individual, according to Vail, takes a dedication to the deviant behaviour that goes outside of fraternal bonds or social acceptability. Affiliation is the second stage of deviance. When individuals decide to become tattoo collectors, they are aware that others before them have exhibited the deviant behaviour. This deviant behaviour, although new to them, has been previously established in the group in which they desire affiliation. The third stage of deviance is signification. Vail discussed this stage in terms of tattoo collectors. Once people have identified themselves as tattoo collectors, the behaviours once novel to them are now appropriate. Vail concluded his deviance research by commenting that researchers commonly view tattoos as a possession of the individual. However, heavily tattooed individuals are more likely to view the tattoo as a part of them. The tattoos are part of one’s identity as much as one’s beliefs, fears, and personality traits.

Sanders (2008) also reported that individuals chiefly mark their body through tattooing as a mechanism for indicating social affiliation and for fostering mutual identification with interpersonal attachments being intentionally created or affirmed through the process. Sanders listed several motivations for tattooing ranging from simply alleviating personal boredom to shocking audiences as a marker of social difference to symbolically chronicling life transitions and performing gender in the social construction of hegemonic masculinity.

These three researchers, however, failed to explore why individuals specifically choose tattooing as body modification. In a culture within which there are several different ways to modify the body ranging in different levels of permanence, why do individuals specifically choose the most permanent of all body modifications? The
research also failed to consider the body projects as multiply motivated and that these motivations are learned over time and incorporated into habits. One study that took up these challenges was the groundbreaking work of Atkinson (2003), *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*.

Atkinson (2003) referred to the act of getting tattooed as walking a tightrope of deviance. In his quest to understand the motivations of tattoo enthusiasts from across Canada, Atkinson described two large motivational categories as embracing deviance (marks of disaffiliation) and embracing difference (marks of conformity). While he discussed the act of embracing deviance, Atkinson highlighted such themes as deviant affiliations, cultural resistance, strained or broken interdependencies, and the quest for excitement. The theme of deviant affiliations discussed that some enthusiasts procure tattoos as a way to signify affiliation with deviant actors. Tattoos are viewed as a public badge of interdependencies forged among individuals to indicate a sense of disaffiliation with more established groups. Atkinson argued that looking like an outsider today is commonly fashionable and that the ‘coolness’ of the tattoo is largely derived from its outsider status. Tattoos in this respect signify one’s difference from the homogenous group of the cultural mainstream. Atkinson identified that negative reactions from members of the mainstream culture solidify this deviant identity, creating a deep commitment to an outsider lifestyle.

A second theme identified in Atkinson’s (2003) category of embracing deviance was cultural resistance. Atkinson described how some enthusiasts are motivated by a desire to wage cultural dissent through their skin. These tattoos are viewed as adaptations to the strain an individual experiences when means for success are blocked by structured
inequality. Atkinson related that some enthusiasts take up tattooing as cultural protest, a type of in-group criticism among the mainstream, established society. He discussed how enthusiasts sought to contest dominant codes about gender and beauty; these tattoos represented a break from what the enthusiasts perceived to be repressive conceptualizations of beauty based on Judeo-Christian ideologies of the body. In this form of cultural resistance, the enthusiasts took personal control over their body to challenge such themes as gender codes regarding appropriate femininity and masculinity. Atkinson argued that these enthusiasts attempted to resist established cultural ideology regarding what counted as beautiful, particularly as it was constituted along gender lines.

A third theme identified in Atkinson’s (2003) category of embracing deviance was strained or broken interdependencies. He identified how following the severance of involvement with norm-abiding others, individuals might not feel as constricted by established social norms regarding their bodies. Atkinson described how the removal of one’s interdependencies with others might act as a gateway towards tattooing as he described enthusiasts who became tattooed after events such as break-ups, divorces, and deaths. Participation in such tattoos was a partial articulation of the feeling of rejection encountered through such strained or broken interdependencies.

The final theme Atkinson (2003) identified in his category of embracing deviance was the quest for excitement. He discussed how some enthusiasts become tattooed as a way to break the routine of their social lives. He described this motivation as a ‘controlled decontrolling’ of emotional controls. Atkinson articulated how tattoos might represent one’s ability to withstand pain, a flagrant breach of established cultural ideologies that emphasized how pain should be avoided or feared in everyday life. By
flaunting this unnatural physical ability, enthusiasts could shock audiences as a form of social protest.

To counter his category of embracing deviance, Atkinson (2003) next described his category of embracing difference. This category described how the actions of enthusiasts could be viewed as less culturally antagonistic. The motivations of these enthusiasts were carefully configured to distance themselves slightly from the so-called outsider traditions of tattooing in Canada (mainly the working-class). The first theme Atkinson discussed in this category was role transitions. In this theme, Atkinson related that tattooing is a method of permanently marking significant interpersonal transitions, where the body is utilized as a travelling scrapbook. Tattoos in this fashion declared a series of bonds with others, such as in the example provided by Atkinson of enthusiasts becoming tattooed after their wedding. Atkinson gave examples of how tattooed iconography could be a way of expressing strength in religious convictions and how these tattoos might forge permanent bonds between friends. He also illustrated role transitions in tattoos by describing cases of older enthusiasts who got tattooed to represent experiences such as their children leaving home, beginning a new career, or going back to school. The justifications for such tattoos were learned from like-minded others during normative bonding processes as well as from interactions with tattooists. The recent explosion of tattoo magazines and the internet have taught enthusiasts to assign sound significance to their tattoos. These symbols bear highly personal meanings designed to promote growth and mark the passage of time for their bearers. In response to these transitions in life, Atkinson described how enthusiasts specifically chose tattoos because:
The permanence of the mark is simply offered as an indicator of the strength of a bond or the significance of the role transition— and not, in any way, to be read by others as a symbolic act of protest. (p. 192)

The second theme Atkinson (2003) illustrated in his category of embracing difference was affect management. He described how many enthusiasts used tattoos to illustrate their ability to overcome negative or painful affect in a highly controlled, quasi-normative way. Such tattoos are emotionally liberating as they vent emotions through the body with the process being rationalized as a normative healing mechanism. Through indirect relation to the pain involved in the tattoo process, enthusiasts might feel as if they have purged the pain of the associated trauma (such as in the case of rape or violence). Rather than passively responding to negative stimuli or the removal of positive stimuli in their lives, enthusiasts grasp the opportunity to work through their feelings through tattoos. These are highly personal acts. Atkinson concluded his theme of affect management by discussing how bodies are increasingly rationalized through the civilizing process as the skin is a communicative text. The act of tattooing demonstrated the ability to conform to cultural edicts (managing one’s emotions, being in control of one’s body) and often took the form of mimesis (imitation through re-production rather than copying).

The final theme in Atkinson’s (2003) category of embracing difference was individual difference. He introduced this theme by stating that being and looking different is a widely promoted cultural goal in Canada and other Western societies. Atkinson argued that, for some enthusiasts, tattoos are a private quest for individuality and should be viewed as a normative means of personalizing the self. He called this normative measure a “Bourgeois form of self improvement” (p. 200). The predominance
of custom made tattoos helped to assert individuality, especially in the case of meaningful one-time events. These tattoos acted as marks of positive distinction.

Motivations for tattoos have often been viewed as varied as the people receiving them (Johnson, 2007). These variations are represented through writings from areas of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Although many psychology articles today continue to examine such motivations as pathologies, recent work in the field of sociology has begun to examine the actual tattoos and what they mean to the bearers. This focus has led to an increase in the variety of perceptions represented in such writings and is more representative of tattoo enthusiasts at large.

The Tattoo Experience

There is very little empirical research on what enthusiasts experience before, during, and after the tattoo experience. The modern tattoo machine will puncture the skin approximately 60-120 times a minute, reaching a depth between one and two millimetres (Johnson, 2009). A very common question from non-tattooed individuals towards enthusiasts is ‘does it hurt?’ Chinchilla (1997) described the feeling of being tattooed as:

Well, it is a bit shocking at first, as it is electric, hot and stinging, but it is not down-right painful unless it is on a bone such as the elbow, knee or spine. Different parts of the body have varying sensitivity. Tattooing is a rite of passage, but not as radical as circumcision, childbirth, scarification or the piercing of the tongue. Some people describe it as irritating, or like a cat scratch, but mostly it is a hot sensation with a slight bite to it. Tattoos are minor abrasions, less than skinning your knee, and instead of getting a scar, you get a colourful and meaningful design of your choice. (p. 50)

She continued her description of the tattoo experience by describing the body’s automatic response to pain, “as a person receives a tattoo, their body releases endorphins and floods them with a feeling of euphoria, similar to a runner’s high” (p. 50).
Many of the accounts depicting the tattoo experience take place in tribal cultures, creating an exotic story far removed from what is practiced in Western cultures. Such accounts predominantly describe traditional Japanese tattoos (Kitamura & Kitamura, 2001) or traditional Maori tattoos from New Zealand (Johansson, 1994; Vale & Juno, 1989; Wroblewski & Heim, 1996). All of these accounts describe the intense practice of hand made tattoos (the tattooist literally hammers the needles into the flesh). In the Japanese tradition, ‘body suits’ (covering nearly the entire body except the hands, neck, face, and feet) take several years to complete requiring extreme dedication by both the tattooist and the enthusiast (Kitamura & Kitamura, 2001). In the Maori tradition, pieces such as the pe’a (imagine a pair of shorts) or the moko (facial tattoo) are deeply steeped in tradition, following familial lineages. These pieces are completed in a matter of days and are a measure of endurance (Johansson, 1994). In one account, Lyle Tuttle (a world famous tattooist) recounted the agony he endured for 5 days while receiving his pe’a, as well as the death of a fellow enthusiast whose intestines came out through his belly button as it was being tattooed (Vail & Juno, 1989). These exotic accounts are culturally rich depictions of tattoos abroad, but do not reflect the Western tattoo experience.

One scholar who did investigate the feelings of enthusiasts during and after the tattoo experience was Matthews (2009). In her study, *What Motivates a Tattoo Collector? The Psychological Study*, Matthews related that she became interested in studying the psychological implications of being tattooed because she herself enjoyed being tattooed. Her pleasure from being tattooed gave her pause for thought so she decided to study the matter more deeply. Matthews made note that many psychology writings on tattoos make the connection to pathologies, specifically that of self-injury. Many of these discussions
relating tattooing to self-injury viewed tattooing as a way of getting attention, releasing endorphins, and reducing feelings of depression or anxiety. This emphasis forced Matthews to consider if tattoo enthusiasts were simply self-injurers with too much money on their hands.

Matthews’ (2009) study had two purposes. The first was to examine the relationship between tattooing and self-injurious behaviour. She argued that if tattooing was a form of self-injury then the two concepts would be positively related. The second purpose of her study was to examine relationships between both tattooing and self-injury, to self-esteem, anxiety, body investment, and depression. She hypothesized that the degree of tattooing and self-injury should have similar relationships with those variables if being tattooed was in fact a form of self-injurious behaviour. Matthews noted that research on self-injury leads one to expect certain correlations between it and the variables. She discussed how those who self-injure are more likely to have high levels of depression and anxiety as well as lower levels of self-esteem and body investment (feelings and attitudes about one’s own body).

For her study, Matthews (2009) conducted a survey at two Californian tattoo conventions. The survey was completed by 114 men and 72 women, ranging in tattoo coverage from zero to full coverage. The degree to which one was tattooed and a psychological survey were completed by each participant. Through her research, Matthews discovered that the extent of one’s tattooing was not an indicator of psychological problems. Those with full body suits were not any more likely to exhibit depression or anxiety than those who were not tattooed at all. The relationship actually went the other way. The more tattoos an individual had, the lower his or her levels of
depression and anxiety tended to be. She described how many people reported “feeling better” (p. 85) after having a tattoo completed. Other relationships also went in the opposite direction of self-injury. Those with more tattoos tended to have higher self-esteem and body investment than those with very few or no tattoos. These findings counter what many of the stereotypes suggest about those who are heavily tattooed.

This current study follows in Matthews’ (2009) footsteps by studying the emotions felt by enthusiasts after their tattoo experience; it also examines feelings before and during the tattoo experience. Since this current study is intended to act as an educational text for those seeking to become tattooed, it gives an insider’s perspective on what it is actually like to be tattooed.

Living with Tattoos

Along with the growing trend among motivation theories to be developed by tattooed sociologists, accounts of living with tattoos are beginning to surface in academia (Atkinson, 2003; Johnson, 2007; Sanders, 2008). Sanders described how enthusiasts consistently conceive of the tattoo as having an impact on their definition of self and demonstrating to others information about themselves. All interviewees in his study spoke at great length about their social experiences with others and how the tattoo affected their identities and interactions. Many of these depictions reflected negative experiences with being stigmatized by the general public. Johnson (2007) similarly described how “it takes a strong will and a sense of self (identity) to withstand the blatant and piercing stares because of the stigma still attached that differs in every culture and
Developing this discussion on personal strength in the face of stigma, Chinchilla (1997) argued:

Concerning tattoos; our first were small and discreet, and the initial impact was minimal. But later, with larger, more radical markings, we found ourselves reacting strongly to our new choice of embellishment. There is a point where being tattooed is a profound crossing-over of learned boundaries. It takes strength of character to wear tattoos. (p. 20)

All of these accounts demonstrate the significance that visibility of tattoos plays in the lives of tattoo enthusiasts.

This idea of giving the body to be read is discussed further by Atkinson (2003). He stated that one’s identity is formed through reflections of the verbal and physical feedback offered by others in situated contexts of interaction over time. Since identity is not completely free from established cultural expectations, the self is clearly dialogical with established constructions of bodies. Atkinson believed that the interdependencies one forms over the life course provide the primary basis of identification and are, as such, central to the ongoing development of a person’s tastes and preferences for tattoos. The reactions of others are pivotal in altering the self-conceptions of enthusiasts. Enthusiasts must take the role of the other in predicting and interpreting reactions to tattoo projects.

In perceiving how tattoos are decoded by parents, children, peers, co-workers, or those sharing interdependencies, enthusiasts attribute significance to their tattoos. Atkinson (2003) acknowledged that some enthusiasts deliberately bare their bodies to be read for a series of personal, political, and cultural reasons; most of these enthusiasts understand that there is a time and place for effective dissent. Atkinson described how enthusiasts relied upon past experiences to gauge when their tattoos would spawn tolerance or hostility. Feedback from others was consequential for grasping how
representational techniques impacted the sense of self. There was, therefore, importance for enthusiasts in drawing attention to the uniquely human method of, and reactions to, self-transformation.

In his discussion on living with tattoos, Atkinson (2003) placed great emphasis on the interactions of enthusiasts with family and peers. The family unit was described by Atkinson as being the most important influence on a person’s decision to become involved with tattooing. An individual’s personality structure and corresponding self-identity were forged principally within the family through the primary socialization process. Most people, fearing backlash from family members and the weakening of family ties, will usually conform to norms promoted within the home. Since tattooing is not normative according to the established mainstream society, it is understandably met with confusion and stereotyping, particularly among the aged 40 years and over generations, for whom tattooing has traditionally denoted membership in nefarious social circles. Atkinson described how condemnation from different family members carried different weight with enthusiasts, with condemnation from parents seeming to carry the most weight. Atkinson attributed this importance to the idea that parents often have perspectives that match the established mainstream views while siblings are more sympathetic and view tattooing as tolerable deviance. In his study, 75% of the participants feared negative reactions from their parents at some point in the decision process with this fear straining their relationship. Many enthusiasts tried to ‘pass’ as being non-tattooed by being tattooed in concealed areas. Indeed, some enthusiasts lived in constant fear of their families discovering their tattoos and only shared them after years when sufficient emotional or geographical space had been created.
Although not as influential as familial responses, Atkinson (2003) believed that peer groups were critical in providing persons with a situated understanding of their actions. Peer groups are the sound circles among whom tattooing projects are the most often discussed. Peer groups, especially among tattooed peers, provided the most honest and objective feedback for enthusiasts. In general, 18-25 year olds have received more exposure to tattooed skin than any other age cohort in our social history. Within this age group, the reactions from tattooed peers are valued and closely incorporated into the self of enthusiasts.

The current study examines what it is like to live with tattoos in a similar fashion to Atkinson (2003). It differs in many respects, however. Atkinson’s study involved over 100 participants, mainly from large cities including Calgary and Toronto. The evidence he gives from participants, although insightful to the subject as a whole, do not speak of the participants themselves. The current study seeks to present each participant in such a way that the reader is able to gauge the personality of the participant beyond carefully selected quotes to illustrate a point. The current research is also centered on the interactions of a tattoo population within a small community in a rural area, giving it greater geographical focus.

Tattoo Education

All of the sociological and anthropological writings produced by tattoo enthusiasts themselves describe their initial tattoo experiences (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; Matthews, 2009; Sanders, 2008). What is common among all of these accounts is that the authors had no previous knowledge of tattooing in terms of the actual experience
itself. They describe how they entered the situation on a whim. There is actually very little information available to help persons considering a tattoo. The only writing I found that described what potential enthusiasts should look for was located in *Stewed, Screwed & Tattooed* by Madame Chinchilla (1997). She stated that, as a potential enthusiast, one needs to look for a clean environment. She advised asking around and getting references before getting a tattoo, including checking up on the shop’s reputation. Chinchilla made note that one should ask if the needles used in the shop were new. After inspecting healed tattoos from the shop and looking through the tattooist’s portfolio, if one still feels good about everything, one should then proceed to get tattooed. Additionally, Chinchilla stated that there were many things to consider when getting a tattoo, especially for women. She encouraged the reader to consider social situations where a tattoo might show because “wherever you go, your tattoo goes with you!” (p. 50). This piece of writing is the only source I could find giving advice on the tattooing process and what to look for in a studio.

In the Education Library at Queen’s University, there is only one book that discusses the subject of tattooing. This book is entitled *Everything You Need to Know about the Dangers of Tattooing and Body Piercing*, written by Reybold (1996). It is not only available in English; it has been translated into Spanish and French for mass international consumption.

This book begins with an incomplete history of tattooing and piercing, glancing over very quickly what is truly a rich history. The focus of the history account in the book is that there is little regulation around the cleanliness of tattoo studios and, if you receive a tattoo or piercing, you are inviting infection, disease, and scarring. This account notes that, in New York City, the practice of tattooing became outlawed after a hepatitis
outbreak due to unsterilized needles in the late 1950s. This account of the banning of
tattoos in New York City has been contested by McCabe (1997). While interviewing the
tattooists of New York City from the era, the story came about that the Moskowitz
brothers insulted a “lady who happened to be a big shot at city hall” (McCabe, 1997, p.
69). McCabe, using the words of the actual tattooists involved in the incident, described
how this ‘society woman’ tried every possible way to shut down the Moskowitz
brothers’, finding the solution with health issues.

The core beliefs that tattoos are health risks and criminal acts are prevalent
throughout the entire book. This general tone is emphasized with chapter titles such as
‘False Expectations’ and captions stating that tattoos and piercings are “a fad driven by
popular culture” (Reybold, 1996, p. 20). The author also related the stories of individuals
who have come to regret their tattoos but does not mention one single case where
someone has benefited from a tattoo. Such cases include women who have been raped
and reclaim their bodies through the act of tattooing (De Mello, 2000; Johnson, 2006;
Pitts, 2003).

Although published in 1996, this book is outdated. Since the time of publication,
not only has tattooing become legal again in all 50 states, New York City is one of the
cultural hubs for tattooing in the United States and has, for 13 years, hosted one of the
largest annual tattoo conventions in the country. This book is not everything you need to
know about tattoos, simply the negative connotations reflected in the social climate of the
mid 1990s.

The current research seeks to explore the dangers involved with tattooing but also
the benefits. It asks the opinions of a professional tattooist on different elements of safe
tattooing as well as the advice and recommendations of tattoo enthusiasts themselves; people who have actually been tattooed. The purpose of this research is to create an educational text for anyone who is interested in tattoos or seeks to understand those who are tattooed. This research, a tattoo education, examines why individuals become tattooed, what the tattoo experience entails, and what it is like to live with tattoos in a small, rural community. This tattoo education describes these aspects of tattooing in the words of the participants themselves to give readers a truly insider’s perspective.
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

This research is a qualitative inquiry in which the purpose of the data is to “contribute different perspectives on the issue” (Glesne, 1999, p. 31). A qualitative method was chosen because it allowed me to provide more depth and description through interviews. The exploratory nature of my research required an approach that would promote rich discussion on “opinions, perceptions, and attitudes” towards the topic (Glesne, 1999, p. 69). At the root of in-depth interviewing is “an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 3); thus individual interviews proved to be the most appropriate method. In this chapter I discuss the methods that I used in conducting this research. I begin by outlining the phases of development in this research and ethical concerns at each phase. Next I articulate my role as researcher. Then I describe the participants involved in this research. I continue further by detailing the methods implemented during data collection and analysis. I conclude with the concerns involved with the methods chosen.

Phases of Development

The initial phase of this research involved three parts. The first part of this research was to interview 6 members of my local tattoo community. It was decided that 6 interviewees would be chosen to represent both sexes as minimally involved, moderately involved, and heavily involved members of the tattoo community. Interview questions were derived from my basic research questions: Why do people get tattoos? Why do they stay minimally involved in the tattoo community (or not)? How do they view themselves
in regards to the rest of society? The second part of this research was a self-study in which I would travel the world going to tattoo conventions in North America, Europe, South America, and Asia to meet with enthusiasts and experience how tattoos are received in these areas. The third part of this research was then to interview prominent tattoo artists at these conventions. Questions were centered on their experiences in the changing global tattoo community. The objective of this research was to critically analyse the motivations and social perceptions of tattooing in my local community and to see if these findings matched other tattoo communities around the world. All research for this phase of the study was stolen in Peru, thereby forcing the termination of parts 2 and 3 from this research.

The second phase of this research focussed on my local tattoo community. After returning from Asia in late November 2008, I began the recruitment process for the 6 members of my local tattoo community that I would interview. I took a pile of information letters regarding this study to my local tattoo studio and discussed my research with the owner of the studio. He agreed to distribute the letters of information (see Appendix A) to his clients. Interested individuals were instructed to email me personally to become involved in the study. The criteria for selection included the gender of the participant and the amount of hours they had spent getting tattooed. I selected a male and female who were procuring their first tattoos, as well as a male and female with approximately 30 hours of tattooing experience, and a male and female with about 50 hours of tattooing experience. Selection was on a first-come, first-served basis. The consent letter (see Appendix B) I had created initially had the option available for the prominent tattooists I had planned to interview to reveal their real names. I extended this
offer to the participants I had selected from my local community. The participants were
given the choice of having their real names used in this study or to be given a
pseudonym; all participants chose to have their real first names used. This decision
created a sense of ownership of the information being shared. The interview questions
were designed to gain a better understanding of the motivations behind the participants’
tattoos, as well as the tattoo experience itself, and what it is like to live with tattoos (see
Appendix C).

The third phase of this research was directly linked to the termination of the
research conducted outside of the local community. As it was my intention to give the
participants in my study context within the global tattoo community, something I could
no longer perform, I decided that I needed a voice of authority from within the
community to set the context for the community. With revised ethical clearance, I
approached the tattooist of the local community and gained signed consent (see Appendix
D) for his participation in this study. Rather than using the tattooist’s first name, the
tattooist and I agreed upon a suitable pseudonym. As the tattooist is a fan of Kustom
Kulture (an American neologism used to describe the artwork, vehicles, and fashions of
the 1950s custom car and motorcycle culture) including such artists as Ed Roth and
Kenny Howard (Von Dutch), and is a proud Scotsman, we decided upon the pseudonym
Von Scotch. Interview questions were created for this participant geared specifically
towards the creation of the tattoo community, the development of the tattoo community,
and advice for people who wished to become tattooed. These questions generated insights
that helped to create context for the local tattoo community and the participants involved
in this research (see Appendix E). I also decided at this phase in the development of the
study that I would like to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants to address common themes from the first series of interviews and to document their tattoos with photographs. With ethical clearance, I acquired signed consent for both of these additions (see Appendix F).

Role of Researcher

When I conducted the study, I was a graduate student in Education as well as a heavily tattooed male in my mid twenties. I approached this research as a tattoo enthusiast, but also as a student, a teacher, as well as a member of a small community. My passion for tattoos made it relatively easy to find the passion in my participants’ answers. However, the point of my research was to learn other views and experiences. Therefore, I found myself in the role of self-reflecting (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), as I compared and contrasted experiences.

In terms of my relationships as a researcher, I have been a participant in the local tattoo community for nearly a decade. Because of this proximity to the community, I was familiar with a couple of the participants, while others I had only known through our common interactions in the tattoo community and some I had just met for this study. Due to my visible tattoos, my involvement in the tattoo community was blatant for those participants I had just met for this study. This shared experience developed immediate rapport and the effects were participants being extremely forthright in their answers and seeming to be willing to discuss any related topic I brought forth. As Patton (2002) makes note, “closeness does not make bias and loss of perspective inevitable; distance is no guarantee of objectivity” (p. 49). To stay objective, I practiced reflexivity, which forces
the qualitative researcher to be attentive and conscious of cultural, social, political, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voice of those one interviews and those to whom one reports (Patton, 2002). I used different strategies to engage reflexivity in my research including the interaction with my supervisor as a peer debriefer. As a peer debriefer, my supervisor discussed with me my preliminary analysis as well as strategies for further development. He also posed questions that helped me to understand my own posture and role in the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). I also practiced audibility, which is the practice of maintaining a record of data management techniques and decision rules that document the chain of evidence or decision trail. This decision trail includes codes, categories, and themes used in description and interpretation. The practice of audibility creates a chain of evidence that may be inspected and confirmed by outside reviewers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Participant Descriptions

*Von Scotch*

Von Scotch first became interested in tattoos in his early teens. He was tattooed for the first time at the age of 14. At the age of 19 he began to tattoo and 15 years later he is the owner of a successful tattoo studio, a husband and father of two young children.

*Chris*

Although Chris had been exposed to tattoos at a young age and became interested in them during his early teen years, he did not receive his first tattoo until the age of 26. This first tattoo, a St. Christopher (see Appendix G), took several sessions stretching
several hours and at the time of the interviews was nearly complete. Chris, although unemployed, was not actively seeking employment at the time of the interviews, spending his time building guitars and playing bass in a local punk band.

_Brittany_

Brittany first became exposed to tattoos in her early teens through significant others. Although she had a few friends who decided to get tattoos at the age of 13, Brittany waited until she was 20. This tattoo, a geisha girl (see Appendix H), took nearly 8 hours to complete and was finished during the time of the interviews. Brittany was employed on a construction site at the time of the interviews, working several weeks at a time without a day off.

_Al_

Al used to draw on his arms in high school classes but was never seriously interested in body art until the passing of his grandfather. At age 19, Al received his first tattoo, his grandfather’s name across his left pectoral muscle. Since then Al has undergone nearly 30 hours of tattooing, covering most of his front torso (see Appendix I). Al worked for a plumbing and piping service at the time of the interviews, predominantly working night shifts.

_Melanie_

Melanie first became interested in tattoos during her early teens. She waited until the age of 18 to receive her first tattoo, a wing on her back. Her mother who accompanied her at the time received a matching wing. Since then Melanie has over 30 hours of tattooing covering a large portion of her petite body (see Appendix J). Melanie was
employed as a bartender in a local pub as well as an apprentice at the local tattoo studio at the time of these interviews.

*John*

John first became interested in tattoos in his early teens. Within a week or so of turning 18, John took his first sitting in the tattooist’s chair. His first tattoo, an alien ripping out of his back, took several sessions and many hours to complete. John had nearly 50 hours of tattooing on his body at the time of these interviews covering half his back, his right thigh, his right bicep, and his left calf (see Appendix K). John was employed as a safety technician in a nuclear power plant at the time of these interviews.

*Ashley*

Ashley first became interested in tattoos when she went to boarding school as a young teenager. She was tattooed by the time she was 16. Ashley spent the next 10 years getting tattooed quite regularly until she began to have children, accumulating well over 50 hours of tattooing over most of her body (see Appendix L). Ashley was raising two small children at the time of these interviews. She was also self-employed part-time, producing artisan cheese for farmers’ markets. She and Von Scotch are married.

**Data Collection**

Data collection began in early January and ended in mid-April 2009. Individual interviews were conducted in the local community at locations where the participants felt they were comfortable interacting. Each participant was interviewed twice. All interviews followed a semi-structured format (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999); the first interview asked questions about personal histories and the tattoo experience itself, while the second
interview focused on a more in-depth examination of experiences living with tattoos. I discovered in my analysis of the first interviews that I needed much more description and discussion of experiences living with tattoos. Thus the second interviews served to clarify and expand upon issues the participants raised in the first interview (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), while checking for internal consistency (Seidman, 1998).

While a certain level of flexibility encouraged discussion on perceptions and feelings, a certain level of structure and standardization ensured “comparability and less difficulty in data analysis” (Silverman, 1993, pp. 92-93). To ensure trustworthiness of the research, the second interviews addressed any points that I needed clarified from the first interviews. In addition, participants' own words were used to convey the data. After the transcription of interviews, field notes were recorded directly onto the transcribed sheets. The field notes helped me to record “notes about patterns that seemed to be emerging” (Glesne, 1999, p. 49). All participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts.

The interviews promoted lively discussion and uncovered participants' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences involving tattoos in their lives. The method of individual interviews also provided the space and freedom for participants to share feelings and relate to other salient topics. Each interview with the tattoo enthusiasts took 45-60 minutes and was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview with the tattooist was 90 minutes, tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. All follow-up interviews were 15 minutes in length, tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants' exact words were transcribed to provide direct quotes in their descriptions. The method of verbatim accounts allowed for distinct portraits of each participant, thereby presenting
seven case studies. I found this method most suitable because “each case study research shares an intense interest in personal views and circumstances” (Stake, 2000, p. 447).

Interview transcripts were 89 pages in total. Each portrait of the tattoo enthusiasts averaged 5 pages, while the portrait of the tattooist and the community as a whole was 15 pages. Excerpts from interviews were chosen according to their relevancy and descriptiveness of a theme. It was imperative that the participants' ideas, feelings, and descriptions were presented as accurately as possible (Yin, 1994). Thus verbatim transcripts and direct quotes were vital in the analysis. Unquoted interview portions were either summarized or paraphrased in the portraits, depending on the relevancy. Any unused interview material was deemed grammatically unclear, lengthy, or redundant to include in a 5-page portrait.

Data Analysis

I used a system of coloured highlighters to identify “units of data”- ideas, words and terms, in the transcribed interviews (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). The data were thematically analyzed by placing the units of data into categories. I used categories that emerged from the data as opposed to borrowed categories because emergent categories are usually the most relevant and the best matched to the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As I read each transcript, I highlighted different words or ideas. After I had finished reading through all the transcriptions, I wrote down all the units of data collected from each interview in my audibility record. I then looked for patterns in the occurrence of similar units of data appearing in different interviews. If a unit of data presented itself in more than one interview I assigned this unit of data a symbol, which I placed next to
the written out unit in the audibility record. This visual representation helped to “assist in making meaning of the data, as well as exposing the gaps or areas where more data are needed” (Glesne, 1999, p. 141).

Data from the first interviews were thematically analyzed (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Through multiple readings of the interview transcripts, my initial rough analysis produced 12 themes common to all participants as tattoo enthusiasts. These themes were as follows: life representation in tattoos, visibility of tattoos, early teen interest in tattoos, advice for tattoos, the best element of tattooing, the worst element of tattooing, reasons for choosing specific tattoo artist, body plan for tattoos, positive reactions towards their tattoos, negative reactions towards their tattoos, memorable reactions from parents towards their tattoos, and community/social outlook (local and society at large). To organize the themes in a more manageable and compact form, my next step was to place them into four broad categories. I considered the following four categories and their themes:

(a) Visibility: positive reactions, negative reactions, and memorable reactions from parents.

(b) The Tattoo Experience: reasons for choosing specific artist, best element of tattooing, and worst element of tattooing.

(c) Enthusiasts: early teen interest, life representation, body plan, and advice.

(d) Context: community/social outlook.

After my initial analysis, I read the work of Matthews (2008) and discovered that I needed more data in one particular area, which was “The Tattoo Experience.” Thus my second interviews concentrated heavily on the participants’ tattoo experiences, especially
after the tattoo had been completed and (for enthusiasts with many tattoos) throughout each tattoo experience. This approach allowed the analysis to be much more focused. With the help of my peer debriefer, I decided to organize the data in a portrait format rather than the thematic approach. This method proved to be more beneficial as it effectively captured the voice of each participant and created continuity in each portrait. I re-evaluated my four themes and condensed them into two final themes. These themes were organized as follows: The Tattoo Experience and Living with Tattoos. The Tattoo Experience focused on how each participant encountered his or her first tattoo experience (as it was a benchmark applicable to all participants) before, during, and after the experience. For those participants with more than one experience, this theme also examined their subsequent tattoo experiences. Living with Tattoos was a combination of Visibility and Context. I used the remaining data from the Enthusiasts theme to create introductions to the participants in their profiles that helped to establish personal motivations behind their tattoos. Once the themes for data analysis were set, I returned to the literature and organized my literature review to match the themes, reading additional sources in each area.

Concerns

I had two concerns about data analysis before I began this study. First, I would be working with a limited sample in that all of my participants would come from the same geographical area and would be predominantly white, middle-class. However, my research was of an exploratory nature, and my goal was not to generalize from my findings (Yin, 1994). In addition, by using these participants, I was able to gather
information-rich, in-depth data to illustrate the motivational and day-to-day issues in my study.

Second, my personal biases would be present during the course of this research. However, remaining conscious of these biases helped reduce my preconceptions of what I observed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Being aware of my biases and practicing reflexivity assisted me in maintaining objectivity during the data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the participants’ perspectives were presented in their own words.
CHAPTER 4: CONTEXT OF A TATTOO COMMUNITY

Tattooist: Von Scotch

It is the early evening. The air is fresh and for miles all one can see is farmland and far off forests. This location is probably as far from the neon glow of traditional urban tattoo studios as one can get. Arriving at the family farmhouse, I am greeted by the family dog. As I enter the home I find Von Scotch (a pseudonym) sitting with his nearly one-year-old daughter on his lap in the living room. This is the only time in his hectic day that Von Scotch can sit with me to discuss the local tattoo community.

Von Scotch begins the interview by relating his personal history. Von Scotch was born in Etobicoke, Ontario in 1975 to Scottish immigrant parents. He moved to Waldemar at the age of 4 and completed all his education in the local community. After high school Von Scotch moved to Toronto to work for a year and then to attend the Ontario College of Arts. He describes how the school was undergoing a lot of changes in the time that he was there, and he really questioned whether he would continue with the program or go elsewhere. Von Scotch explains that, at this point in time at age 19, he went into a tattoo studio looking to get tattooed, and, when he showed the owner his sketchbook, he was offered an apprenticeship. The apprenticeship was a “sort of hang about” at the shop that lasted over a year and a half. Through this apprenticeship, Von Scotch became quite serious about learning tattooing techniques, purchasing his first tattoo machine in 1995 and doing his first tattooing in the same year. He then worked in Toronto tattooing for 3 years before leaving for New York City. After nearly 9 months in New York, Von Scotch returned home for Christmas in 1998. Although he had plans to
work in Sweden that upcoming fall, the plans fell through because his “little temporary
tattoo scenario” (located in the back room of a barber shop) had grown into a “reasonably
busy tattoo scenario,” and he felt compelled to see how it would develop. It has been 10
years since.

The Life of a Tattooist

“You do a good tattoo on somebody, it just lights up their whole existence and that’s a
really great feeling to be a part of that for someone” (I, p. 7).¹

Von Scotch is a husband and father of two young children. His typical day begins
with waking up with his children and having breakfast with his family around 8 o’clock.
Usually he will leave the house between 9 and 10, aiming to be at the tattoo studio for 10.
When he arrives at the studio, he commences to prepare for the day, which starts at 11.
He usually begins his days with consultations with clients concerning the subject matter
of upcoming tattoos. After these consultations, Von Scotch will tattoo between 6 and 8
hours over the course of the day. Although the shop’s business hours are 11-5, Von
Scotch often stays later and, if he is lucky, he will make it home in time for dinner with
his family. After dinner, he spends the rest of the evening with his family until bedtime.
After putting his kids to bed and waiting for everyone to be asleep, Von Scotch will get
up and begin drawing from 10 or 11 o’clock until 1 or 2 in the morning. This drawing
workload will vary from week to week:

Depending on how much of a drawing load I have, if I’m lucky that week and I
have a lot of clients with work in progress, then I don’t have much of a drawing
load. Even in weeks like that, if I’m smart I try to work a little bit on drawing so
I’m not overloaded the next week when I have a bunch of people to draw for. (I,
p. 6)

¹ The roman numeral I or II refers to the interview with the particular participant (first or second). The page
number refers to the transcript page.
The greatest element of being a tattooist for Von Scotch is being able to make a living doing something that he really loves and feeling like he’s having a pretty positive impact on people’s lives. He continues by describing that there are not too many avenues for creative artists to make a living today and that tattooing is a pretty good avenue. He feels “blessed that it is something I enjoy and I feel I’ve become decent at. It’s a pretty awesome way to make a living and I feel pretty lucky” (I, p. 7)

The worst element of being a tattooist for Von Scotch is having homework every night. He relates that there are times when he is a little bit envious of people who get out at 5 o’clock and not think about their job at all until the next day. “But would I trade that for this? I don’t think so” (I, p. 7). Von Scotch also mentions that, as a self-employed business owner, he feels more stress than if he was working in a shop for someone else:

You can still be a tattooer and not have to worry about that burden if you want to work for somebody else but being here I had to have my own shop because there was nobody to do it for me. That’s one of those things that are like a necessary burden that you have to take on. (I, p. 7)

Tattooing is not a regulated industry and, because of this lack of regulation, the personal ethics of a tattooist can be of great importance in ensuring a positive experience. Some of Von Scotch’s basic ethics include not tattooing anyone under the age of 18. This is an arbitrary benchmark he has set with his shop to correspond with the legal age of majority in Ontario. Other ethics include cleanliness and sterility and maintaining that everyone gets a safe tattoo, “everyone leaves just as healthy as they came in” (I, p. 8).

Part of the ethics involved in tattooing for Von Scotch is refusing to tattoo something a person is not prepared to live their lives with, “for example tattooing someone’s hand when they’ve never had a tattoo before or tattooing their face or neck or whatever, that maybe you would do for somebody else in a heartbeat without questioning it but not for
this person” (I, p. 8). When Von Scotch encounters a situation where he needs to refuse a
tattoo he will explain to the person why he is objecting. He might suggest a different
location for the tattoo or perhaps a different way of representing what the person is trying
to express. He believes that if you take the time to explain why you are not willing to
work on people based on years of experience, they usually find the advice to be “sincere”
and at bare minimum give “pause for thought.”

Perhaps one of the most important ethics for Von Scotch is creating a positive
experience for each and every one of his clients:

I think part of the ethic of tattooing for me is doing the best work you can on
somebody whether they’re getting a 20-minute flash piece or a full custom back
piece because it’s significant to them and they deserve your effort and care in that
job as much as anybody else does. From a strictly business point of view, I’ve
learned from experience that the person who you really take the time to pay
attention to and do a really nice job of that tiny, seemingly insignificant flash
piece is the person who might come back 6 months or a year later and want like a
full arm sleeve, or a back piece or a leg, that as a tattooist you might be more
jazzed up about. But if you treat them with disrespect when they come in and just
shrug off their tattoo and think it’s something stupid and slap it on them, and
that’s the experience they get from you, it’s not going to be your shop they come
back to if they decide to get another tattoo. Depending on how poor of an
experience they have they may never get tattooed again and then you’ve done a
disservice to tattooing as a whole. (I, p. 9)

The first step Von Scotch takes in creating a positive experience for his clients
begins with the atmosphere of the studio. Von Scotch likes to keep an “open, comfortable
atmosphere” in the studio where “people feel welcome coming in there. Not with being
all flowery and holding their hands, but letting people know that they’re in a place where
they can trust the artist working on them” (I, p. 9). An important element of the
atmosphere for Von Scotch is the music he plays, which ranges from drum and bass
electronic music to gypsy punk. Although he is willing to accommodate any customer's
musical tastes, Von Scotch describes how his personal music selection is often music that
the customer has never heard of and adds to the “Other” experience.

Von Scotch feels that tattooing is inherently “a spiritual or profound experience
without necessarily dressing it up and overdoing it in the garb of being some profound
mystical thing, it’s just that on its own” (I, p. 9). He maintains that you can still be loose
and have fun with tattooing in a laid back way and not take away from it if that’s the
experience you are looking for:

Some people want a really fun, loose, hooligan experience from the whole thing there, they’re hoping to get a cool tattoo and have this rock and roll experience while other people want to have this deep, mystical tattoo experience and being able to accommodate both those kinds of extremes is valuable for a tattooist. (I, p. 9)

When questioned about any fears he has as a tattooist, Von Scotch speaks of a
small fear that is constantly in the back of his mind, “screwing up that next tattoo.” He describes a “tiny little seed” inside of him that “appreciates the fact that even though I’ve done this thousands of times before, if I don’t get into the zone and buckle down and pay attention to what I’m doing and really do this, I could screw this up” (I, p. 10). Tattoos are permanent, and, although some elements of a tattoo can be fixed, this “tiny little seed” constantly reminds Von Scotch to be respectful of the fact that tattooing isn’t something to be messed around with. He describes this as a small, background fear because ultimately he has confidence when he sits down to create a tattoo, “the moment that needle touches the skin I know I’m going to be in the zone and I know that everything’s going to be fine. I’m going to pull it off and the tattoo is going to look great” (I, p. 10). Von Scotch argues that in a lot of ways you are only as good as your last tattoo and that
he wants to make sure that each one is as good or better than the last; it is something of which he is always keenly aware.

However, Von Scotch has an even greater fear: not living up to the standards of those tattooists who came before him.

I always had this fear since I started tattooing that I wasn’t good enough, that I wasn’t good enough to be carrying this torch that so many people had lit before me. It was always something that drove and pushed me. I have this little postcard of Sailor Jerry [a pioneer of tattooing in America] above my station with this little thought bubble saying ‘I’m watching you boy!’ and it’s just because I always imagined, not necessarily Sailor Jerry but what he embodies, that whole tradition of tattooing all these guys who fought it out in the trenches and fought to elevate tattooing to what it’s become now. I almost feel like I’ve had that to live up to. I at least owed it to tattooing as an art form to do the best that I possibly could to carry on that tradition. So that’s always been one of my greatest fears, to drop the ball or fall short and not do justice to what so many people had built before me. It’s a personal belief for me. (I, p. 11)

After tattooing for 14 years and running his own shop for 10, Von Scotch describes his greatest achievement as:

Being able to come home to my little home town, which never had a tattoo shop previously, and to be able to not just open a shop but to be able to thrive and actually have got what I see as a significant level of appreciation and understanding about tattooing from the general public here and to have been welcomed and sustained so warmly here by the community and the outlying communities has been huge. (I, p. 13)

Von Scotch describes how he now feels like he has to ask himself “What’s next? Where will I go from here? What’s my next step? How do I take my work further?” (I, p. 13).

Von Scotch expresses excitement over not knowing where his next “droplet of information” (I, p. 13) will come from, and it sometimes comes from the most unusual places. He also states, “It’s exciting to constantly be pushed. Tattooing has pushed me further than any other artist endeavour I’ve ever done” (I, p. 13).
Von Scotch’s future goals, simply put, are to “just keep improving...to keep pushing myself as an artist and a technician” (I, p. 11). He explains:

As an artist you’re always looking at your own stuff and wondering where can I go next what can I do to express the ideas I have better, what could I do to add more vibrancy or more dimension to the graphic language that I am particularly using at this given point. There’s so much, and it’s so overwhelming and just when you think that you might have some kind of grasp on something, you look at the way that half a dozen other people are doing it and you’re like ‘damn I didn’t even think about that! That’s amazing!’ and it’s just great, it’s inspiring, it’s a really competitive art form and I want to be constantly pushing myself because I feel that there’s so many more levels that I could try to attain and there’s so many people out there who are inspiring to me and are doing things with their tattooing that I don’t necessarily want to mimic but I want to incorporate into what I do and try to see those same qualities in the work that I can produce. There’s so much more to learn, tattooing is a really multi-faceted craft. We’ve talked a lot about the artistic side of it, but there’s this whole technical side to it too and understanding the machines and understanding pigments and understanding the skin and understanding the psychology of it and the relationship between the tattooist and client, it’s just so much it’s like one of those things that’s a lifetime pursuit. (I, p. 11)

The Beginning of a Tattoo Community

“We were punk rock little skateboard kids, and we were getting tattooed and living large and it was all we wanted” (I, p. 5).

Von Scotch received his first tattoo at the age of 14. His older friend Darko (a pseudonym) had been tattooed by an old school tattooist in Kitchener, Ontario. After having received a few tattoos, Darko decided to give tattooing a try himself. Darko’s budding career as a tattooist grew into tattoo marathons at a friend’s parents’ cottage (while the parents were away) in which Von Scotch as a young teenager took part:

The moment they pulled out of the driveway we’d be in the house rearranging the kitchen, sliding the glass coffee table into the kitchen to work off of. Like doing a convention, Darko would literally tattoo all weekend on all of our friends, like practically 48 hours straight, and then right before they got home we’d clean everything up and put it all back and spray it all down. (I, p. 5)
Von Scotch reveals that, although these early tattoos, his first being a dragon design, were at a beginner’s level, all of his friends were thrilled with their new ink.

Moving forward, Von Scotch relates the first time he himself tattooed. He reveals that the first person he tattooed was himself. Von Scotch describes the Tibetan mask he tattooed on himself as something he had always gravitated towards but never intended to tattoo. After this experience and tattooing a few close friends, Von Scotch was encouraged to keep tattooing and was granted permission to work on small pieces at the shop where he worked. Most of the work done at the shop was specifically Tribal designs and doing this solid black work taught Von Scotch the importance of line weight, flow, the way tattoos work on the body, and the balance of positive and negative space: all elements he still incorporates to this day.

Describing Waldemar at the time when he opened his shop, Von Scotch reveals “there almost was no tattoo scene here” (I, p. 2).

There was little really, very little awareness of anything that was going on in any kind of a global or modern sense for that matter. Without even saying global tattoo scene, very few people even had become aware of what tattooing had become in the last 25 years and they had seen the work from like street shops and scratchers, most of it mediocre at best. I sort of opened up really quietly in the back of a barber shop. I put out a few posters and I let people know I was around and almost entirely through word of mouth people started coming in to get work done. I sort of made it my mission to try to, I mean to the best of my ability because I was still a pretty junior tattooist at that point, to show people what was possible as far as tattoo goes and introducing the concept of custom work rather than just getting something off the wall, that was all they had any idea about. (I, p. 2)

Von Scotch describes the tattoos that people were interested in during this time being reflective of a rural community because “being a rural somewhat conservative area, you’re always going to get people that have fairly conservative ideas about what they want to get as a tattoo” (I, p. 2). In the same breath, Von Scotch describes other types of
tattoo enthusiasts who existed at this time as people who were interested in something more than what they found on a wall: people who shared common interests with Von Scotch in the world of tattoos. The kind of things Von Scotch mentions as interesting him at that time were Japanese tattoos, American working class tattoos, and artistic tattoos in general. He claims to have become interested in these styles through global travels into the world of tattoos.

Von Scotch describes his travels throughout this initial period as “indispensable to me, it was the only way I could justify being here the way that I was here” (I, p. 3). He mentions attending conventions in American cities such as Pittsburgh and New York City as well as European cities such as Berlin. To go to these conventions and meet the artists who were icons to Von Scotch was an extremely valuable learning experience:

because it was a rural community with a relatively cheap cost of living at the time, it allowed me to have a small shop and work at a moderate pace and still save money enough that I could travel 2 or 3 times a year to Europe and go to these conventions and be totally immersed in what was at that point as far as I was concerned the cutting edge of what tattooing was becoming. (I, p. 3)

These European travels influenced Von Scotch’s work in a great manner. He brought what he learned overseas home into his work in Waldemar. Von Scotch reminisces about those times:

I would come back here and I would bury myself in my little shop and I would try as much as I could to digest everything I learned in those few weeks or month or whatever that I had been over there and it was a way for me, there was a nice sort of ebb and flow process, going over there getting totally charged and coming back here and working out those ideas. (I, p. 3)
The Tattoo Community Today

“I think there’s a lot more of an awareness and an eagerness to get cool tattoos” (I, p. 3).

Von Scotch describes the current tattoo community in Waldemar as “really vibrant and active” (I, p. 3). He notes that, due to the popularity of tattoos in media, represented through television and print, the general public is much more comfortable towards tattoos and has much more access to different information sources. In the current tattoo community, “there’s a lot more of an awareness and an eagerness to get cool tattoos and definitely to get bigger tattoos than what people were comfortable with 10 years ago. More creative and custom work” (I, p. 3). He comments on his influence in this transformation:

I would like to think in my own small way, the things I try to promote in my work, adhering as what I sort of see as the values of traditional tattoo design aesthetics, that it seems like I created a taste for that kind of work here among my clientele. (I, p. 4)

Due to an overwhelming demand for his art work for the past 2 and a half years, Von Scotch has held “Walk-In Fridays” throughout the summer months. These are days when anyone can walk into the studio and put her or his name on a list to be tattooed, as long as the work can be done in a 2-hour time frame. Von Scotch created these days to try to accommodate clients who want smaller work and don’t want to wait for his year-long waiting list to tick away. These days typically begin with Von Scotch showing up to the studio by 8 o’clock, consulting with each person on the list and beginning to tattoo by 9. On average he will tattoo between 8 and 12 people in a day and is at the shop often until 12 or 1 o’clock in the morning; on rare occasions Von Scotch has stayed as late as 3. Von Scotch describes the benefits of walk-in days:
Those days are really fun because they’re fast paced and they force you to think on your feet and force you to do a lot of creative work on the spot. I wouldn’t want to make a career out of it but it’s really fun to do and I feel like it affects the way I design other stuff when I do have the time to take over the drawing. I still think about the efficiency and the simplicity that is required for that kind of work and going back to what I was saying about the traditional aesthetic, that stuff was all designed to be very efficient and put on very easy as well but still readable and getting all the visual information across that was intended. That’s something I try to put into all of my work, even if I do have the time to sit down and draw it out and take a long time with it. (I, p. 6)

Further describing the clientele with whom he works, Von Scotch acknowledges that there is no “average” client and that he tattoos “as random a slice of the population as you can imagine” (I, p. 4). He describes working in large cities such as Toronto or New York City and how there is a more narrow demographic in those areas; making generalizations of clientele much easier. Von Scotch relates that in that kind of a market a shop can specialize in a particular genre of tattoo, and, with having so many people surrounding you in such a small area, you can “be a sort of specialist vibe and a specialist shop and draw in whatever type of market you’re after” (I, p. 4). In Waldemar, however, Von Scotch works with a huge selection of clients of all ages, involving both sexes and touching every echelon of society with respect to people’s social status. Although many of the clients who frequent Von Scotch’s shop are from the local community of Waldemar, many travel from far-off locations. Von Scotch has had clients fly from as far as Germany and the United Kingdom as well as driving hundreds of kilometres from places such as Michigan or Upstate New York. On a slightly less far-ranging level, Von Scotch has clients drive from all over southern and central Ontario on a regular basis to get tattooed and, as Von Scotch appreciates, “quite often from where they’ve come, they’ve probably drove past a dozen tattoo shops to get here” (I, p. 4).
As there is no such thing as a typical or average client for Von Scotch, there is no typical or average relationship:

Every person who comes into the shop comes at it from a different angle and different desires and different ideas of what they’re looking for out of a tattoo. So you have to be many different things to many different people. On a basic level, they’re coming to you with ideas about something that they want to express or something that they want to wear as a tattoo. As the artist, especially a custom artist, it’s my job to interpret those ideas and make suggestions as far as what I think will make the most successful tattoo for them; not only from the point of answering their goals in what they want to get with their tattoo but also making something that is aesthetically pleasing and works with the body. (I, p. 7)

Von Scotch describes the role of the tattooist in this relationship as being a sort of “medium” (I, p. 8). After the tattoo has been discussed and designed, it is also the job of the tattooist to be a technician and apply that design to the client’s skin in a way that’s going to heal nicely, look good, and stay with him or her forever as a technically sound tattoo. There is a lot of trust involved in this relationship as the clients trust the artist to leave them with a tattoo that meets their needs and look great while the artist is asking for the trust of the clients to have enough leeway in the design to create a certain aesthetic:

As a tattooist you see thousands of people throughout the course of a career and you’re never going to remember all the names and you’re never going to remember all the tattoos. Depending on how good your memory is you might remember some of them or a few of them or hardly any of them but every single person who sits in your chair will have you burned into their memory forever. Sometimes the most subtle things you do in that process will stay with them for the rest of their lives. (I, p. 17)

A client’s motivation for a tattoo is not something that is always directly stated, but it usually is revealed at some point in the process of tattooing. When asked to describe the general motivation behind his clients’ tattoos, Von Scotch states:

As far as motivation goes, I guess that’s so individual and so varied that it does run the gambit of every possible reason from things as simple as vanity and taste right up to the most complex concepts about life and death, love, family, belonging and community. Ultimately, at the core of almost all tattoos, is a need
for transformation. Whether people are trying to transform some deeply significant part of their lives, be it their spiritual lives or their family lives or what be it, or if they’re simply transforming the way their arm looks or their leg looks. Whether it has a really deep connotation for them or if it is something more surface and they’re doing it for the beauty of it or the coolness of it, there’s a real conscious act of transformation going on there on everybody’s part, wanting to become something they weren’t before. (I, p. 8)

When Von Scotch considers the global tattoo scene today, he believes that the “old timers” would be completely elated with some aspects and totally disgusted with other aspects. He believes that it is good for tattooing to be popular, but that, in some ways, this popularity “cheapens” tattooing when it becomes “the sort of bubblegum carnival it is today” (I, p. 12). Von Scotch does not get “bent out of shape” over this trend. He believes that if a television show depicting a “bunch of tattooers acting like goofballs” inspires potential clients to visit his shop and give him the opportunity to show them the side of tattooing that Von Scotch “believes in,” he cannot completely look down upon it (I, p. 12).

Von Scotch admits that he works in his shop far too much to give an accurate comment on the state of tattooing in the world. He does feel “very positive” about the state of tattooing in Waldemar. “Tattooing has become so big and so common and so accepted that there are just so many more facets to tattooing now” (I, p. 12). Describing the current state of tattooing and where it may lead, Von Scotch articulates:

I think in the end tattooing has been around forever and it will probably continue to be around forever. It’s going to go through the same ebbs and flows and rises and falls in popularity and acceptability that it always has and in the end all this stuff will come out in the wash. If, like a lot of people are predicting, that tattooing is at a crest right now and that the bottom’s going to fall out and a whole tonne of stuff is going to crash and people are going to be out of business, I think the people who are really passionate and dedicated to tattooing and the people who have really been good to tattooing, whatever that means, tattooing will be good to them. It will still be there and they will still be able to do what they do and tattooing will go on. (I, p. 12)
Von Scotch discusses his interactions with the local community and relates that he has been tattooed for so long that he almost takes it for granted. He says that he is always aware that, whether he likes it or not, he is an obviously tattooed person and as a business owner in the community, sometimes he feels like he needs to act as an ambassador for tattooing. As this “ambassador,” he feels that he has a responsibility when people look at him and perhaps make judgements about tattooed people based on his actions; but he tries to not to get “too carried away with it” (I, p. 15). Von Scotch describes how, in the warmer months in Waldemar, you can see many tattoos and this number is reflective of how the general community is much more relaxed and open to the idea of tattoos than perhaps 10 or 25 years ago. He tells of how visits to other rural Ontario communities, where there are no tattoo studios, can still draw attention although, in Waldemar, “people know who we are” (I, p. 15). Von Scotch tells me that such attention has never bothered him. He also relates that he would have to think very hard to recall an experience of being discriminated because of his tattoos. He describes that, in any situation where someone is on a face-to-face level with another person and given 2 minutes to show who they really are, the non-tattooed general public usually are comfortable to simply “let you be who you are and let them be who they are” (I, p. 15). Von Scotch argues that, if the general public see that you're not an idiot, and if you are “a person just like they are” (I, p. 15), most people cannot be bothered with appearances. He believes that this is not how the case would have been 30 years ago and that this fact alone speaks volumes of where the general public's opinions of tattoos are leading:

So maybe that says a lot about our society in general and how far we’ve come in accepting tattoos, that even the people who are totally not into it have been slowly eroded over time to the point where they don’t really give it that much of a
thought any more. I found it to be as much a benefit as I ever have a drawback. I could probably list you way more instances in my life where people have seen my tattoos and that’s opened doors for me or gravitated people towards me than I’ve ever had shut them and I think that’s pretty cool. I think that says a lot about where tattooing has gotten today as well. (I, p. 15)

*Tattoo Advice*

“Do you feel like the people there are professional or do you get that icky ‘no’ feeling in the pit of your stomach?” (I, p. 16)

Tattooing involves blood and where there is blood there can be blood borne pathogens. Diseases such as AIDS and Hepatitis C can be spread with dirty needles, and it is therefore important for people interested in becoming tattooed to be educated in the health and safety aspects of tattooing. Von Scotch suggests that people interested in becoming tattooed should feel welcome to see the type of set up the artist uses to tattoo them, to ensure its cleanliness, as well as making sure that single-use needles and tubes that are either disposable or are properly sterilized are used. Von Scotch believes that a studio shouldn’t be secretive about showing you where its autoclave and scrub room are if you feel like you would like to see them. Walking into a shop for the first time and saying ‘let me see your clean room’ may rub some people the wrong way, but Von Scotch argues that you should be guaranteed that they’re using single-use equipment and inks in disposable cups. It also shouldn’t be out of the question to take a look at the artist who’s potentially going to tattoo you and watch his or her work habits. While watching a potential artist work, Von Scotch recommends looking for clean procedures:

Are they touching stuff with dirty gloves and then going back to tattooing? You can’t expect the general public to be all that well educated about what goes into clean procedure and what doesn’t but there are certain benchmark things like sterile tubes and needles, and certainly in this day and age, a lot of people use bagged equipment. Soap bottles should be bagged, cords should be bagged. From your general impressions, does the shop look clean? Do you feel like the people
there are professional or do you get that icky ‘no’ feeling in the pit of your stomach? Then maybe you should listen to that and maybe look around and see. (I, p. 16)

Von Scotch argues that people should familiarize themselves with tattoo studios before getting tattooed. He believes that instead of going to one tattoo studio, a prospective client should visit 5 or 10 studios because each will give the client its own vibe. He believes you have found the right studio when you have a gut feeling that says “this feels pretty good. I feel like I can trust these people and maybe this is where I should think about getting my tattoo” (I, p. 16)

After you have been assured of the health and safety of a studio, aesthetics then come into consideration. Von Scotch believes that you could go to the cleanest shop in the world, but if the artist can’t draw or doesn’t do work that looks nice, you will not get the tattoo you desire. On the contrary, it is still not a good idea to go to an artist who does great work but with whom you end up getting sick. These are what Von Scotch refers to as “double criteria”:

That’s why research is so important and you shouldn’t just be happy with looking at one or two shops and making your decision. Ultimately, you’re trying to find somewhere that is doing a whole bunch of things that as a package offer a safe environment for tattooing but they also have a whole separate set of skills that make them a competent artist and a competent technician and that’s going to be able to put this thing on your body and make you look great and complement you and satisfy your artistic and expressive needs. (I, p. 16)

Von Scotch admits that this is a lot to ask from one person but it is “something you gotta do.” He also advises considering a third criterion, which is the personality of the artist. “It doesn’t hurt if the person is nice” (I, p. 16). Von Scotch relates that he would not want to sit in a chair for 4 or 5 hours with a guy poking needles in him only to think 10 minutes into the tattoo that “this guy’s an asshole.” He speaks of personal friends who have gotten
great tattoos and, when he compliments them on their tattoos, they say “yeah but that guy’s a sonofabitch! I would never get tattooed by him again. It’s a great tattoo but he was a dick from beginning to end of the experience” (I, p. 17).

The Importance of Tattoo Education

“You put it on the table so they know what to think about” (II, p. 1).

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to welcome Von Scotch into my grade 10 Career Studies class as a guest speaker. He spoke to the students about tattooing, the risks and benefits involved and owning his own business while leaving time for the multiple questions the students had. Von Scotch describes the experience as “really important” and “beneficial for the kids because how often do they get exposed to that kind of thing as a kid?” (II, p. 1). As he says, people usually only receive second- or third-hand information. This information usually comes from friends who have been in a tattoo studio. He relates that it was a great opportunity to share information with students at an age when they will begin thinking about tattoos in the next couple of years. “It’s good to plant those seeds about things to be aware of and what the dangers are and what the benefits are if it’s done properly and those kinds of things” (II, p. 2).

Discussing the reaction he received from the students, Von Scotch states “it was a really positive reaction.” He relates that the students made him a thank you card filled with their comments and really enjoyed having him there. Von Scotch found this reaction to be amazing considering that almost none of the students wanted to become tattooists; they were just really interested in tattoos and what Von Scotch had to say. When it comes to the importance of tattoo education, Von Scotch believes:

Tattooing, like most things, is in a sense a kind of ‘buyer beware’ product. There’s every range of tattoo experience available from totally filthy, backroom,
inexperienced, dangerous tattooing right up to the highest levels of elite professionalism and mastery of the art form and there’s everything in between. I think arming yourself with as much knowledge as you can before you set out to make a decision about where you’re going to get tattooed and what you’re going to get and that kind of stuff can only be beneficial. (II, p. 3)

Von Scotch is largely responsible for the growth and development of the tattoo scene in Waldemar. Before Von Scotch, the closest professional tattoo studios in the area were between 150-175 kilometres away. His enthusiasm for quality, driven by travels throughout Europe and North America, has developed a taste for a truly world-class aesthetic among his clientele. This aesthetic has characterized the tattoo scene in Waldemar and continues to spread as more and more people become introduced to tattoos through Von Scotch’s clientele. Although the job is physically demanding (strained eyes, hands, and back), Von Scotch has created a home in Waldemar and will be shaping this tattoo community for decades to come.
CHAPTER 5: TATTOO ENTHUSIAST PROFILES

Tattoo Enthusiast: Chris

The room is filled with drum and bass music and the sound of tattoo machines keeping the beat with their signature buzzing hum. Sitting in the tattooist’s chair is an average-built 26-year-old male named Chris wearing only a t-shirt and boxer shorts. Looking at Chris, only one tattoo, the one being worked on, is visible. This is Chris’ first tattoo. The tattoo depicts an old, bearded St. Christopher carrying a baby Jesus across a dangerous river amidst a menacing storm. The tattoo covers ¾ of Chris’ left thigh. When questioned about the meaning behind such a tattoo, Chris relates “It’s one of those kind of symbols that you know even people who aren’t very religious can recognize” (I, p. 3). Jokingly, he states that the tattoo is more than simply a pictorial representation of his given name.

Chris describes himself as an average guy of his age. He discusses his passion for travel. He divulges stories of travels that stretch over a year in length and include destinations such as Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Thailand. St. Christopher is a common icon to travellers, and Chris relates that, when he was trying to decide on a tattoo design, he wanted to incorporate this travel element. He then shares a deeper personal meaning to the tattoo he is now sitting through, as he talks about the passing of his father. Chris recounts the night a drunk driver killed his father in a car accident when he was only 6 years old. These two elements of his persona came together in one tattoo design, as Chris suggests, “I thought no matter whose car I’m in or wherever I’m at, I’ve always got my St. Christopher with me” (I, p. 3). It is not long before the session is
finished, and we relocate to a nearby coffee shop to discuss Chris’ experiences with tattoos in greater depth.

*The Tattoo Experience*

“It’s not a pain you wish you would never feel again” (I, p. 2).

Chris portrays the weeks leading up to his first tattoo experience as a time when his thoughts were slightly hesitant to this new encounter. Chris’ tattoo covers a large portion of his thigh and for a tattoo this size several sessions are required. He relates that at the time when he made his first appointment he had limited funds and could not commit to a series of appointments in quick succession. He explains how this lack of funds created the situation that led to his hesitation. He expresses how knowing the wait time at the tattoo shop could be up to a year and also knowing it would take more than one session, he was feeling half-hearted about starting a piece and being uncertain of when it would be complete. Chris relates:

> Usually when I do something, I do half of something and never get it finished…I knew I would have this half-finished tattoo for a quite a while and I just wanted to make sure I’d get it finished because a lot of people don’t get their tattoos finished or take forever to get it finished. (I, p. 2)

Sitting in the tattooist’s chair waiting for the first pass of the machine, Chris describes anticipating a lot of pain. He confesses that he was not sure at that moment if the pain would be too much to bear. Chris reveals that he found the pain to be very insignificant, as he discloses:

> It definitely doesn’t feel good but it’s not a pain you wish you would never feel again, it’s like a sunburn almost…it’s not the kind of pain that drives you nuts but there’s obviously a threshold where eventually your skin can only handle so much irritation before you have to stop. (I, p. 2)
Chris explains that the pain was necessary. He expresses this idea by stating, “When you think about what you’re doing and why you’re going through this pain it’s a lot different than pain for no reason” (I, p. 2).

Chris describes his initial feelings after his first tattoo experience as, “Sore. I mean I was in some pain for sure, but I couldn’t wait to go back in for more” (II, p. 1). He relates that simply having the tattoo is the greatest part of the experience for him.

Chris conveys his excitement for the finished product by declaring:

It’s just cool to look down on it when it was done and be like ‘holy fuck’! I hope you can print that because it’s pretty much the best word to describe it, it’s quite insane. You’re kinda married to that for life so it’s kinda cool and it’s kinda like you have that brief instance of ‘whoa, what the fuck did I do’? But in the end you’re excited…it’s there, it’s part of my life now. (I, p. 4)

As Chris recalls the differences between his first sitting and his subsequent sittings he declares, “Fully knowing what to expect, I felt much more at ease about the whole process and became quite eager to go through it all again” (II, p. 1). When questioned of what he would change about his tattoo experience, Chris relates, “I don’t know, maybe made it took place earlier in life. Maybe I’m glad I got it done now, I don’t think I’d change much” (I, p. 2). What is certain is that Chris feels his tattoo experience was a positive one, and he is already making plans for his next piece.

Living with Tattoos

“It’s a part of me now” (I, p. 4).

For a first tattoo, Chris’ tattoo is rather large. Discussing the considerations he made when deciding on where to place his first tattoo, Chris reveals his concerns pertaining to visibility. He describes his reasons for choosing his left thigh as:

I realized it’s a pretty big area so can get something that’s quite large and kind of tucked away. Living in Canada especially, usually you’re wearing pants so
Chris suggests that he chose a much hidden location so that he can pick and choose with whom he shares his artwork. He also speaks of how he wasn’t sure how he himself would react to constantly wearing a piece of art and chose his tattoo’s current location because “with a forearm or something like that you see it all the time, it’s always in your face” (I, p. 2).

Considering that Chris has his tattoo in a hidden spot and has only had it for a short amount of time, he reports of reactions only from close friends and family. When questioned about his family’s reaction to his tattoo, Chris simply states “Mommy don’t like tattoos” with a little chuckle. He then continues to tell me that his mother has not even seen the whole tattoo. “She just saw a small piece of it and then rolled her eyes and said she didn’t want to see anymore” (I, p. 4). Reactions from friends take a completely different turn according to Chris, as he reveals:

I’ll be sitting around in a group with my friends just chilling out and someone will mention my tattoo. Then everyone wants to see it, which is cool, but because of where it is it means I have to literally drop my pants and after a while it can get pretty annoying. (II, p. 2)

While considering how society in general view tattoos, Chris states, “Society views things any way that society is told to view them, the media influences them to think” (I, p. 5). He shares his opinion that his generation lives and breathes media and that is perhaps why tattoos are considered a fad by older generations, whom he feels aren’t as influenced by the media. Chris predicts that, as time passes on and his generation gets older, tattoos will become more accepted in the mainstream society but
that it remains something to be seen. In terms of his local community, Chris relates “Well
everyone had so many damn kids so it’s all young people now, we run this town” (I, p.
5). He continues to describe tattoos in his local community by stating:

We all have tattoos; in general I don’t think anyone cares. You see people with
tattoos on their necks and stuff now, I mean it’s something that’s always
happened in society but now it’s quite commonplace here. You see some of the
people who stop to talk with friends of ours with tattoos on their necks and tattoos
on their hands and stuff and you know they’re treated 10 times nicer than they’d
be treated anywhere else even among their own tattooed people. I don’t think it
really matters because people’s reputations around here kind of precede their
immediate image. You might see something kind of rough but you’ve known
these people for 15, 20 years so it’s kind of hard to think ‘this person’s a bad
person’ just because they have tattoos. It’s a personal choice; a lot of people
respect that, especially living in a small town. (I, p. 5)

Chris feels that, living in his small rural community, he can express himself freely with
his tattoos and not be considered a social outcast.

Tattoo Enthusiast: Brittany

The room is filled with the sound of gypsy punk music and tattoo machines in
unison. Sitting backwards in the tattooist’s chair is an athletic 21-year-old female named
Brittany, wearing only black yoga pants and a black bra unhitched at the back where she
is getting tattooed. Looking at Brittany, only one tattoo, the one being worked on, is
visible. This is Brittany’s first tattoo. The tattoo depicts a geisha girl wearing a very
colourful kimono holding a lotus flower. Depicted on the kimono is a Japanese koi (also
known as a carp) fish swimming upstream. The tattoo stretches from just below her left
shoulder blade to her waist line, covering nearly half her back. When questioned as to the
motivation for her tattoo, Brittany tells me that the koi “represents perseverance in
adversity and strength of purpose” (I, p. 4).
Brittany describes herself as a “girlie girl” (I, p. 7). She is interested in fashion and wears designer clothing. She comments further on the motivation behind her tattoo by describing her formative years. She recounts moving to China at the age of 12 and completing her elementary education there. When she was 14, she moved back to Waldemar for her secondary education. She describes these years of her life as a “struggle,” which had a tremendous impact on her. When questioned as to why she specifically chose the geisha girl with a koi kimono, she comments that this experience was both beautiful and struggle, “so both resemble me quite a bit” (I, p. 7). She explains that her experience in China has had a huge influence on how she views the world and herself; she also states that she could think of no better way to represent her experience than with a beautiful girl clothed in strength.

The Tattoo Experience

“So many people have so many different reactions” (I, p. 3).

Brittany drove to the tattoo studio for her tattoo by herself. She describes sitting in the car, extremely nervous, taking some Gravol to calm her stomach. “When you’ve never had a tattoo, I’m not a fan of needles, I was definitely very nervous” (I, p. 3). She relates that she had a friend meet her at the tattoo studio, and this friend held her hand through the whole process.

Brittany explains that the pain she felt during the tattoo was nothing like what she had anticipated. She recalls thinking “OK, I can handle this. It isn’t too bad” (I, p. 4). She describes in greater detail, “I think it’s a totally different feeling than getting a needle, like taking blood, obviously it doesn’t go as deep and there’s no injection pressure” (I, p.
4). Although she felt confident in her abilities to withstand the pain of the tattoo, Brittany admits she was “sweating” and that “it wasn’t a breeze obviously” (I, p. 4).

When commenting on how she felt after her first experience, Brittany surmises that she “was pretty good, I think I was pretty good. I wasn’t faint or anything. I find you do get very tired” (I, p. 4). Aside from being “pretty sore,” Brittany tells me that she was also excited to have a permanent art piece.

Brittany feels that the worst part of the tattoo experience was the pain involved. She describes different types of pain, “the first time I was just doing outline, but I think the colour with the amount of going over the same area, I was in a lot of pain” (I, p. 5). She describes that, as the needle is lifted, you get “a little break” and that it is not as bad as she thought it would be. It was not the pain during the process that was the worst element; it was the pain involved afterwards. “Then the itchiness after, I was trying not to pick scabs and you just wanna scratch them off. With your back, your shirt is constantly rubbing on it so that was the worst part, after” (I, p. 5). Brittany speaks of driving home and trying to not touch her back to the seat of her car. She continues by relating how uncomfortable sleeping was for the first week afterwards because she couldn’t sleep on one side. Like many people, when Brittany considered the pain of the tattoo, she was focussed on the tattooing process and not as much towards the aftercare. Brittany describes this time as a different kind of pain, not as sharp but very drawn out.

The best part of the tattoo experience for Brittany is simply “having” the tattoo. She speaks of the confidence she felt the entire time being tattooed by Von Scotch, knowing the amount of time and dedication he puts into all of his work. Brittany enjoys
sharing with people why she has this “beautiful” tattoo on her back; “it’s absolutely beautiful and it has so much meaning to me” (I, p. 5)

_Living with Tattoos_

“I’m pretty lucky as my parents are pretty accepting of what I want to do” (I, p. 6).

Brittany’s tattoo is on the left side of her back and, for all intents and purposes, quite hidden. Visibility is a large concern for Brittany. When I asked her why she had chosen such a concealed location, she describes her thought process for me:

People always say ‘when you’re 80 years old you might not like your tattoos anymore.’ I mean, that could be. I don’t think [it will be] with myself, like I said it’s meaningful, but if that’s the case I’d like to have the option of not showing them to your grandkids and you’re 85 years old if that’s something at the time [which] isn’t very acceptable….on my back had to do with, ok, wedding dresses, stuff like that. I mean obviously I hope to get married….if I find a strapless dress it would be covered. There’s no way it would show unless I had a backless dress. So that’s an option too, I have the option of showing it or keeping it hidden. … At your wedding you’ve got pictures and whatever, maybe you don’t want that incorporated into that or maybe your future spouse’s parents are totally against tattoos, like they wouldn’t want that in their picture at all. (I, p. 4)

Brittany relates how she feels society views tattoos as a 50/50 split between positive and negative reactions. With Brittany having such a concealed tattoo, I question how she acquired these insights. She relates an experience in a parent-teacher interview with her boyfriend:

One situation we came across already this year was with [boyfriend’s son]’s teacher and [boyfriend] had his sleeves rolled up, and she [the teacher] made numerous comments at our parent-teacher interview about [boyfriend] not being able to afford a house, or not being able to, well, you could see she was just looking at him and the holes in his ears and [boyfriend] works at [local nuclear power station]. He makes a lot of money, he doesn’t want a house, he likes his apartment right now. Just the references by looking at him, because if another person with a [local nuclear power station] t-shirt went into that parent-teacher interview I can’t see them judging them or making comments about their income. (I, p. 6)
With a concealed tattoo, and in an occurrence like the one just described, Brittany would have been free from receiving prejudice.

    Other than this one incident with her boyfriend, Brittanny indicates there has been a generally positive response from many people:

    Well I did post those pictures that [researcher] sent on Facebook and there was a number of people that actually sent comments about how much they liked it and how big they thought it turned out…it was a good feeling. (I, p. 6)

Part of this reaction could be attributed to the fact that tattoos are very much accepted in Waldemar. Brittany describes how prevalent they are around town and, due to the quality of the work, viewed with interest by locals.

    There are so many people tattooed here, it’s like a common thing to do, I guess, for some people. It’s just something that everyone experiences around here I find. [There are] not too many people, especially guys that you see around town, that don’t have something tattooed on them. (I, p. 6)

Brittany admits that if the quality of the work around Waldemar had been sub par she probably would not have gotten tattooed. “I trust the people I go to get tattooed by. I’ve seen a lot of their work and that makes me feel comfortable” (I, p. 5).

    It is through the extremely concealed location Brittany chose for her tattoo that she has the option of displaying her tattoo or not, and being able to chose with whom she would share it. It is in this regard that she may keep negative reactions, like the ones she encountered in a parent-teacher interview, to a minimum while still receiving positive feedback from friends and family. Brittany often refers to her family as very supportive throughout the interview. Her most memorable reaction thus far came from her mother, who exclaimed upon seeing the finished tattoo, “Oh that's really big! But I like it!” (I, p. 7). Although she chooses to keep her tattoo hidden most of the time, the acceptance of
her family, friends, and her local community help Brittany to feel confident and inspired to be tattooed.

Tattoo Enthusiast: Al

The air is warm and filled with the sound of the tattoo machines hard at work. Sitting stoically in the tattooist’s chair is a tall, skinny 26-year-old male named Al, naked from the waist up. A cursory glance over Al’s torso reveals several tattoos, mostly text and all of a similar theme. He has his grandfather’s name across his left breast, matching roses on his arms with the words “mum” and “dad,” as well as his brother’s and sister’s names in scrolls. Down each side of his rib cage Al has his father’s surname as well as his mother’s maiden name. Across his chest in letters that are the size of the palm of his hand, Al has the word “FAMILY” tattooed. Today he is adding to his collection of tattoos with a winged halo on one shoulder tendon and a shooting star on the other; he attributes these images to his grandmother. When questioned about the theme of his tattoos, Al declares “family is the most important thing on the planet to me” (I, p. 1). He asserts that the permanence of the tattoos on his body are representative of the permanence of his affection and loyalty to his family, as he contends that friends and significant others will come and go throughout life but your family is forever.

Al describes himself as a normal, laid-back guy. As the discussion continues on the subject of family, jumping from tattoo to tattoo, Al describes his family history. He relates that, although his parents divorced when he was young, they both played instrumental roles in his development and growth as a person. Al is one of three children, with an older sister and a twin brother. He speaks of how his mother works for “the
Church” and how her employment might have had an influence on the placement of his tattoos as they are all hidden under a standard t-shirt. It is not long before the tattoo session is finished, and Al is being wrapped in bandages. A huge smile materializes on his face as the ritual is complete. We relocate our discussion to a nearby coffee shop to delve deeper into how Al perceives the tattoo experience and how tattoos affect his life.

The Tattoo Experience

“I felt complete after it, I just loved that feeling” (I, p. 3).

Al characterizes his first tattoo experience as a nerve-racking leap into the dark. He attributes this nervous feeling to the fact that he was the first of his friends and family to become tattooed. Al relates:

I guess it’s like anything else that breaks the ice, and is so permanent and painful, like these things don’t wash off, so the first one you’re going to be nervous. You think to yourself is this the right idea? Should I be doing this? Am I going to get into trouble? I had no one else to talk to about how to handle it, how to deal with it, you’re kinda on your own. That’s why it was so nerve-racking because I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. (II, p. 1)

When he explains this encounter at age 19, he describes the tattoo studio he visited as a “dank kind of pit” in London, Ontario. This first tattoo that Al is discussing is his grandfather’s name across his left breast. He describes entering the tattoo studio as a “really intimidating experience” (I, p. 3). Al illustrates this first sitting by describing how he “was sweating the whole way through it and I kept thinking ‘I hope this is worth it’ because I mean, it’s the first tattoo” (I, p. 3).

Advancing our conversation of his first tattoo experience, Al describes the emotions he felt immediately after finishing this first tattoo session:
I started walking downstairs into the sunlight and it was this gorgeous day out and I just felt like grandpa was looking at me going [gestures a thumb's up] 'Good for you! You did it!' I just felt good about myself. It’s like when someone passes away everyone has their own way of showing their grieving process or whatever and this felt like something I just needed to do. I felt like I accomplished what I wanted. I felt complete after it. I just loved that feeling. (I, p. 3)

Al confesses that, if he could have changed anything about his initial tattoo experience, he would have liked to have researched the art of tattooing itself more thoroughly. He portrays this first tattoo as “A pretty plain tattoo, it’s just writing” (I, p. 3). He expounds on this initial experience by discussing the importance of researching the tattoo culture prior to sitting for your first tattoo; “If I could go back and change one thing, I would have put a bit more research into the actual shops where you get it done” (I, p. 3).

Al has had several tattoo experiences since this initial experience and conveys that this feeling of accomplishment is present after each and every tattoo experience. He articulates that, prior to his first sitting, he had only planned on getting this one and only tattoo in memory of his grandfather but that after this encounter he desired more. Al discusses the body plan he created to celebrate his entire family and how each tattoo since this initial memorial has been one step in his overall plan.

Progressing on the topic of the tattoo experience, Al discusses what he finds to be the least appealing aspect of the process, namely, the pain. He views the pain as a prerequisite, as “something that has gotta happen” (II, p. 2). Al does not view himself as a “super tough guy,” confessing rather that “paper cuts make me squeamish” (II, p. 2). To Al, the pain is something that you need to prepare yourself for but nothing that cannot be handled. He conveys his outlook on pain:
I’m sure everyone looks at it differently, I mean pain is not fun, and there are some spots that are worse than others. If I had to name a negative part of the experience, the pain and hardship on the body would be it. (I, p. 3)

Al describes his current attitude towards the tattoo experience as a very positive one. He asserts that with each tattoo experience a sense of accomplishment is the end product. The least favourable part of the experience for Al, the pain, is now simply a necessary part of the whole experience:

Now I've gotten so many. My second tattoo I was a little nervous, not as much as the first time, and the third time there was a little bit of jitters just going in there but now I know what it’s like to be tattooed so I go in there strong-headed every time I go in. (II, p. 2)

Living with Tattoos

“I didn't know they could do that kind of stuff” (I, p. 5).

Sitting in a coffee shop across from Al, who is dressed casually in a t-shirt and jeans, even an astute observer would not be able to detect any tattoos. Although he has several tattoos, over 30 hours ‘under the needle,’ all of Al’s tattoos are extremely hidden. While discussing the placement of his tattoos, Al shares his reason for placing all his tattoos on his front torso, “when I look in the mirror every day, I think of everyone who’s important to me” (I, p. 2). He relates that his tattoos are for himself to enjoy and that by placing something on his back he would never see it. For Al, looking in the mirror and being reminded day in and day out of those closest to him is why these testaments exist in the first place. He extends the conversation of visibility by commenting on its significance over time since his first tattoo, now 7 years ago.

Yeah, visibility is an issue. I don’t mind having some things visible but I don’t think I want to have anything on my neck, or the palms of my hands or the back of my hands or the knuckles or anything. The more I get into it the less I'm concerned with visibility as I was at first. At first I wanted to be able to hide it, but now I'm not overly concerned with it. (II, p. 3)
Concealing his tattoos has not been limited to job interviews. Al discloses that for 6 years, he did not show his own mother his tattoos. He explains this concealment as a reaction to the attitudes his mother possesses concerning tattoos as she is “a part of the group born in the 50s that think tattoos are horrible things” (I, p. 5). This veil was only recently lifted, as Al recalls the moment he shared his tattoos with his mother:

She had this idea in her head that tattoos were horrible things so I took my shirt off and said ‘you gotta look at these.’ So I showed her and she was happy, she was impressed, she was blown away with what they [tattooists] can do now. She said ‘I didn’t know they could do that kind of stuff.’ She saw her last name and started feeling it to see what it felt like. It was a really good experience and now she’s at least more acceptable, she’s at least becoming more receptive to it. (I, p. 5)

Through this revealing encounter, Al describes becoming closer with his mother. Living with tattoos does not simply constitute what the outside world thinks of a tattooed body; rather it also pertains to how the individual receiving the tattoo views her or his own body.

Al also seems to emit a sense of confidence. With each tattoo experience, he feels an increased sense of confidence and accomplishment. He describes the development of his self-body image through the tattooing process as escalating confidence. When characterizing this process, Al states:

I like my body more and more every time I get a tattoo. It’s not that I didn’t like it before or that I’m self-conscious or anything like that, I just like the modifications I’ve done to it. I love looking in the mirror at my tattoos. I’ve spent thousands of dollars and several hours on these things. They’re enhancements. I didn’t dislike my body before; it’s just that I like it much more now because of all the things I went through to modify it. (I, p. 4)

This ever growing confidence that Al feels with each tattoo experience is further encouraged by the reactions of those around him. He speaks of how each compliment he
receives for his tattoos is internalized in a positive way. Describing such incidents, Al shares:

99% of the feedback I get are positive comments. If I’ve had 100 comments on my tattoos there have been 99 times that people have positively commented on my body; comments that I wouldn’t have gotten without the tattoos. (I, p. 4)

Living with tattoos has not only affected the way that others view Al and the way that he views himself, but it has also affected the way Al views the outside world and determines his place within it. He describes how tattooing has changed in public opinion since the days of his parents’ upbringing, being something that was reserved for bikers and criminals. He suggests, “my dad said when he was a kid it was not well looked upon but now I’m getting almost all positive reactions from my tattoos” (I, p. 5). When questioned about his local rural community and how he perceives its outlook on tattoos, Al claims:

Here in town they’re [tattoos] looked upon fairly well given the fact that we have such a high calibre artist in town. There are a lot of people walking around with some pretty intense, intricate, and elaborate pieces of ink. I think people [the general public] are almost desensitized to it now. There are enough people walking around the area with tattoos that it’s not an uncommon thing to see and people accept it. (I, p. 4)

Within his local rural community, Al feels acceptance in regards to his tattoos and feels free to express himself though tattoos without being labelled as a social outcast.

Tattoo Enthusiast: Melanie

As you walk into the local tattoo studio, odds are in your favour that the first face you will see will be Melanie’s. She is the counter person/receptionist at the shop as well as Von Scotch's apprentice. Always with a smile on her face, this petite 23-year-old female is quickly filling up her body with tattoos. A cursory glance from behind the
counter reveals a full sleeve tattoo on her right arm of an octopus-woman with a raven on her left shoulder. Melanie also has a “Mom and Dad” tattoo as well as an eagle on her arms. One may also see a large dagger stabbing through a pumpkin with bat wings on her calf as well as a naked (furless) rat and a Van Gogh-style sunflower. Behind her ear, Melanie has a swallow tattoo and, on her ankle, a bat. She also has a skull with roses on her hip and the first tattoo she ever tattooed, a sugar skull (decorated skulls used in the Day of the Dead celebration in Latin America), on her calf. Along her side is tattooed script that reads, “The only man a girl can trust is her daddy.” The first tattoo she ever received sits on her back and is one of a pair of wings she shares with her mother.

As Melanie describes each tattoo with me in chronological order, she recounts stories, memories, and meanings behind each tattoo. Life course representation is a consistent theme with Melanie's tattoos and, when questioned as to whether her tattoos are a way of keeping a visual journal of her life, Melanie replies:

If you really care about something, you want something there to remind you about it. I wouldn't have any reason to talk about my rat but maybe somebody would bring it up and say 'hey, why do you have a naked rat tattooed on you'? and I could say 'my rat was the best thing ever.' I don't think about my rat every day, but as a pet she was very close to me and it's nice to look down and have those memories with me forever. (I, p. 7)

Melanie's life course has been characterized by many transitions throughout the past five years, including moving to the other side of the country for a number of years. Many of her tattoos were created with close friends and family in mind while separated from them, while some have simply been a matter of being in the right place at the right time. In either case, Melanie's tattoos act as representations of landmarks throughout her life and hold special meaning for her.
The Tattoo Experience

“Almost like a 'Best Friends Forever' necklace, but a lot fucking cooler” (I, p. 2).

Melanie's first tattoo experience occurred at the age of 18, just prior to her move to British Columbia, can be viewed as a rite of passage. She conveys her emotions at the time as being full of excitement, pondering how it would feel but without any feelings of nervousness. Melanie recounts her first experience as very positive:

Once he was tattooing it was fun. My back didn't hurt at all. It was a really good time in general, a pretty good experience. It wasn't as painful as I thought it would but the back is pretty easy, the shoulder blades, a really good place to start. (I, p. 2)

The positive feelings Melanie expresses of her initial tattoo experience did not stop when the bandage was applied. She describes feeling “really good” after her tattoo experience, especially the next day:

I was super stoked for it. Now that I could get tattooed, I'd definitely be getting more. I was really excited to jump in there. I remember getting up the next day and taking the bandage off and washing it and it just looking perfect, it just looks amazing. (I, p. 2)

Advancing our conversation about her first tattoo experience, Melanie shares that she would not change too much about her first experience. She speaks of “tattoo real estate” and how her decisions now are influenced by her earlier choices:

Now that I'm more into it than when I was when I got my first tattoo I almost think that, like when you're talking about tattoo real estate, I only have one wing on my back. I almost wish we had done our whole half back as a huge wing now that I know I'm going to be covered. I'm kinda thinking of how I'll work around that because when I got that I wasn't really thinking that. I knew I wanted more but I didn't think I'd want as many as I do now. So if I knew I would be getting a back piece one day or that I wanted to be more covered maybe I would have thought about it differently but it was a good experience and I think it was necessary to push me to do it and actually want one. I don't think I'd change anything. (I, p. 3)
Melanie relates that this positive first experience and the positive emotions she felt afterwards have been replicated with each and every one of her tattoos. Although it will require some thinking in the designing stages, Melanie intends to become heavily tattooed.

Continuing our discussion on the tattoo experience, Melanie relates that the worst part of the whole experience would have to be the pain. She conveys this sentiment by stating, “It hurts but it's not that bad. If there had to be a bad thing it would be the tender spots” (I, p. 5). In the same breath Melanie counters this worst element of the tattoo experience by elaborating on the greatest element of the experience for her, watching the development. She shares her excitement for this element of the process by stating:

Watching it develop is the greatest part, just watching. Every time you do a new little piece, especially with my sleeve, Von Scotch will put crazy little texture over here and you kind of see it happening. Then you get up and look at it in the mirror and it's one big crazy thing! Just kind of not knowing what to expect and then watching them do it, like you kind of have an idea but you can't actually know what it's gonna look like so you kind of see it come together. (I, p. 4)

Melanie, as an aspiring tattooist herself, is very interested with the process of tattooing and using layers to create detailed textures. For her, the tattoo experience is a very positive experience; one she wishes to share with future clients.

Living with Tattoos

“Does your ass have any tattoos?” (I, p. 6)

Beginning with a small wing on her back and eventually moving to an entire arm sleeve, Melanie has been procuring more and more visible tattoos. When questioned about her views regarding such visible tattoos, Melanie shares:

For the first one I was semi-concerned, not overly concerned. After I got it I kind of wanted tattoos I could see more and show more. It kind of felt like a shame that
I got a cool tattoo and I had to put a shirt over it. My conversion happened pretty quick. Now I want more, like the neck and stuff. (II, p. 2)

Melanie relates that tattoos are truly a lifestyle choice for her and, given that she wishes to pursue a career in the tattoo industry, visibility is not a concern for her at all.

Melanie discusses how living with tattoos has changed the way she is as a person. She describes how hanging out within the tattoo community and all the different “characters” has definitely changed her. Melanie portrays her personal change:

I used to be very shy and I think they make me less shy. They give you a reason to go and talk with people. You see somebody with a tattoo and you can go up and talk to them because you know. It gives people a reason to have conversations with so I think it's made me less shy. I almost feel more comfortable now. (I, p. 5)

Melanie's tattoos have not only changed the way that she looks at herself, but also the way that others look at her. She describes positive reactions from patrons of the bar she also works at when she states, “older women I would be serving in the bar, maybe in their 60s, would say things like 'oh those are really beautiful’” (I, p. 6). She continues her tales of positive reactions by discussing her mother's reaction to her work, “even my mother, she shows them off to everyone she sees. 'Oh this is her mom and dad one' or 'show them that'” (I, p. 6).

Melanie's experiences with reactions from people are not always positive however. She describes meeting her boyfriend's grandmother:

I don't do it with anyone else, but I wear sleeves when I'm around her because she just hates it and she's old, she's not going to change. I want the woman to like me. When I met her the first time and she asked what I did she was not impressed. She's not down with the whole tattoo thing, and she told me that my lip ring looks like a dirty piece of cabbage coming out of my mouth. (I, p. 6)

Such negative reactions stretch beyond the family of her significant other; it also touches her at her workplace as a local bartender. She describes an old man who literally spit on
her arm and pretended to rub off her tattoo, stating “if it was somebody who didn't have
tattoos, they wouldn't like to have somebody spit on them” (I, p. 6). Melanie relates more
negative experiences in the bar:

I'll be doing something at the bar and people will just grab you and because I'm a
little girl, what're ya going to do?! Like they feel the need that they can just grab
you. I'll be walking by and they grab my arm and are like 'what's this? Oh I want
to see it' and twist my arm all around. I mean, if they ask or if they bring it up
that's fine but I don't need to be manhandled. There's been times when there's
contract workers and construction workers at the bar who say 'oh you've got a
tattoo, where else ya have them? Ha ha ha' and people always try to get you to
take your clothes off. They say things like 'does you ass have any tattoos?' It
happens all the time. (I, p. 6)

Overall, however, Melanie expresses that there are far more positive comments and
feedback than there are negative. “Overall I've gotten really good reactions, more positive
than negative” (I, p. 6).

Melanie views tattoos as being more accepted in North America these days and
feels that, although she lives in a small town, she is comfortable in her own skin even if it
is tattooed. Melanie shares her views on the social positioning of tattoos today:

I think that tattooing on a large scale, like North America, is getting a lot more
common and it's being more accepted due to its popularity and a lot of people
having them. As well, TV shows kind of make them popular so it's not such a big
deal now. As for being in a small town, I think for a small town it's still pretty
well accepted. There's still definitely some old-fashioned people that aren't as
accepting but overall I think it's pretty accepting. Especially in this area where we
have such a good artist and people can see good work. If you have a nice piece
people normally don't say anything about it. If you have something that's not very
well done it just kind of looks sketchy and you know it could be looked down
upon but it's no big deal. I've been turned down for jobs in Waldemar because of
tattoos definitely. I think it's still an issue but I think it's becoming more accepted.
It might be more accepted in a city because more people are apt to have them but
I don't think it's bad. (I, p. 5)
As a small female, Melanie does feel that she has to endure more negative reactions than perhaps a large male would but overall feels welcome in her own community and looks forward to what the future will bring to tattooing in Waldemar and the world.

Tattoo Enthusiast: John

The room is filled with punk rock music, the sound of tattoo machines hard at work, and laughter. Sitting in the tattooist’s chair with a huge grin on his face is an athletic 27-year-old male named John, wearing only a t-shirt and boxer shorts. A glance at John’s right thigh reveals a large tattoo that is being shaded and coloured today. The tattoo is what appears to be a large section of John’s thigh ripped open exposing a metallic bone structure with several hoses and mechanical parts. This style of tattooing is known as biomechanical, and it is a prevalent theme in all of John’s tattoos. John bears four tattoos including this most recent work. The tattoos range in size from an armband of a few inches wide to half his back. His tattoos include a biomechanical alien ripping out of his back, a biomechanical armband with his own eye as the centrepiece, a biomechanical octopus stretching from his left knee cap to his foot, and his most recent work on his thigh. When questioned as to why he has chosen this biomechanical theme to his tattoos, John reveals, “I really enjoy the look of it. With the development of modern technologies human beings are becoming mechanical with pacemakers and replacement hips. It’s something I’m really interested in” (I, p. 7).

John describes himself as a normal member of society who owns a home, has a steady job, and handles adult responsibilities. As we continue our discussion on his
biomechanical tattoos, the focus of conversation centres on his first tattoo, the alien ripping out of his back, and what motivated him to get such a piece:

Most people think ‘ah that’s just nuts.’ If it was somebody really religious and they got a cross nobody would think twice about it. For me, I’m not religious and I look to the Universe for my answers so an alien is right up my alley. (II, p. 1)

The Tattoo Experience

“I look forward to getting the tattoo, but I don’t look forward to getting the tattoo.”

John begins our conversation by relating what it was like to grow up in a household where his father was tattooed. He claims that he wanted tattoos from an early age and any questions or concerns he had about tattoos were answered by his father. Before his first experience, John tells me he was not nervous because his father had explained to him what the pain was like. He does admit that “as soon as I took my shirt off I felt a cold sweat, and I don’t think it was the temperature in the room. It was the fact that I didn’t really know what I had gotten myself into” (I, p. 3). John continues to describe this initial experience:

I felt that first pass and it was kinda surreal actually. It’s not what you’d expect. It’s just those first couple of passes, and then it doesn’t get so bad once the adrenaline kicks in. It’s a different feeling; you go to your ‘happy place’ because you have to. (I, p. 3)

John describes the tattoo experience as a “rollercoaster ride” in that there are many ups and downs that create a “nervous excitement” (I, p. 3).

After his first experience, John expresses that he “felt really good” and that he “wouldn’t change a thing” (I, p. 7). He elaborates on how he has felt with each of his tattoos, “I feel better with each one because Von Scotch gets better with each one” (II, p. 2). John describes that before each tattoo he has an idea of what he wants and what the tattoo will be. He claims that the end result is always much more impressive than what he
imagined, and he attributes this better result to Von Scotch’s ever improving abilities.

John also relates that, with each tattoo, he feels better about himself:

Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror and try to think back to when I had no
tattoos. I think my body image is the same as it was then. The only difference is
that now I have these tattoos that I dreamed of, and it makes me feel good. As my
body plan materializes I feel better about myself. (II, p. 2)

John believes that, if there has to be a negative aspect of tattooing, it would be the pain
involved. He describes the pain, not during the experience itself, but afterwards in the
healing process. He compares the sensation afterwards to “a really bad sunburn.”

I hate how sunburns feel…and I think that’s what the most uncomfortable part
was, the drive home. I got it on my back and all I could feel was this tingling
sunburn, it was almost worst than the entire thing [the tattoo experience]. You just
want it to be gone. (I, p. 4)

Ultimately, John argues that the pain is simply a part of the process, so you have to just
endure it. He discusses the last 15 minutes of any tattoo as “the longest part” and that by
the time you do reach the finish it feels like “crossing the finish line. You cut the ribbon
and throw your arms in the air. It’s nice to stand up and take a couple of deep breaths” (I,
p. 4).

Discussing the most appealing element of the tattoo experience, John feels “the
best part is having them, there’s no other way I can put it” (II, p. 1). Every time he looks
into his mirror he sees his tattoos and admits to looking at them “all the time.” He adds
that “having” his tattoos is a very personal thing, and for him only, “It’s not like I care
about showing them off because you don’t go through that for anybody except yourself”
(I, p. 6).
Living with Tattoos

“It’s a prejudice like anything else; it’s not up to you, it’s up to them” (I, p. 9).

Although he has some rather large tattoos, wearing a t-shirt and pants covers all of John’s tattoos. When questioned as to his stance on visibility, John believes there are some places that he just will not tattoo. These areas include his genitalia and his face. He describes other visible areas such as his neck as something he “probably won’t do for a while.” He elaborates, “it’s not that I don’t like them [neck tattoos]. I think they’re cool and I don’t see anything wrong with them. I just have other places I’m going to go to first and that is basically what it comes down to” (I, p. 5).

John chose his first tattoo to be on his back as a way to “test the waters” (I, p. 5) and because of the space required for such a large detailed piece. Although visibility was not a large concern for him at the time, he still did not want to get something that could possibly jeopardize his entry into his current career. Despite really wanting a sleeve tattoo, he decided to wait until he was “in a better position” (I, p. 5). As he advances further along in his career, John is becoming less and less concerned with visibility.

John describes his mother’s reaction to his tattoo as being a direct result of her upbringing; “it depends on how you were brought up, like my mom, she hates tattoos. She doesn’t like any of my dad’s” (I, p. 9). He relates an encounter between his mother and Von Scotch shortly after John got the alien tattooed on his back. When Von Scotch asked her what she thought of the tattoo, John’s mother replied, “I don’t like tattoos” but then quickly added “I think the artsmanship is beautiful, I thought it was a very nicely done tattoo” (I, p. 9). To John this last part of her comment says a lot. He also mentions times when she says to him “I thought you had more class than that,” which he finds
strange considering her husband, his father, has tattoos “running up and down his arms” (I, p. 9).

When questioned as to whether tattoos have changed the way he views himself as a person, John replies “no, I think people’s views of me have changed because of my tattoos, that is for certain” (I, p. 8). He speaks of a time when he was at a party and the subject of his armband tattoo came up. When he showed his arm, one girl said to him, “Aren’t you worried you won’t get into heaven?” (I, p. 8). After John asked her what she meant by that question, she said “I was told anybody who gets a tattoo automatically gets their soul released through the hole in their skin” (I, p. 8). John is a firm atheist, and he was completely dumbfounded by such a statement saying “I think it was the nicest way someone has ever told me to go to Hell” (I, p. 8). John also relates other negative encounters with co-workers who usually begin the conversation with “how much did that cost ya?” (I, p. 12). The common response to his estimates usually follows the lines of “you could have spent your money on something more useful” (I, p. 12). He describes how these same people will gladly spend thousands of dollars on an ATV:

That ATV is gonna break down in 6 years and in 6 years I’ll still have this tattoo and in 16 years I’ll still have this tattoo and in 66 years if I still happen to be alive then I’ll still have this tattoo. Is it really a waste then? I don’t think so. (I, p. 12)

John believes that society’s views on tattoos are split 50/50 in terms of positive and negative outlooks. He feels that tattoos are becoming more accepted in society on a large scale but that they are still something that can prevent upward mobility. Looking to the local community John relates that there are quite a few people who are tattooed in Waledmar and that he does feel like he fits in there. He comments on his local community and the interactions that take place as:
It’s a small area so you run into people all the time and I think socially it’s a really beneficial thing because people meet each other and they have a common ground. It brings people together really, but not everyone because tattoos are not for everyone. (I, p. 9)

John is comfortable in Waldemar; he has a home, a car, and a great career. John is also heavily tattooed and finds acceptance for this lifestyle choice, most of the time, in his little rural community.

Tattoo Enthusiast: Ashley

The room is filled with the sound of trains and laughter. Sitting in her farm house living room is a slender 29-year-old female named Ashley nursing her infant daughter while her toddler son plays with his toy trains. A nurturing and loving mother, Ashley finds a few moments in the day when her children are napping to share her experiences with tattoos and their role in her life. Ashley is dressed in a short sleeve shirt and jeans, her arms and chest revealing several traditional tattoo designs. These traditional designs include early 20th century style portraits of nurses and aloha girls, swallows carrying banners for “MOM” and “DAD,” a star on one elbow filled with the American flag, and a star on the other elbow filled with the Union Jack. There are also several flowers, and the star theme is continued on her chest in negative space upon a background of blue swirls. Ashley also has two large cats that stretch from just under her breasts along her stomach to her hips. On her left shin, she has a Frankenstein tattoo and on her right a Bride of Frankenstein tattoo. On the inside of her upper lip, she has the word STIFF tattooed. On her lower back, Ashley's first tattoo is a tribal piece with flowers and a Chinese symbol. Her current tattoo project is a large rose on the side of her neck, a work still in progress.
As we discuss her tattoos in chronological order, Ashley’s face lights up, and she tells me of her future tattoo plans. She describes a back piece of a Kali mask, a representation of a Hindu goddess to whom devotees pray for health, happiness, and liberation. When questioned as to her motivations for choosing such a tattoo, Ashley replies:

When I was giving birth to [her daughter] up in my bed, we have this giant Kali mask at the foot of our bed and our midwife was kind of sitting underneath her the whole time as she helped deliver my baby and it was really clear to me that it was a good symbol. Kali kind of had her back and mine and it’s just a really great, powerful maternal symbol. (I, p. 3)

Ashley relates stories for her tattoos as she recounts growing from a young enthusiast into a shop worker in the industry to a shop owner and today as a tattooed wife and mother of two.

_The Tattoo Experience_

“The pain of your own stupidity hurts you just as bad as a needle” (I, p. 4).

Ashley describes her first tattoo experience at the age of 16 as a positive experience and “a lot more emotional than I thought it would be for me” (I, p. 1). She reveals that the moment the tattooist began tattooing her she began to get “queasy” and had to “run to the bathroom to throw up” (I, p. 1). Although she now knows from years of experience in tattoo studios that this is a very common reaction, Ashley admits she was very surprised but sat right back in the chair and continued to get tattooed. She confesses that the experience was a lot harder than she thought it would be and, in retrospect, acknowledges that the tattooist was very slow and took longer than he needed to. Ashley relates that the ill feeling she had passed in a matter of minutes and immediately she wanted more tattoos:
I think I knew instantly that I wanted more than one tattoo. It was a definite thing. I liked the way they looked. Even though my experience with my first tattoo having been physically ill in the beginning, that didn't deter me. I thought it was really beautiful and knew I wanted more. I can't say there was any reason why I wanted more. I just found them aesthetically pleasing and pictured myself to be more heavily tattooed. (I, p. 2)

Ashley confirms that this positive sensation she felt after her first tattoo has been consistent throughout all of her tattoo experiences.

Continuing our conversation on the tattoo experience itself, Ashley discusses what she finds to be the greatest part of the whole experience, “having them forever” (I, p. 4). Ashley further describes this sentiment:

We have such a disposable culture. It's nice to have something that even if I'm covering it up, even if I'm not 100% about that old tattoo, at least it's there with me forever. That's not going to change and there's a sort of comfort in that. (I, p. 4)

Ashley jokes around and laughs about the very popular statement, 'what about when you're 60?' by adding “what about it? I'm going to be a grannie with some great tattoos, so what? Good” (I, p. 4).

Progressing on the topic of the tattoo experience, Ashley shares what she considers to be the worst part of the experience, the pain. As Ashley puts it, “I can't say I enjoy getting tattooed” (I, p. 4). She highlights a certain pain associated with tattooing that not all enthusiasts must endure but is common among enthusiasts with her amount of tattoos, cover ups. Ashley describes this pain:

It hurts...I have had some really painful tattoo cover ups. I had my ribs covered up. I had a series of cover ups on my sternum because I couldn't make up my mind and was making rash decisions and that was excruciating. That was sheerly out of my own stupidity. My pubic area, which hurt enough the first time and I decided I didn't like the design, I had covered up and the artist took a very long time to do so and it was excruciating and I hated every second of it. Truly hated it. The only silver lining of course was that tattoo wouldn't be there anymore. Doing
it the first time hurt enough, doing it the second time was just rubbing salt into the wounds. (I, p. 4)

The pain from cover ups is the worst part of the whole experience for Ashley. She describes how “cover ups suck, it's terrible,” but that rash decisions and not thinking clearly can hurt just as much. As Ashley puts it, “the pain of your own stupidity hurts you just as bad as a needle” (I, p. 4).

When questioned as to whether there is anything about her experiences with tattoos that she would change if she could, Ashley responds, “I would change a lot about all my experiences” (I, p. 3). She continues with this thought by stating:

If I could do it all over again I would probably erase all the tattoos I have and start over again and go into getting a body suit. I can't say that I regret all of my tattoos, but if I had a do over I would take it. (I, p. 3)

Ashley relates that the idea of a body suit is appealing to her because “it's just more aesthetically pleasing. It flows and it's one cohesive piece rather than different styles and a total quilt of things which is what I have and there's no going back” (I, p. 3).

Living with Tattoos

“You become something different; you become a tattooed person as opposed to a person with tattoos” (I, p. 5).

Sitting across the room from Ashley, it is plain to see that she is heavily tattooed. With such a large array of tattoos covering such a large portion of her body, one might ponder if there is anywhere Ashley would not get tattooed. “I never want my feet tattooed. I will go my entire life without getting my feet tattooed” (I, p. 3). To emphasize this point, Ashley confesses, “You would have to knock me unconscious to tattoo my feet. I find it way too sensitive” (I, p. 3). Laughing, she relates “I'll tattoo my neck but I'll
never tattoo my feet” (I, p. 3). Continuing our discussion on visibility, Ashley says that there is nowhere else on her body that she would not tattoo:

I would tattoo my hands, I have tattoos on my thumbs, on my finger and I've got a tattoo on my forehead. Face, fine. Neck, fine. Hands, fine. Just found the feet too much, too much for this chick. I even have a tattoo on the inside of my lip. (I, p. 3)

When discussing living with tattoos and the reactions she receives from people, Ashley relates her parents' reactions to her tattoos. She shares the fact that her parents were not very happy with her tattoo collecting at first, but, as she became more involved in the industry, her parents saw tattooing as a “legitimate lifestyle choice” (II, p. 2). Ashley recounts how her tattoo collecting has influenced her parents who are both now tattooed, even though her father still wishes she didn't have any tattoos at all. When questioned about her mother's reaction to tattoos, Ashley states “she's got half sleeves now” (II, p. 2). Ashley continues to discuss her mother's decision to become tattooed after the age of 50. She discloses that her grandmother is still living and that her mother is afraid to show her grandmother her tattoos.

Ashley has lived with tattoos for almost half her life. She describes being heavily tattooed as a “lifestyle choice” (I, p. 5), as Ashley further relates:

You become the Other when you cross a certain boundary. I don't know what the boundary is, but it has to do with visible tattooing. Obviously like your neck or your hands or your face or your arms, really like the amount of coverage. You become something different; you become a tattooed person as opposed to a person with tattoos. I can't give you a number of hours of tattooing that is, but the line definitely exists. (I, p. 5)

Ashley continues to discuss “the line” by describing the differences she feels she faces as a female as opposed to being a male. She relates that for women to cross that line it “takes a lot less for sure” (I, p. 5). Ashley recounts her experiences of tattooed couples:
There are plenty of tattooed men or heavily tattooed men who can have non-tattooed girlfriends or wives, significant others who have some tattoos or no tattoos but I would think that it’s highly unlikely that a tattooed woman would have a partner who wasn't. (I, p. 5)

She continues to define the distinction between males and females in regards to being heavily tattooed by relating, “it's socially acceptable for women to have one tattoo. It's threatening to a man's masculinity for a woman to have more tattoos than her partner. Definitely” (I, p. 5).

Discussing negative reactions she has faced as a woman who is heavily tattooed, Ashley describes instances where “They'll say things to me if I'm alone, if I'm not with a partner. Lone tattooed woman, you are public property” (I, p. 5). She further illustrates this concept of being “public property” by revealing:

Women get touched more than men get touched in public if they're tattooed. No person is going to come up to some big burly biker guy who's covered in tattoos, at least not regularly, and touch them to try to pull their shirt down or try to lift their shirt to look at their butt or what have you. You're not going to do that to a big tattooed guy. As a tattooed woman, I've had men and women literally pull my shirt down to try to expose my breasts to see the work on my chest, pull up my shirt to see the work on my sides, try to undress me in public to see my tattoos and you would never do that if it was a man...the being touched without permission thing, although some people may be doing it because they have a tattoo as well and it is not necessarily malicious, sometimes it is malicious. I've had people peer down my shirt or look at my sleeves and say 'How could you do that to yourself? Those are sailor tattoos!' No one would come up to me like that if I was with a heavily tattooed partner, they realize they would get punched. (I, p. 6)

Not all of the reactions to Ashley's tattoos are negative. Many reactions are in fact positive, and a “big percentage” of those persons with the positive reactions are tattooed themselves and “want to share their stories.” Ashley recounts a meeting earlier in the day at her child's play group where one mother approached her and said:

Oh I really love your tattoos! You've got lots of them! I'd love to have lots of tattoos, I picture myself as heavily tattooed but my parents and my family just
think they're horrible and I'll never have more than the amount I have now. (I, p. 6)

Ashley also mentions that many of the women who approach her do not have tattoos themselves, as she relates, “I find it's usually the older women who don't have tattoos who comment on my tattoos. ‘If I was younger I would have something like that’ or ‘I didn't know they made colours like that’” (I, p. 6).

Ashley has spent 10 years working in the tattoo industry. When questioned as to trends she has noticed in these previous 10 years, Ashley states:

People are getting more heavily tattooed younger and that's for sure. I've also noticed the growing number of tattooed women. People are also getting visible tattoos, tattoos on their neck and hands, and they seem to be younger and younger. Those things were maybe reserved for bikers before, or tattooists, and that is certainly a trend in itself. I can't remember what movie it was [From Dusk Till Dawn] with George Clooney with the Tribal necklace, these things come through the media and you see echoed in shops. I can't count the number of guys who came in to get that giant tribal thing they saw in a movie or Pamela Anderson barbed wire. Totally tied in with media and television. (I, p. 7)

Comparing the local community to the outside tattooed world, Ashley indicates, “I find I get a lot better reception here than I have in a lot of other places” (I, p. 4). She speaks of living as a heavily tattooed woman in Italy, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Toronto, Ottawa, and Guelph.

I've had more negative responses in all of those places and I can't say I've ever had any here. I think that's just because Waldemar is a small town, and they know who I am. Even if they think I'm weird, they generally keep it to themselves. I've never had any negative reactions to my face anyways, about being heavily tattooed. It has all been positive or no response because country people just don't care. They don't care about the fact that I'm tattooed. I think in general, in North America, I feel tattoos are becoming more accepted especially with television shows these days. It totally crosses all demographics but I think it's just becoming more popular with the shows. Hazard to guess it's becoming socially acceptable to have some tattoos. It's still not socially acceptable to be heavily tattooed. (I, p. 5)
Ashley feels free to be herself within her local community in regards to being heavily tattooed, although amidst some laughing at the end of the interview she tells me that although she feels comfortable here “I don't know if I'd get a job here” (I, p. 5).
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This thesis examined the perspectives of 6 tattoo enthusiasts and 1 tattooist to gain a better understanding of tattoo culture within a small, rural community. The primary focus for these perspectives centered on the lived experience: before, during, and after the tattoo experience. In this chapter, I revisit these experiences and connect them to the literature discussed on Motivations for Tattoos, The Tattoo Experience, Living with Tattoos, and Tattoo Education. Next I provide recommendations for further research. My final thoughts complete the thesis.

Motivations for Tattoos

In the literature, there seem to be four ways to categorize the motivations for tattoos: their sexual nature (Parry, 1933/1971), their connection with psychological pathologies (Deschenes et al., 2006; Hicinbothem et al., 2006), their affiliation with cultural deviance (Atkinson, 2003; Sanders, 2008; Vail, 1999), and their ability to demonstrate subscription to cultural norms (Atkinson, 2003). While the first three ways seem to represent an inclination towards deviance, the fourth suggests conformity towards cultural norms.

The participants of this study revealed no sexual connotations in their self-described motivations for their tattoos. The hypothesis presented by Parry (1933/1971) that women receive their first tattoo around the same time of their first sexual experience was not evident among the female participants of this study. I did not specifically ask my female participants when they lost their virginity, although it seems unlikely that Brittany
had her first sexual experience at the age 21 as she has been in a serious relationship with her boyfriend for a long period of time prior to then. In contrast, it is more possible that Melanie’s (age 18) and Ashley’s (age 16) first tattoos were around the time of their first sexual experience. A second hypothesis presented by Parry regarded the homosexuality involved with tattooing men. This hypothesis also did not appear evident in the interviews conducted with the male (or female) participants in this study. I did not ask the participants specifically what their sexual orientation was, although all participants in this study followed heterosexual norms through their selection of partners. Ashley is a married woman with two children. Brittany and Melanie are in serious relationships with men. Al is in a serious relationship with a woman. John and Chris have had several girlfriends throughout the past. Although the topic of sexuality was not blatantly pursued in the interview questions, the responses the participants gave in regards to their motivations for tattoos did not indicate any sexual nature whatsoever.

The participants of this study also revealed no psychological pathologies in their motivations to become tattooed. The hypothesis presented by Deschenes et al. (2006) that tattooed individuals are more likely to suffer from depression and suicidal tendencies could not be supported by the responses of the participants in this study. I did not feel comfortable asking questions about the psychological nature of the participants as this is an extremely personal matter, so when I asked these questions I phrased them in direct questions: Have you ever been depressed? Are you a masochist? When questioned as to whether or not they had ever faced bouts of depression, all participants responded with the answer no. Al responded by stating that he’s “never been in a serious rut or anything you could call depression.” John stated that he’s never experienced “anything beyond the
normal ups and downs of everyday life.” All participants in this study indicated that they had no documented psychological disorders and not only denied, but laughed, at the idea of being masochists. Al responded, “I am by no means a masochist. I mean, paper cuts make me squeamish.” Again, with this subject matter I was very direct with my questioning. Do you suffer from any mental illnesses? No. Are you a masochist? No. I did not probe these answers any further as I found it unnecessary and bordering on being intrusive.

Atkinson (2003) described motivations in tattooing as walking a tightrope with deviance on one side and the fulfillment of cultural norms on the other. The central question one must ask while walking this tightrope is: are enthusiasts getting tattoos to fit in with an outsider image or are they trying to show their commitment to the ideals society suggests through their tattoos? This is not an easy question to answer as motivations may be geared towards both, especially if the enthusiast has several tattoos procured for as many different reasons. One of the arguments made by Vail (1999) is that the behaviours of enthusiasts are learned from their interactions with other enthusiasts. Could it be possible that an enthusiast was motivated by deviancy into the practice of tattooing and then learned behaviours and motivations that could be deemed as abiding by cultural norms?

All considered, the motivations for the participants in this study to procure tattoos seemed to be primarily ways of subscribing to cultural norms, rather than being blatant acts of deviance. The motivations that participants presented aligned with Atkinson’s (2003) themes of embracing difference. The primary themes of embracing difference that are highlighted by these findings are role transitions and affect management.
Many of the tattoos discussed in this study may be described as marks of conformity as they represent what Atkinson (2003) labelled role transitions. These tattoos depict transitions in life that have a large impact on a person. Brittany’s tattoo of the geisha girl was motivated by her 3-year experience of living in Asia. This time proved for her to be a very significant part of her life, and she chose to permanently represent this transition on her skin. Ashley described her future ambitions to have a large Hindu mask tattooed on her back to not only represent her transition to becoming a mother, but also as a symbol of the bond she has with her children. Role transition tattoos often represent bonds with others. Melanie described several tattoos that highlight this idea such as her first tattoo, the wing both her and her mother had tattooed on their backs before she left for British Columbia. She also described a “Mom and Dad” tattoo she received in British Columbia while she was away from her parents as she missed them dearly. As well, Melanie described an eagle tattoo she had done with school friends (the eagle was their school mascot) as a way of creating a permanent bond.

Al’s entire torso is a testament to the bonds he feels with each and every member of his family, as well as the importance of these bonds. Al related his primary motivation for specifically choosing a tattoo to describe such bonds was the permanence of the tattoo itself. Al, Melanie, Ashley, and Brittany chose to demonstrate these transition roles and bonds with family and friends through tattoos to show the strength of the bonds and the significance of the transitions.

Many of the tattoos discussed in this study may also be described as marks of conformity as they represent what Atkinson (2003) labelled affect management. These tattoos are memorial tattoos. Al’s first tattoo was a memorial tattoo for his grandfather.
who had passed away. Linking the permanence of the act to his feelings for his deceased grandfather, Al related that he felt it was the right thing to do. Although Chris’ tattoo of St. Christopher might be viewed as a protective talisman and a representation of his travels, it was also very strongly linked to the passing of his father. Melanie also described a memorial tattoo she received for a deceased pet stating that this pet was with her through some hard times, and the tattoo was a way to always remember her pet. When people approached her and asked her about this tattoo, she relived her experiences with her pet in each conversation. Melanie, Chris, and Al chose to have memorial tattoos to not only signify the bonds they felt with the deceased, but also as a way of dealing with their passing. Brittany described the years she spent in Asia as being very stressful to her family unit, and she turned this negative experience into a positive tribute to the strength she learned from this experience. For these individuals, the act of tattooing was a way to purge negative emotions with the result being a positive mark on their skin forever.

The participants of this study also demonstrated adhering to cultural norms by deciphering the cultural norms of the tattoo community through interactions with other enthusiasts. As the creator of the local tattoo community, Von Scotch gave valuable insights into the community’s development. One of these insights revolved around the idea that, within this tight knit community, enthusiasts often influenced and motivated each other through their tattoo projects:

I would like to think in my own small way, the things I try to promote in my work, adhering to what I sort of see as the values of traditional tattoo design aesthetics, that it seems like I created a taste for that kind of work here among my clientele and the people that see their work, just because my work is predominantly what people see around here, it sort of influences the taste and aesthetic of what people are into here, which is kind of neat to see. (I, p. 4)
When questioned about the tattoo community, Al related that the interactions described by Von Scotch occurred often:

We’ll go hang out there and…we’ll run into you, John, I mean it’s a community…you know who’s all been tattooed there, everyone likes to check out other people’s stuff. The next time I see John I’m gonna wanna see what he got … everyone’s kinda linked together in some way I think. (I, p. 6)

Al also indicates the impact of such interactions through the tattoos he procured in memory of his grandmother:

It inspired me to get a lot more ideas. I was originally gonna just get some initials for my grandparents and then I saw John getting his and the whole thing. It was inspiring. I thought ‘maybe I can elaborate.’ I started digging into my memory bank for things that brought me, you know, that I remembered of my grandparents. (I, p. 6)

The cultural norm of the local tattoo community to put a great amount of personalized detail into tattoo designs was conveyed through the interactions of community members.

None of the participants of this study mentioned any motivation that could be deemed as embracing deviance. To the contrary, all of the motivations discussed in this study reflected a subscription to cultural norms including role transitions, such as leaving home and becoming a mother, as well as signifying bonds with family and friends.

Cultural norms expressing the positive managing of emotions and being in control of one’s body are represented through the affect management of several participants. These findings force us to reconsider the deviant image of tattoos in our modern culture.

The Tattoo Experience

For the participants in this study, the first tattoo experience was relatively similar. It began with nervous excitement, with all participants relating that they really had no
idea of what to expect in terms of pain and their ability to manage it. Chris and Al described a sense of nervousness before their tattoo experience that they connected to a fear of the unknown. John experienced a cold sweat as he took off his shirt to begin the process. Brittany and Melanie also related such feelings of nervousness and discussed their coping strategies involving having friends and family share in their experience. Ashley became physically ill. All participants indicated that they had no idea what to expect before the first pass of the needles.

This common experience continued as all participants came to the realization that the pain was not as terrible as they had imagined prior to the experience and although, not a pleasant feeling, it was something that they could bear. The experience ended on a positive note with all participants expressing that they felt better after having received the tattoo. For the participants with several tattoos, this feeling of satisfaction was consistent with each and every tattoo session. This sensation of constant satisfaction was indicated in the literature through the work of Matthews (2009). Matthews conveyed that she felt better after each tattoo and that this feeling did not wear off, but continued in her daily life. Her study reported findings where enthusiasts in California offered the same experiences in this regard.

Other significant parallels between this study and the work of Matthews (2009) were that participants demonstrated no relation to any form of depression or anxiety and those with more tattoo coverage discussed having higher levels of body investment with each tattoo. Al felt more confident with each tattoo. John had a high level of body investment with each tattoo because, with each tattoo, his body appeared better in his own eyes. Both Al and John stated that they did not have negative feelings towards their
bodies before being tattooed; they simply felt that with each tattoo their body improved in appearance.

The highlights and lows of the common experience were also consistent among all the participants. The greatest element of the tattoo experience for all participants in this study was the end result, having the tattoos. Whether it be watching the tattoos develop over time as Melanie mentioned; or being able to share fantastic art filled with deep meaning with friends and family as described by Brittany; or as John, Al, Chris, and Ashley indicated, simply being able to wear the tattoos forever, all participants put great emphasis on the pleasure they derived from having the tattoos.

When questioned as to the worst part of the tattoo experience, all participants voiced their opinions that, if there had to be anything negative about the experience itself, it would be the pain involved. All participants made reference to the pain of the actual process, but also acknowledged that it was a necessary evil, a part of the process that could not be avoided. As John stated, “I look forward to getting the tattoo, but I don’t look forward to getting the tattoo.” This play on emphasis demonstrates the interconnectedness of the satisfaction of the final product and the pain necessary to get there. Some participants, such as John, Chris, and Brittany, focused on the pain associated with aftercare. Tattoos can take several weeks to properly heal and in this time can take some adjustment (Chinchilla, 1997). Not being able to use your tattooed arm the next day, or sleeping on the opposite side of your body for weeks, as well as the itchiness of new skin and general soreness, were reported by these participants. This common aspect to the tattoo aftercare experience is important to describe. Most people who are not tattooed will question people with tattoos about the pain involved in the experience. I
have never had one of these non-tattooed people ask me about the pain incurred during the healing process. If they were truly interested in acquiring a tattoo and were concerned with pain, this aftercare period is something of which they should be informed.

While examining the data collected on the tattoo experience, I wondered if the participants of my study were addicted to getting tattooed. I was not familiar with clinical definitions of what an addiction actually entails. Goodman (1990) defined addiction as:

A process by which a behaviour, that can function both to produce pleasure and to provide escape from internal discomfort, is employed in a pattern characterized by (1) recurrent failure to control the behaviour (powerlessness) and (2) continuation of the behaviour despite significant negative consequences (unmanageability). (p. 1403)

It is hard to speculate if the participants of this study demonstrate powerlessness in regards to getting tattoos because of the wait time involved with getting tattoos. The normal wait time to sit for a tattoo in this community can range from 6 months to over a year. Appointments are required in this custom shop; therefore, an enthusiast cannot go in and get tattooed whenever he or she pleases. Perhaps by refusing to go elsewhere to get tattooed, by waiting until they can sit at the local tattoo studio, the participants of this study actually demonstrated power to control the behaviour.

With respect to the second characteristic of an addiction, continuing a behaviour despite negative consequences, although John and Al were aware of the negative consequences of becoming tattooed in terms of employment, they continued to get tattoos. They managed these negative consequences in a similar manner to Chris and Brittany (who were receiving their first tattoos) by placing their tattoos in hidden locations. Melanie and Ashley both worked within the tattoo industry and were not subject to the same negative consequences as the other participants. Their employment
within the tattoo industry could possibly be considered a method of dealing with the negative consequences of having a visible tattoo in regards to employment. The actions of the participants in this study thus suggest that tattooing is not an addiction for them as they demonstrate power to control the behaviour and manage negative consequences.

Living with Tattoos

The greatest factor in determining how the outside world views a person with tattoos is visibility. In the Japanese tradition, a body suit will stretch from mid-forearm, around the back, and down the front torso to mid-thigh on each leg. There is gap that runs down the center of the front torso. The reason for these specific parameters is that while wearing a kimono, the entire tattoo is still completely hidden from sight. When discussing visibility, Ashley commented on the idea that there is a line one crosses when one chooses to have visible tattoos; crossing that line turns an enthusiast from a person with tattoos into a tattooed person. For the participants in this study who had just received their initial tattoos, Chris and Brittany, visibility was a huge concern. They chose locations on their bodies (thigh and back) that were hidden under clothing. They both accredited their decision for tattoo placement as a way of getting accustomed to having a tattoo, as well as being able to decide when and with whom they shared their tattoo. With their tattoos being concealed under clothing, they ‘passed’ as a ‘normal’ person in any given social situation.

When participants with several tattoos were questioned as to their concern with visibility, they described it as a diminishing concern. Al and John have tattoos that cover large portions of their bodies, but can be completely concealed with clothing. At the time
of the second interview, Al revealed that he had just booked his appointments to get his sleeves tattooed. This is a step towards more visible tattoos and evidence of this diminishing concern for visibility, although he is still playing it safe since a long sleeve shirt will still conceal his tattoos. When questioned about visibility, John described how he just had other spots to tattoo before he tattooed anything that could not be concealed by clothing. He also attributed this waiting for tattoos in visible locations to his career, as he was quite aware of the prejudices that many face with tattoos, especially in the workplace.

Melanie and Ashley were the only two participants in this study with visible tattoos. Melanie revealed that she was only concerned with the visibility of her tattoos when she was in the presence of her boyfriend’s grandmother as she tried her best to impress her. Ashley revealed that she was not concerned with visibility at all. What is the difference between these two and the rest of the participants? They were also the most connected participants to the tattoo industry and culture. Melanie was an aspiring tattoo apprentice, working in the tattoo industry. Ashley had worked in the tattoo industry for a decade and was married to a tattooist. These two participants had chosen the social context in which they worked and their visible tattoos were a way of conforming to the norms of that social context, just as John’s concealment of his tattoos was a way of conforming to his social context. This observation demonstrates that, although visible tattoos may be viewed as an act of deviancy, it is actually an act of conformity in these cases.

The literature on the lived experience of tattoos illustrates that enthusiasts will encounter experiences of prejudice (Chinchilla, 1997; Johnson, 2006). Chris and Brittany,
both having only recently acquired their tattoos, which were in concealed locations, could not share any experiences of being discriminated against based on their tattoos. Al related that 99% of the comments he received concerning his tattoos were positive, although his tattoos were concealed in everyday situations and he determined who might view them. John, having been tattooed for over a decade, related some experiences that were not as positive, but these represented a small minority of his overall experiences and did not reflect his daily experience. Melanie and Ashley, being visibly tattooed females, had several occasions when they were verbally and physically assaulted because of their tattoos. They described instances when they were ‘man-handled’ by people wanting to see their tattoos, in some cases having their clothing nearly removed. They also related negative comments, usually crude in nature, that they received based solely on their tattoos. These findings indicate that there may still be a very real prejudice in our society against visible tattoos, especially towards women.

Visibility within the local community is common. Von Scotch has established an atmosphere where tattoos are largely a normal occurrence. When questioned of the acceptance of tattoos in the local community, Brittany responded, “I think this community is very accepting of them. I think that we’ve been given no choice [laughs] really with the amount of people that have them.” However, although all participants of this study viewed the local community to be accepting of tattoos, Melanie and Ashley both admitted that their odds of gaining employment outside of the tattoo industry were unlikely.

There is a contradiction within the community. Although tattoos have been accepted by many people from many different demographics within the community, the
idea that tattoos are not normative is still present (especially in regards to employment).

The idea of social figuration, originally described by Elias and adopted by Atkinson (2003) in his study of tattoos, states that as people become tattooed, the non-tattooed population is more aware and open to the idea and members of this population are more likely to become tattooed themselves. This theory demonstrates how tattoos have become widely popular, especially in a small community like the one under study. Atkinson also makes note that, as more people become tattooed, people with established roles (teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc.) within the community will also become tattooed creating more acceptance of tattoos within the community. As tattoos have only recently become visible in popular culture, it is unlikely that tattooed persons with established roles have progressed high enough in the social structure to make a difference in this regard.

Although tattooing has been on the rise in terms of popularity among the 18-30 generation, this popularity is not as represented in older generations and perhaps employers’ attitudes towards hiring policies involving tattooed people are based on this idea that persons above a certain age will not accept tattoos and not be comfortable dealing with persons having visible tattoos.

A large aspect of living with tattoos, according to Atkinson (2003), is how they are received by those with whom we are interdependent; namely immediate family members. All participants related how their tattoos were perceived by their families, specifically their mothers. John’s mother’s reaction to his first tattoo was not completely accepting, although her appreciation of the craftsmanship was noted. Al kept his tattoos hidden from his mother for six years. She knew he was tattooed but did not want to see them. When she did see them, she was impressed with the quality, and Al internalized
this positive reaction. Chris’ mother would not look at his tattoo, causing a strain in their relationship. Ashley’s parents did not approve of her tattoos at first, but her mother came around to the idea by eventually becoming tattooed herself. Melanie’s mother played an important role in her first tattoo, sharing the experience with her. Among friends and family, Melanie’s mother would encourage her to show others her ‘Mom and Dad’ tattoos. Brittany related that she felt very lucky that her family was so accepting of her tattoos, discussing the joy her mother expressed when she first saw her geisha girl. These experiences are testament to the impact the reactions the immediate family can have on the lived experience of tattoo enthusiasts.

Tattoo Education

Von Scotch and Chinchilla (1997) advise potential enthusiasts to look for clean and safe practices as well as an artist with a solid portfolio and good character. The current study adds to the literature by describing specifically what to look for, items and procedures that the general public would not know. In this regard, Von Scotch lists questions that any reader looking to get a tattoo should ask him or herself such as: Does the shop look clean? Are they touching stuff with dirty gloves and then going back to tattooing? Rather than simply telling the reader of the risks involved and advising against tattooing at all (Reybold, 1996), this tattoo education centers on the belief that, if a person is interested in becoming tattooed, he or she should know of the dangers and how to avoid them in a safe manner while still acquiring a tattoo.

This entire study has been constructed as a tattoo education. The experiences of those tattooed have been shared in an attempt to impart upon potential enthusiasts the
realities of having tattoos in our current social context so that they may make well-informed decisions regarding tattoos. I questioned all participants as to any advice they had for people who were looking to get tattoos, as well as advice for parents and teachers.

All participants advised that potential enthusiasts perform research. Chris advised that potential enthusiasts get tattoos for themselves and not to please others, while John felt that potential enthusiasts should create a customized idea of what they wanted and not just pick something off the wall. For Brittany, it was critical that potential enthusiasts make the tattoo very personal, give it thought for a year, and discuss the idea with people whose opinion meant something to them. Melanie advised waiting until the potential enthusiast was 18 and taking the time in-between to give the idea serious thought. Al suggested going to tattoo shops and asking questions as well as preparing a customized idea. Ashley recommended that potential enthusiasts really think about what designs they wished to tattoo and to consider if such designs would still be appealing at 50.

In regards to advice for parents and teachers, most participants highlighted the idea that simply telling someone not to get a tattoo will not work. Once persons turn 18, they can do what they will with their body. Melanie suggested that parents take their children to the tattoo shop to check it out for themselves. Brittany advised that parents and teachers keep an open mind to the subject and that they should discuss the idea with potential enthusiasts. Above all, Brittany stressed that parents and teachers should be supportive of the decisions potential enthusiasts make. Al suggested that parents and teachers should advise potential enthusiasts to put some thought into their designs. Ashley’s primary concerns involved health and safety, encouraging parents and teachers to have open dialogue with potential enthusiasts in a similar manner to that of practicing
safe sex. Ashley felt that, in this day and age, it was the responsibility of the parent to become educated on the risks involved in such practices and to become informed of blood borne pathogens. In terms of safety, the parent needs to educate the child; in terms of design, the parent needs to listen to the child. By creating an atmosphere where open dialogue can occur, parents may ask potential enthusiasts questions to further develop the ideas of the potential enthusiasts as well as gaining critical insights into the lives and psyches of potential enthusiasts.

Education involves a teacher, a person who is rich in knowledge of a subject, sharing information she or he finds relevant with people who seek to understand the subject being discussed. Not all teachers are members of the Ontario College of Teachers, or any other professional teaching community. Every person is a student in some respect, and every person is a teacher in another respect. We learn from each other. Through the opinions of professional tattooists, the general population gains an understanding of aspects of the trade that go beyond the superficial appearances we encounter in popular culture. Through the opinions and experiences of tattoo enthusiasts, the general population gains an understanding of the aspects of tattooing that can only be achieved through first-hand experience. It is the purpose of tattoo education to provide the general public with a more in-depth understanding of tattooing on these levels so that if people decide to become tattooed they can do so in a safe, reflective manner.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are three limitations to the current study, each of which might be addressed by future research. First, although the participants of this study were recruited to
represent different levels of involvement in tattooing among different genders, they are still a relatively homogenous group. Second, there is a likely impact on perceptions of the participants due to the shared experience of being tattooed by the same person and living in the same community. Finally, there are biases present, both those of the participants and the researcher, due to my personal involvement as the research instrument.

This study was conducted in a small, rural community where all the participants shared a common ethnicity, age range, and social status. All tattoo enthusiast participants were Caucasian, between the ages of 21-29, and middle class. It has been stated that middle-class tattoo enthusiasts create meaningful significance as a way to distance themselves from the deviant perspective of tattooing attributed to previous generations of the working class (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000). As all the participants in this study are of the middle class and all the motivations for their tattoos were extremely personal in nature with rich, meaningful significance, this hypothesis could be true. It would be interesting for future research to examine these differences by studying more than one social class, more than one ethnicity, and more than one age range.

All participants were tattooed by the same tattooist at the same tattoo studio. It would be beneficial for future research to study different artists within a geographical area to see if similarities arise in these tattoo experiences. It would also be beneficial to study the experiences of enthusiasts across different geographical locations, such as comparing the experiences of enthusiasts in different rural areas, in different urban areas, or by comparing urban and rural experiences with tattoos. It would be interesting to perform studies with the lived tattoo experience (experiences within the community) in a similar fashion.
Finally, I had been a participant in the tattoo community under examination for nearly a decade. Due to involvement in the community, I had biases that were reflected in the interview process. My body language, the way I asked questions, the way I reacted to statements; all of these aspects were influenced by my biases. In turn, the responses provided by participants might have been biased because of my obvious involvement in the community. These participants would have reacted (and perhaps responded) differently if the interviewer was from outside of the community and did not demonstrate any affiliation with tattoos. It would be interesting for future research to be conducted in a fashion where this relationship could be further studied. An example of this change could be for a tattooed interviewer to be a member outside of the community with her or his tattoos hidden in the initial interviews. The same researcher could conduct a second series of interviews with the tattoos evident. This procedure could help demonstrate how affiliation affects participation in this matter. A second limitation of my role as researcher is that I am male. It is impossible for me to fully understand the female perspective towards tattoos. It would be beneficial for future research to study the responses provided by participants to same sex interviewers and how these responses differ when participants are interviewed by the opposite sex.

My Final Thoughts

The philosophers of the Enlightenment posited that the identity of the self could only be created and understood in relation to others in a dialogical fashion. Through my studies of others, their motivations and experiences with tattoos, I have learned a lot about myself. In this process, I questioned my own motivations, how they were created,
and how they have evolved. Although I have never been a fan of authority, I have also never considered myself a ‘bad boy.’ Rather, I have simply always believed in the autonomy of individuals over their own lives, as long as small children and animals are not harmed in the process. I have never considered my actions deviant, and I still do not. For me personally, tattoos are about belonging.

The literature I have presented in this thesis demonstrates that there are several perspectives that bring into focus the world of tattooing. Some researchers perceived deep sexual connotations in the motivations of the tattoo enthusiasts they studied, while others perceived indications of psychological pathologies. The majority of the literature proposed links between tattooing and deviance. Despite this slant in the literature, some researchers (including me) have probed the motivations of tattoo enthusiasts for descriptions of culturally normative behaviour. There is no one, definitive answer. There are millions of people around the world with tattoos, with just as many circumstances and contexts to consider.

The participants with whom I shared this research experience helped me to understand the culturally normative nature of tattoos in my local community. I hope that this research may help you, the reader, to consider such a perspective when people close to you voice their interest in procuring a tattoo. Rather than immediately perceiving such an act to be deviant, I hope that this research will inspire you to take a moment to have an open-minded discussion with this person. The revelations that could arise from such an act could help you to not only understand this person in a better light but perhaps yourself as well.
At one point in the interview, Von Scotch becomes reflective of the tattoos he has created over the years and speaks specifically of a tattoo he created on my right leg (see Appendix M). It is a Balinese Barong mask. Barong is viewed as a protector god in the traditional ‘good vs. evil’ ceremonies in Bali. The mask was tattooed nearly 3 years ago and became an entire leg sleeve over a period of 2 years. In the past 3 years, I have travelled to tattoo conventions all over the world, and this specific tattoo has won nearly 20 awards in countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Norway, and Peru.

Having gotten to the point where I have done the kind of work I’ve done on your leg and gotten my tattooing to the point where you can go out, totally absent of me, it’s not like I know people and we’re ‘in,’ you’ve gone out as some sole traveller, showed up at conventions, pulled your leg out and people have dropped their jaws at what they’ve seen and most importantly my peers have dropped their jaws at what they have seen. They’ve been impressed by it and to me that’s huge because I do feel like I’m out of touch sometimes, I mean, I try to stay in touch as much as I can. To feel like my work is even on a calibre where it’s acceptable to the people that I feel have an ear to the ground to what’s happening in tattooing today feels really good. Your leg represents for me having to bring together everything I’ve been trying to learn in the last 13, 14 years of tattooing and having something that I can put down and say ‘damn I’m proud of that.’ (I, p. 13)
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INFORMATION

Title: (TH)INK CULTURE

I am writing to request your participation in research aimed at furthering the understanding of the tattoo community. The ultimate goal of my research is to understand the motivations behind becoming tattooed, becoming (or not becoming) more involved in the tattoo community, and how members of the tattoo community perceive tattoos within the current social context. I am a student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University, working on a thesis in order to complete the requirements for an M.Ed. This research has been cleared by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board.

In this part of the research, I wish to document the views of members of the tattoo community about factors that influence motivations to become tattooed and become involved in the tattoo community. If you are willing to participate, I will interview you for approximately 45-60 minutes in a public place of your choosing.

I am planning audio-tape the interview and take notes to make up a written record of your interview, so that I may obtain a verbatim account of any information you wish to share with me. The taped interview will be transcribed and maintained on a pass-word protected computer file and then the tape will be destroyed. None of the data will contain your name, or any information that may reveal your identity. Data will be secured in a locked office; your identity will be kept confidential. The verbatim transcripts of your interview will be emailed to you for a chance to edit the interview. In this stage you will have the opportunity to expand on answers, withdraw answers or offer new information. The edited transcripts may be returned to me via email. Even if you are satisfied with the interview and wish to change nothing, a return email would be greatly appreciated.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions you find objectionable, and you are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone. You are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, and you may request removal of all or part of your data. Any removed data will be destroyed immediately.

This research may result in publications of various types, including my master’s thesis, journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, and books. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide; neither will your name be known to anyone tabulating or analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed. If you wish to be identified, through your name or description of your tattoo, please advise of me of your preference by endorsing the relevant statements on the consent form. Otherwise, your tattoos will be described in a general manner without specific details.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Myke Zinn at 519-386-6953, email: 6mjz@queensu.ca, or his supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Sincerely, Myke Zinn
APPENDIX B: INITIAL CONSENT FORM FOR TATTOO ENTHUSIASTS

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “(TH)INK CULTURE,” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interview will be recorded by audiotape. I understand that I will be interviewed for between 45 and 60 minutes.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. I have also been told the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality to the extent possible of all information.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Myke Zinn at 519-386-6953, email: 6mjz@queensu.ca, or his supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I want my name to be used in all publications and presentations that come from my contribution to this project YES ___ NO ___

I want my tattoo to be described in specific detail in all publications and presentations that come from my contribution to this project. YES ___ NO ___

Participant’s Name (please print): ____________________________________________
Participant’s Signature: ____________________________________________________
Date: ____________________________________________________________________

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet so I am able to contact you with your interview transcripts and to provide you with study results.

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Myke Zinn. Retain the second copy for your records.
APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR TATTOO ENTHUSIASTS

1) Could you share with me your earliest experiences with tattoos?

2) How old were you when you first got tattooed?

3) What was the first tattoo?

4) Was there any significance to the symbols you picked?

5) How would you describe your first tattoo experience?

6) How long was it between tattoo #1 and tattoo #2? (if applicable)

7) When did you know that you wanted more than one tattoo?

8) How quickly did you become tattooed?

9) What kind of considerations did you make when you were looking at the placement?

10) Did getting tattooed change your earlier views of tattoos?

11) What’s the greatest part of the tattoo experience for you?

12) What’s the worst part for you?

13) Do you feel like getting tattooed has changed you as a person?

14) How do you feel society in general views tattoos?

15) How much significance do you give to the body as being a communicative text?

16) What advice would you have for parents and teachers who have children who are looking to become tattooed?

17) How did you feel after your tattoo experience?

18) Was this feeling consistent with your following tattoo experiences?

19) Is there anything you would change about your tattoo experiences?
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM FOR TATTOOIST

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “(TH)INK CULTURE,” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interview will be recorded by audiotape. I understand that I will be interviewed for between 45 and 60 minutes.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. If my name is used in the study, it is likely that my identity could be inferred by people who know me. Beyond that, confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Myke Zinn at 519-386-6953, email: 6mjz@queensu.ca, or his supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I want my name to be used in all publications and presentations that come from my contribution to this project YES ___ NO ___

Participant’s Name (please print): __________________________________________
Participant’s Signature: ______________________________________
Date: ______________________________________

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet so I am able to contact you with your interview transcripts and to provide you with study results.

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Myke Zinn. Retain the second copy for your records.
APPENDIX E: QUESTIONS FOR TATTOOIST

1) Could you please give me a general biography of yourself?
2) How old were you when you began your apprenticeship?
3) How long was your apprenticeship?
4) Could you describe the tattoo scene in the local community when you started?
5) What were the tattoos like in that time?
6) How have things changed since then?
7) I know there is no ‘average’ client, but what extremes in members of social standing have you tattooed?
8) How far do your clients travel to be tattooed by you?
9) Do you remember what your first tattoo was?
10) What triggered your initial involvement in tattoos?
11) What was the first design you tattooed?
12) What is a typical day like as a tattooist?
13) What is the greatest part of your job?
14) What are some of the least appealing aspects of your job?
15) Could you describe a typical tattooist/client relationship?
16) Do clients voice their motivations behind their tattoos to you?
17) What kind of rules or ethics do you run your shop by?
18) Do you have any rehearsed phrases or scripts you use on first time clients?
19) When you do not feel like tattooing a particular tattoo on someone, how do you deal with the situation?
20) What’s your greatest fear as a tattooist?
21) Do you have any future goals or aspirations at this point in your career?
22) How do you see tattooing in our current social time?
23) Do you have anything that stands out as a greatest accomplishment for you?
24) How would you characterize your interactions with the community?
25) What sort of things should people be looking for in a shop in terms of health and safety?
26) Do you have any other advice for someone getting a tattoo?
27) You have two little ones. What type of advice are you going to have for them when their friends start talking about tattoos?
APPENDIX F: FOLLOW-UP CONSENT FORM FOR TATTOO ENTHUSIASTS

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “(TH)INK CULTURE,” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study. I have already signed a consent form for this study concerning a 45-minute interview, the use of my name to be used in all publications and presentation that come from my contribution to this project, as well as to having my tattoo described in specific detail in all publications and presentation that come from my contribution in this project.

I understand that I am now being asked to be involved in a second, 15-minute follow-up interview to discuss common themes raised in this study. I also understand that I am being asked that photographs of my tattoos be used in this study.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. In that my name is being used and my tattoos described, it is likely that my identity could be inferred by people who know me. Beyond that, confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Myke Zinn at 519-386-6953, email: 6mjz@queensu.ca, or his supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I agree to performing a 15-minute follow-up interview to discuss common themes. YES ___ NO ___
I agree to having pictures of my tattoo(s) included in all publications and presentations that come from my contribution to this project. YES ___ NO ___

Participant’s Name (please print): ________________________________

Participant’s Signature ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet so I am able to contact you with your interview transcripts and to provide you with study results.
e-mail or postal address: ________________________________

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Myke Zinn. Retain the second copy for your records.
APPENDIX H: BRITTANY’S GEISHA GIRL TATTOO
APPENDIX I: AL’S TATTOOS
APPENDIX K: JOHN’S TATTOOS
APPENDIX L: ASHLEY’S TATTOOS
APPENDIX M: MY LEG TATTOO