DRAWN TOGETHER: HOW THE HEAVILY TATTOOED BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ‘THIRD PLACES’

By

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Abstract

This thesis puts forth an ethnographic, social constructionist account of tattoo shops with the aim of examining how heavily tattooed individuals negotiate positive social meaning in a constructed society. This research assumes that heavily tattooed individuals may be viewed as deviant, which can create problems associated with labeling and stigma. Consequently, these individuals need to develop ways to cope, and can do this by seeking out the company of like-minded people who can help them define away stigma. The central focus of this research will be on the social structures of the space (tattoo shops) and the individuals who visit it - more specifically on their interactions, conversations and experiences. Data were collected from both participant observation and semi-structured open ended interviews with participants. The results from this study demonstrate that tattoo shops are environments that can be interpreted as ‘new third places.’
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Chapter One

Introduction

When I think about ‘third places,’ the theme song to the 80 and 90’s hit television sitcom Cheers comes, unbidden, to mind. Cheers is, unquestionably a ‘third place’:

Makin your way in the world today takes everything you got,  
Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.  
Wouldn’t you like to get away?  
Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name,  
And they’re always glad you came.  
You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same.  
You wanna be where everybody knows your name (Portnoy and Angelo 1982).

The lyrics from this song align with characteristics Ray Oldenburg (1989) describes as necessary for a space to be considered a ‘third place.’ More specifically, Oldenburg (1989) describes a ‘third place’ as a setting in which individuals can congregate; it is a space where home (first place) and work (second place) lives are temporarily forgotten and individuals socialize for pure pleasure. These spaces are welcoming, accepting, and free of outside judgement or worry; they can be a remedy for life’s drudgeries and are “essential for the health of our towns and ourselves” (ibid:25). The company and the conversation attract individuals, and the enjoyment that ensues results in continued visits to these informal public spaces.

For heavily tattooed individuals, who are the central concern of this thesis, the benefits of ‘third places’ may be invaluable. According to Oldenburg (1989), ‘third places’ have essential characteristics: they are novel and create stimulation, which other environments may lack; they are established on neutral ground and that works to level the differences between individuals and remove any hierarchical distinctions; the physical place is both accessible and accommodating to newcomers and regulars; conversation is the main activity and maintains a friendly, humorous and light-hearted tone; the profile is low because the physical structure is plain but the mood is
playful (i.e. conversation, humour); lastly, ‘third places’ are a “home away from home” for those who go there (ibid.). But the most distinguishing element between ‘third places’ and other social spaces is the intentionality to be there (ibid.) Individuals seek out these spaces.

‘Third places’ are casual environments that meet many individual needs and within these places individuals can avoid the effort or inefficiency incurred in other areas of life. Oldenburg (1989) goes on to discuss how within ‘third places’ there is no apprehension or exhaustive emotional output, as there can be in one-on-one situations. Alternatively, individuals befriend everyone and are enriched and warmed by the breadth of these relationships. Socialization in ‘third places’ makes an individual’s world more complete, increasing their wisdom and self-assurance through the experience of friendliness and generosity (Oldenburg 1989). These places bring about social enlightenment, because it is here life lessons are learned and experienced (ibid.). However, individuals do not always have the capacity to recognize the benefits of these places, or that these places represent physical manifestations of their desires to associate with others.

Coffee shop, tavern or corner store, all ‘third places’ share these common essential features, which create the overall character of the space. Coffee shops for example have historically been places where all individuals are welcomed and treated equally (Oldenburg 1989). Within the coffee shop individuals can discover each other apart from the “classes and ranks” that otherwise divide them, and can engage each other and converse, over a beverage, purely for the human association (ibid:191). Tattoo shops share these essential features by welcoming heavily tattooed individuals and allowing them to socialize freely and uninhibited by outside social structures. Tattoo shops are a “gathering place where community is most alive and people are themselves” (ibid:20). The experiences afforded in ‘third places,’ whether a coffee shop or tattoo shop,
cannot be discovered anywhere else and the eternal sameness of these spaces overshadows their variations.

Equally important, although not mentioned by Oldenburg, is the idea that ‘third places’ can be thought of as locational forms of social capital. More specifically, the interactional exchanges that occur in ‘third places’ make the environments favourable for constructing social and personal relationships (Granovetter 1973; Halpern 2005; Putnam 2000). These relationships are built around trust and personal association that may be overlooked in other social environments. However, ‘third places’ provide a location that enables building relationships through collective vitality.

For heavily tattooed individuals this informal interaction becomes critical because of their visible differences from the “norm”. Although displays of heavily tattooed bodies are increasing, they are, within Westernized cultures still considered to be unconventional because tattooed bodies do not adhere to more traditional appearance norms (Armstrong 1991; Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Fischer 1975; Goffman 1959, 1963). The physical attributes and, sometimes, the behaviours of heavily tattooed individuals deviate from societal norms and can also lead to social stigma (Goffman 1963; Lemert 1967, 1974). In turn, it becomes important to examine individual identity in connection to social and self-acceptance because despite individuals’ willingness to ‘achieve’ this stigma (getting tattooed is voluntary), stigma still affects individual’s self-esteem and self-worth (Goffman 1963). Heavily tattooed individuals must confront social perceptions and judgements, and require a means through which to negotiate these social understandings; the tattoo shop is a gathering place where this can occur. Therefore, the motivation of this research study is to examine if heavily tattooed individuals utilize tattoo shops as ‘third places’ to construct positive social meaning through social capital resources.
This process begins in Chapter Two with a review of the relevant sociological literature that will situate this thesis in the context of broader concerns of the discipline. This involves a consideration of ‘social constructionist’ theory specifically as it relates to knowledge about how individuals understand and interpret deviance. With a social constructionist foundation, I discuss how individuals internalize a deviant identity and, how heavily tattooed individuals’ assign and manage these understandings of their bodily displays. Theories of subculture and urbanism are discussed in connection to the management of heavily tattooed individuals’ identity and appearance. The literature review concludes with a discussion of ‘third places’ and the idea that tattoo shops may conceivably represent one such type of place.

Chapter Three begins by aligning research methods with social constructionist perspectives in order to discuss the epistemological and ontological positions of this study. Once these elements are clarified, I discuss the research design and the methodological applications that were selected. I examine the research sample, comprised of heavily tattooed individuals, and the process through which I gained access to these individuals. Following this is a more extensive discussion of the specifics of the research methodologies that I employed. These include participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Finally, I review the ethical dilemmas faced while undertaking ethnographic research.

Chapter Four details the findings from this study, from both observational and interview data. In this chapter I begin by describing the overall character of tattoo shops, which includes physical elements, pertaining to both the environment and the individuals who visit these spaces. Next, I consider individual narratives, conversations, interactions and feelings the research subjects associate with tattoo shops. As the benefits of these interactions are discussed, the connections between tattoo shops and ‘third places’ become discernable.
The fifth and final chapter provides a discussion of some of the theoretical implications of this research study. This involves a consideration of the manner in which heavily tattooed individuals re-establish positive meaning pertaining to their appearance and identity. I examine the characteristics of tattoo shops and the individual and collective benefits these spaces represent for those who visit. I describe how tattoo shops possess characteristics of ‘third places’ and how these characteristics then permit individuals to construct positive meaning through the social capital resources they obtain in tattoo shops. Lastly, this chapter acknowledges study strengths and limitations, suggests areas for future research and makes concluding comments.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

In order to properly position this research study it is critical to conduct a review of existing sociological literature. This will help specify and contextualize elements pertinent to issues under examination and advance the direction of this thesis. Within this chapter I will review the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism and how, from this theoretical position, ‘deviance’ is understood. I will then examine how interpretations of deviance are preserved through labeling and stigma. Subsequently, urbanism and sub-cultural theories will be discussed in order to reveal how individuals manage socially constructed knowledge regarding deviance. Lastly information about social capital and ‘third places’ will be reviewed and connected to the larger aim of this study. All of the information advanced will situate the intended research study within already existing boundaries of sociological literature and elaborate on the more substantial intentions of this study.

Social Constructionism, an Overview

It is essential that this discussion begin with a conceptualization of ‘social constructionism,’ since we seek to understand how and why people assign meaning to individual actions and actors. A constructionist understanding will assist in examining the heavily tattooed person, (those visibly covered in tattoos), and their negotiation of positive social meanings. Social constructionism is rooted in ‘symbolic interactionism,’ which focuses on the distinctive character of human interaction (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969, 1986; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). From a sociological perspective, this means that importance is placed on how individuals deal with or negotiate their actions in the context of social structures and processes, and on how this construction produces human knowledge which is understood as real (Becker
1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Best 2007; Mead 1934). More simply, social constructionism assumes that the world only possesses meaning once it is assigned as a result of social processes.

The construction of meaning stems from common sense, and further shapes reality through experience and observation. According to Berger and Luckmann, “common-sense knowledge is the knowledge shared with others in the normal, self-evident routines of everyday life,” allowing people to perceive the reality of everyday life as “reality” (1966:37). Since common sense is emphasized as the inter-subjective character of knowledge, it enables institutions and cultures to produce stability by bridging differences between humans and their physical environments through social norms (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Fischer 1975, 1976). This paramount and shared reality creates a correspondence between meanings, but alternatively these meanings are what create sub-versions of reality to be constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

In other words, attempts to cement meaning in knowledge and common sense create a collective and cohesive way to view “reality.” This collective reality will have consequences because individuals will experience and observe their social worlds differently. Inevitably, individuals will have varying understandings of common sense, creating further differences in the production of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Lemert 1967). Ultimately, common sense creates knowledge but it is the shaping and sharing of this reality that enables variance in the construction of meanings, which is ongoing.

Regardless of others’ investments in shared understandings of constructed meanings, the reality of everyday life can change fluidly since meaning is dependent on interaction (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Cicourel 1968; Douglas 1970; Garfinkel 1967; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). People have the ability to diverge from these social constructions since everyday methods that produce reality vary based on situational and contextual elements. Through
detachment from the dictated and imposed rationality of society, people can produce a new rationality based on their unique interactions and experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Douglas 1970; Cicourel 1968; Garfinkel 1967; Schutz 1964, 1974). Heavily tattooed individuals assign their own meanings to the body, and largely to life, and this is the point from which this analysis proceeds as it attempts to determine how the meaning of tattoos is negotiable and how positive meanings are negotiated by the heavily tattooed.

The Construction of a Deviant Label

The term ‘negotiation’ is employed to help explain how heavily tattooed individuals create new positive personal understandings regarding socially-constructed meanings. However to examine how this negotiation is accomplished, it is first necessary to discuss theories of ‘labeling’ and ‘stigma’ in order to position the heavily tattooed in an appropriate social context. This will help to explain the processes that construct an understanding of these individuals, as discussed in sociological literature. This connection to labeling theory will provide a perspective from which to better understand how the heavily tattooed attempt to cope with different ideas of appearance and negotiate positive social meanings.

Labeling Theory

‘Labeling theory’ is a form of social constructionist argument. It is also rooted in ‘symbolic interactionism’ and is an extension of the ‘social reaction approach’ to social action (Lemert 1951). Very simply, individuals assign labels to one another in order to better understand, categorize and react to their social worlds (Becker 1963; Cooley 1902; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). Major contributions to the labeling approach have helped conceptualize and connect it to the notion of deviants and deviant behaviour, arguing that deviance is not inherent to any particular individual or behaviour (Becker 1963; Erikson 1964; Lemert 1967). In fact it is the
social audience, from members of the community at large to agents of social control, such as authority figures, who confer the label of deviance on specific individuals and behaviours (Becker 1963; Erikson 1964; Lemert 1951, 1967). The critical component in the process is the social audience and its control over defining and labeling, regardless of how the social audience comes to be defined.

The labeling process can activate both formal and informal social control because it can restrict, influence and affect how people behave (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967). Accordingly, the social audience possesses a tremendous amount of power through an ability to assign labels. Consequently, audience members become ‘moral entrepreneurs,’ acting as guardians of moral order, social action and acceptance (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). Therefore, when a label carries a negative connotation it can seriously hinder an individual’s attempt to find an identity and to function competently in a society (Becker 1963; Goffman 1959; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). Although the effects of being labeled can be numerous, the primary concern is the effect on one’s sense of self or identity (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967). For the heavily tattooed, being affixed with a deviant label is a common experience since these individuals diverge from the generally accepted understandings of how people should appear.

Notably, two aspects of becoming labeled deviant are important. First, the social audience creates the norm and then applies it to a person, labeling that person a deviant or ‘outsider’ (Becker 1963; Erikson 1964). For example, in order for a heavily tattooed individual to be labeled deviant based on appearance, there must first be a norm regarding appearance. If appearance norms did not exist, deviation from appearance norms could not occur. However, just because appearance norms do exist does not mean that everyone labeled deviant based on appearance has actually violated some norm (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Mead
1934). Secondly, there is a difference between rule breakers/rule breaking behaviour and deviants/deviant behaviour; ‘deviant’ is reserved for those who have had the label successfully applied to them, and deviant behaviour is any specific behaviour assigned the label of deviant regardless of whether or not any norms have actually been violated (Becker 1963; Erikson 1964; Lemert 1967).

One way to appreciate this distinction is with reference to Lemert’s (1967) concepts of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ deviance. Primary deviance involves a “deviant” act that occurs but does not become a permanent element of the individual’s identity since it has only marginal implications for one’s emotional structure and organization of the self (Lemert 1967). By comparison, secondary deviance involves being engulfed in a deviant role and the acceptance of the label as part of one’s self image (Becker 1963; Lemert 1967). It can be argued that both are relevant to participation in tattoo culture, such that the heavily tattooed can be thought of as secondary deviants. While it is no longer deviant in any significant sense for almost anyone to get a tattoo (or even a small number of tattoos), there is still considerable stigma in society-at-large associated with being heavily tattooed. For this reason, it should be made clear that any subsequent use of the term “deviant” is in reference to the latter not the former category. More simply, deviance can be understood as a product of ideas that people have about one another; however, because reality exists in the context of human experience, what is considered deviant will vary among groups (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer1969, 1971, 1986; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). As well, the heavily tattooed are not a cohesive or homogenous group; there are distinct variations in regards to the experiences, ideologies and lifestyles of those who participate in tattooing (Armstrong 1991; Atkinson 2003; Betterton 1996; Burgess and Clark 2010; DeMello 1993, 1996, 2000; Irwin 2000, 2011; Koust 2006; Patterson and Schroeder.
Although all theory can be limiting, predominantly what this means is that not all acts are considered equally deviant and therefore not all labels are internalized identically. However, people do tend to define themselves based on others perceptions of them and this may create stigma regardless of one’s acceptance or denial of the label.

**Stigma**

When the self-concept is changed from “normal” to “deviant”, an individual will be forced to take on a new identity or acquire a ‘social stigma’ (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1963; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). The result can leave the individual feeling devalued, inferior, or shunned by other ‘normal’ others (Goffman 1963; Mead 1934; Blumer 1986). For the most part, stigma is based on individual differences departing from social standards, and the heavily tattooed are a perfect example of a group who experience this because they differ in how they choose to appear.

Stigmatization can lead to shame, self-hate and self-degradation because, even though stigmatized persons may feel normal, they are labeled and treated otherwise in the presence of those who conform (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1963). Social groups affect an individual’s attempt to find a sense of self and can impose crucial beliefs regarding identity (Goffman 1963). In other words, the socialization of stigmatized individuals can create a struggle since the perception of reality and the identity standards one chooses to apply are based on constructed understandings and social influences. Thus, it is vital to recognize that stigma is not concrete; it is not a set of categories or specific violations. Stigma does, however, affect anyone who does not conform to standard appearance norms.
Nevertheless, being stigmatized is a process by which reactions of others are dealt with and can either spoil or encourage one's identity (Goffman 1963; Shih 2004). The adoption of stigma as empowerment will assist individuals in overcoming adversities generally associated with labeling and stigma as a depleting process (Goffman 1963; Shih 2004). By reassessing what stigma means, focus can be placed on the positive effects, benefits and rewards of possessing a stigma or identity mark (Herman and Miall 1990; Shih 2004). More generally, contrasting views of stigma demonstrate how vastly it can differ based in time, place, and one’s understanding of its meaning.

Many people see being heavily tattooed as deviant, and labeling theorists argue that this can lead to significant problems and conflicts for heavily tattooed people. When an individual becomes heavily tattooed he or she may quickly experience changes in interaction with others, and must therefore adopt new reactions and employ new strategies to cope with the changes they experience. This is necessary in order to re-define meaning about one’s self through a new perception of social symbols. More specifically, the dissatisfaction expressed by others regarding one’s appearance offers an opportunity for stigmatized individuals to create a new perception of themselves, by perceiving stigma as positive and aligning themselves with new social influences. It is through the development of coping strategies that these issues are resolved, typically, in the company of like-minded people who help define away any social stigma. For the heavily tattooed, one is likely to meet such people in a designated place where similar others congregate and form a community.

**Relief from Labeling and Stigmatization**

The focus of the discussion thus far has been on how heavily tattooed individuals are perceived, assigned labels and stigmatized through social constructions and understandings. How
these labels are internalized, managed and responded to is extremely relevant to individual processes, and specifically affect how heavily tattooed individuals assign meaning to their worlds. Simply, because being heavily tattooed is seen and labeled by many as deviant, the heavily tattooed have to manage issues arising from the stigma they experience. As mentioned, one way of doing this is by seeking out similar others in an attempt to reduce any socially assigned stigma. This discussion will continue in a direction that advances an understanding of how the heavily tattooed achieve and maintain social relationships that provide acceptance.

*The Urban Scene*

In order for so-called ‘deviant’ individuals to avoid rejection by mainstream values and norms, they may need to create new social connections. These connections will have spatial dimensions, because unconventionality is more likely to occur within urban areas. According to Fischer (1975, 1976, 1995), urbanism allows for increased innovation, creativity, originality and modern thought. All such forms of unconventionality can be associated with the heavily tattooed (Fischer 1975, 1976, 1995; Wirth 1938). The unconventional urbanite has a better chance than someone in a rural area of “discovering other individuals who hold unconventional values, beliefs and display unconventional behaviour” (Fischer 1976:192). Additionally, due to the increased flexibility and social acceptance in urban areas, those who seek out such locales can more freely display unconventionality. This lessens social stigma and labeling and enhances the construction of positive social meaning (Becker 1963; Goffman 1959, 1963; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934).

As previously discussed, common knowledge is inter-subjective knowledge and people will behave in a manner constructed by the formal and informal structures around them (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Fischer 1975, 1976). For the heavily tattooed, a subculture
creates a means through which problems of social structure can be solved since it creates a way to escape larger culturally transmitted and inhibiting norms (Fischer 1975, 1976, 1995).

Predominantly, subcultures are solutions to problems posed to the unconventional because the solution is not to struggle individually but to join forces with those who are similar (Mills 1959). Furthermore, it is important to understand how the unconventional negotiate this separation from mainstream society in a manner that enables both a human and cultural stability.

**Subculture: Creation and Preservation of Social Capital**

The unconventionality of heavily tattooed individuals compels them to establish alternative meaningful relationships, and urbanism makes it easier for individuals to discover and associate with others in the subculture (Fischer 1975, 1976; 1995). It is through subcultural interaction that heavily tattooed individuals discover positive meanings associated with their values and behaviours, and where they do not experience condemnation of unconventional appearance alone. Connections to subculture in this discussion are only intended to provide a means for understanding how the heavily tattooed initially create social capital within the larger subculture of conventional society, not how heavily tattooed individuals are further separated into smaller groups once within the culture.

**SubCultural Theory**

There is no consensus on the central tenets of subcultural theory because it has undergone many significant developments over the decades (Atkinson 2003; Fischer 1975, 1995). Essentially it was pioneered by the Chicago School of Sociology and was associated with the social disorganization of delinquent youth in urban areas (Wirth 1938; Sutherland 1937; Thrasher 1927). This eventually transitioned towards notions of strain, reflective of sociological theories of anomie (Durkheim 1893, 1951; Merton 1938). This theory examines the structural...
processes that create strain by prohibiting equal opportunity, as well as how subcultures work as the means for coping with this problem (Agnew 1992; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Merton 1938, 678; Thrasher 1927). A re-conceptualization of the strain model moved subcultural theory towards identity and status as a way to express symbolic resistance or opposition to dominant culture (Cohen 1955).

Subcultural theory creates a baseline for thinking about problem solving, which is demonstrated, in much of the sociological literature. Frequently subcultural theory emphasizes how actions demonstrate the ways in which individuals grapple with their existing conditions of stress, conflict and contradiction, which are all products of an unchanging status quo (Tanner 1996; Fischer 1975, 1995; Wirth 1938). Status functions as a measuring stick to constrict individual identity and further creates an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality (Cohen 1968; Fischer 1975, 1995; Tanner 1996). Subcultural theory reinforces the idea that individuals do have issues regarding identity and the constriction that certain expectations of identity can have.

The heavily tattooed can be better understood through perspectives which focus on why individuals come together and how people inter-subjectively come to understand the world in a subcultural context. Behaviour is developed through collective understanding, association, the sharing of traits and values, as well as the sharing of a common way of life (Becker 1963; Goffman 1959, 1963). The emergence of a tattoo culture allows people to negotiate positive meaning through interaction with other tattooed individuals and can strengthen social bonds, thereby creating a form of solidarity (Atkinson 2003; Cohen 1968; DeMello 2000; Durkheim 1951; Fischer 1975, 1995, 2008; Wirth 1938;). Furthermore, because being heavily tattooed is stigmatized, individuals require an alternative setting – a designated place - that provides a collective element as a means for coping with the pressures and labels of society.
The process of discovering subcultural groups allows individuals to create social circles and personal relationships. In fact, the heavily tattooed would be less able to maintain the adoption of different forms of self expression if it were not for urban places and subcultural groups that provide the means to be unconventional while continuing to form social relations (Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Fischer 1975, 1976, 1995; Wirth 1938; Simmel 1903). Heavily tattooed individuals will manoeuvre around the power and influence of social constructions, resulting in participation in tattoo subculture, the production of social capital and the creation of positive social meanings.

Social Capital

The aim of subcultural theory is to grasp how heavily tattooed individuals negotiate positive social meanings with others through social connections. The discovery of others and the formation of social and personal relationships can be conceptualized as ‘social capital,’ which expresses the value of relationships between and among individuals (Bourdieu 1985; Coleman 1988; Granovetter 1973; Halpern 2005; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000). This implies that people have the ability to act in a rational manner since they will select the resources through which they establish meaningful social relations (Coleman 1988). Discussions about the importance of social capital convey that when it is absent one can drift back into a state of anomie (Durkheim 1984). However, despite concerns about an overall decline in social capital, it would appear that participation in tattoo subculture is not declining or accidental (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Putnam 2000). Therefore, social capital is acquired within the boundaries of the larger tattoo subculture, which would otherwise be non-existent.

Within this subculture, the social norm of being tattooed becomes redefined as favourable and results in the establishment of positive social meaning, resolving issues of individual
unconventionality. In other words, the heavily tattooed learn to cope with the stigma placed upon them with a collective solution; they interact with others who share their interests and problems (Atkinson 2003; Coleman 1988; DeMello 2000; Irwin 2000). Social capital can provide an opportunity to create belonging, increase well-being and think positively about oneself despite the fact that others may not (Bourdieu 1985; DeMello 2000; Fischer 1975; Goffman 1963; Granovetter 1973).

It is important to reiterate that the formation of social capital involves a spatial dimension because individuals need a space in which to interact with one another. This is especially significant when the heavily tattooed attempt to negotiate positive social meaning. However, even within urban settings where unconventional subcultures and individuals thrive and appear more frequently, individuals need a place to generate social capital (Coleman 1988; Fischer 1975, 1995; Halpern 2005). The heavily tattooed are no exception and require a space where interests can be shared and relationships can be built and given an opportunity to flourish.

**Shaping Positive Meaning**

Since the heavily tattooed are “assigned” meaning by social actors, their search for similar others must occur in a space that is removed from those individuals who assign hindering and negative meanings to them. One way to achieve this is by seeking out like-minded others, which can occur in spaces that encourage positive social interaction and engagement. This space allows individuals to be themselves, to interact willingly, happily and to build social capital.

**Third Places**

In sociological literature such spaces have been referred to as ‘*third places.*’ A “*third place*” is defined as an informal or neutral public gathering place that embraces individuals and functions without focus on external characteristics (Oldenburg 1989). Traditionally these places
have been thought of as the place on the corner, such as the tavern, community center or bowling alley; nevertheless, whether for a visitor, a newcomer or a regular, the ‘third place’ promotes unity, care, and entertainment for any individual who desires to venture there (ibid.). This becomes significant because ‘third places’ create bonds that promote civil society, democracy and civil engagement (Oldenburg 1989). Furthermore, separate from the two usual environments where people interact - the first place (home) and the second place (work) - ‘third places’ disregard hierarchy, encourage individuality and allow people to shed the uniform roles of social life (Oldenburg 1989; Simmel 1903). More generally, ‘third places’ are sorting areas for social interests that enable positive social relationships to be formed (Oldenburg 1989, 2001).

For this reason, ‘third places’ become invaluable because social relationships create networks that benefit individuals’ functioning, opportunities, choices and quality of life (Oldenburg 1989, 2001). Non-contractual elements of the ‘third place’ are the active ingredient in the interaction that occurs there, and through the production of respect, trust and reciprocity, people become happier, by simply being surrounded by the individuals and activities that occur there.

Interestingly, although ‘traditional third places’ are considered to be vanishing, as personal interest in recreational interaction has declined, involvement in tattoo culture has not declined (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Vail 1999). In fact, not only has tattoo culture maintained consistent levels of participation for thousands of years, involvement in the culture has gained momentum over the last century (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Fischer 2000; Vail 1999). Therefore, in an attempt to construct new positive social meaning given the ever present possibility of stigmatization, the heavily tattooed require a ‘third place’ to connect and belong.
This new place on the corner can be illustrated as the ‘tattoo shop,’ a place that creates a center for the community and is a home away from home for any individuals involved.

**Tattoo Shop: A “New” Third Place**

Although the tattoo shop is discussed in most tattoo literature - sociological or otherwise - little weight is placed on anything other than simple descriptions of their physical appearance. Traditionally the tattoo shop has been hidden away at the margins of society and considered the dingy, shady hangout of social deviants (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 1993, 1996, 2000). This speculation requires new conceptualizations because the tattoo shop has always been a unique world with a secret tranquility, where stories are swapped and experiences are shared. The shop actually helps constitute membership into the community and is the most important place for a newcomer to learn about and be involved in social processes and relationships within the culture. The tattoo shop not only produces an encouraging environment but also is composed of individuals who share a love for the culture and experience similar problems of adjustment (Atkinson 2003). The space is filled with the artists who make tattooing possible, clients who consciously place themselves there and regulars who simply go there to feel like they belong to something. In fact, the tattoo shop as a ‘third place’ supports both the individual and the tattoo community by strengthening social ties and the subculture.

It is this ‘third place’ that provokes and allows new positive social meaning to be produced for the heavily tattooed. People develop ways to cope with these problems of labeling and stigmatization by seeking out the company of like-minded others who help them eliminate any negative social constructions. In fact, “the underlying ideology of the tattoo shop is inclusiveness,” helping individuals wield agency in constructing their own unique identities (Atkinson 2003:73). However, the idea of the tattoo shop as a ‘third place’ for congregation and
community formation has not been adequately discussed in sociological or more general
literature relating to tattoo culture.

Sociological Tattoo Literature and the Tattoo Shop

Areas frequently written about in tattoo literature are often riddled with misconceptions
about who heavily tattooed individuals are and what they represent. Identifiable themes within
the literature commonly consider the history of the culture from both masculine and feminine
perspectives, the renaissance of tattooing, how tattooing may be morphing into fine art, media
coverage and cultural consumption of tattooing, the tattooed female body and tattooing as a form
Hawkes, Senn and Thorn 2004; Irwin 2000, 2011; Koust 2006; Patterson 2010; Pitts 1998;
But the most frequent theme, both historically and in the weight of its focus, pertains to
deviance; more specifically, connections to bad behaviour and criminality (Atkinson 2003, 2004;
Atkinson and Young 2001; Burgess and Clark 2010; DeMello 1993, 1996; Fisher 2002; Irwin
2004). Whether the association is to criminal groups specifically, such as gangs, or more simply
participation in something marginal, the notion of tattooing and tattooed individuals representing
something ‘deviant’ is an instilled social construction.

Most of the sociological literature conceptualizes tattoo wearers in terms of deviant labels
Steward 1993; Vail 1999). In other words, the display of one tattoo may label an individual a
primary deviant but displaying several tattoos places an individual into the category of secondary
deviant (Atkinson 2000, 2003; Becker 1963; Fischer 2002; Irwin 2000; Lemert 1967). This is because heavily tattooing one’s body deviates from how the socially constructed body should appear (Atkinson 2001; Irwin 2011; Sanders 2008). Heavily tattooed individuals exceed social norms in the celebration of their identity through customizing their bodies, but the conflicts with conventional society are apparent.

Regardless of whether increases in tattooing have altered the traditional tattooing stereotypes, behavioural norms are still enforced by the social majority and any behaviour that differs will generally be labeled deviant. Thus, for heavily tattooed individuals it is not the act of being tattooed but the consequence of that label applied by those following social rules and norms that influence how they develop their identity and form relationships (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Burgess 2010; Irwin 2001; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934). Moreover, this type of social construction has permitted an understanding about the heavily tattooed, because people believe these structural and institutional meanings and assign them to others. Yet this does not stop individuals from utilizing body art, reclaiming expressive freedom and negotiating everyday contexts and subcultural shifts despite the fact that artistic, creative, expressive, emotive, symbolic and communicative characteristics of art can be labeled and stigmatized as deviant (Atkinson 2000, 2004; Irwin 2001; Williams 2004). The heavily tattooed are always at risk of being assigned a deviant status but once more the importance is in how these individuals negotiate the context of this status and assign positive social meaning.

**Research Intentions**

A review of both sociological and tattoo literature reveals a need to further examine the ‘tattoo shop’ as the ‘third place’ where heavily tattooed individuals find meaning and acceptance in their lives. Regardless of any other individual differences, whether in experiences, ideologies
or lifestyles, all heavily tattooed individuals attend a tattoo shop and the significance of this space requires further attention. The tattoo shop will be examined as a serene and therapeutic environment for heavily tattooed individuals to negotiate positive social meaning, communicate and be accepted.
Chapter Three

Methodological Choices

Examination of Constructionist Research

This study focuses on the manner in which heavily tattooed individuals construct positive social meanings through social capital resources in the tattoo shop, a ‘third place.’ Constructionist assumptions depict reality as subjective, situational and culturally variable. As well, meaning-making is perceived as an active process produced, sustained and manipulated by individuals (Ambert, Adler and Detzner 1995; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969; Marvasti 2004, 2008). Accordingly, constructionist research involves active participation, insomuch as knowledge is not discovered but constructed by the researcher and participant (Charmaz 2008; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Schwandt 2000). Proceeding from constructionist assumptions, an effort is made to investigate subjective perspectives, experiences and interpretations of heavily tattooed individuals, in the context of their social worlds (Charmaz 2008).

Specifically this study utilizes mixed qualitative methods including participant observation within tattoo shops and semi-structured open-ended interviews. Because reality is socially defined through the subjective experience of everyday life, qualitative methods are ideal for understanding the empirical world in that they focus on exceptions or anomalies, as well as social patterns and regularities (Glaser 1967, 1995; Maxwell 2008). This chapter describes the research methodology employed in this study and acknowledges my own role in the construction of meaning.
Research Methodologies and Social Constructionism

Rooted in *symbolic interactionism*, constructionism assumes social interactions are the means through which individuals actively shape, define and transform the social world into lived reality (Best and Luckenbill 1993; Loseke and Best 2003). As discussed, individuals do not have direct access to some determinant social world, meaning is not inherent and all that is social is constructed through interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Harris 2008; Loseke and Best 2003). Constructionist scholars define structures as inter-subjective and based on relativism, meaning that although an external physical world exists we can only directly access representations of the world in our consciousness. Consequently, nothing is absolute (Best 1993; Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Best 2007; Harris 2008; Mead 1934).

Qualitative research methods have been influenced by two generations of Chicago School sociologists (Ambert, Adler and Detzner 1995; Silverman 2004; Glaser 1992, 1995; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987). Qualitative research analyzes novel situations and is concerned with the dynamic nature of the research process during the engagement with subjects; it provides a detailed analysis of individual lives and is committed to seeing the social world from the individual’s point of view (Alasuutari 2009; Bryman 1984; Silverman 2004). Qualitative research methods include participant-observation, in-depth interviewing, photographic analysis, document analysis or historical research and reveal how individuals construct and assign meaning to their social worlds (Alasuutari 2009; Ambert, Adler and Detzner 1995; Bryman 1984; Denzin 2001; Lorand and Coffey 2009; Silverman 2004).

The Present Study: Research Design and Methodological Applications

Existing literature reveals frequent misperceptions about heavily tattooed individuals, mainly pertaining to deviance, criminality and bad behaviour (Atkinson 2003, 2004; Atkinson
and Young 2001; Burgess and Clark 2010; DeMello 1993, 1996; Fisher 2002; Irwin 2000, 2001, 2011; Koust 2000, 2006; Sanders 1988, 2008; Steward 1993; Vail 1999; Williams 2004). Other significant themes such as perspectives regarding gender, a tattooing renaissance, media effects, capital consumption and communicative forms are not ignored; but in comparison receive much less attention (Adams 2009; Armstrong 1991; Atkinson 2002, 2003, 2004; Bengtsson 2005; Becker 1963; Betterton 1996; DeMello 1996, 2000; Fisher 2002; Frances 1992; Goulding 2003; Hawkes, Senn and Thorn 2004; Irwin 2000, 2011; Koust 2006; Patterson 2010; Pitts 1998; Sanders 1988, 2008; Shelton 2008; Swami 2007; Vail 1999; Velliquette 1998; Warech 2006). As such, heavily tattooed individuals must reconstruct positive social meaning by managing deviant labels and maintaining normative day-to-day functioning. Regardless of the fact that more tattooed bodies are becoming visible, negative connotations amongst societal groups persist and behavioural norms are still enforced by the social majority. In spite of the stigma, many individuals still utilize body art and reclaim their expressive rights. The following sections will detail the sample under study and the precise methodological techniques used to understand the subjective realities of heavily tattooed individuals and how they negotiate their identities and establish relationships within tattoo shops.

The Research Sample

Research for this study was conducted over a six-month period. Data were compiled from field notes from participant observation work at six tattoo shops in Toronto (ON) and surrounding areas, and from in-depth interview accounts with patrons and participants. The sample of interviewees was drawn from tattoo shops during participant observation. I conducted twenty-four interviews that averaged seventy minutes in length in tattoo shops, local coffee shops and restaurants; the location was the decision of the interviewees based on where they
were most comfortable. The interviewees were a combination of visitors (54%) and artists (46%), and men (58%) and women (42%), but all the interviewees were heavily tattooed, meaning that tattoos were visible and covered much of the individuals’ bodies. Participants ranged in age from twenty-one to forty-five. Both sex and age of the interviewees were proportionate to individuals present within tattoo shops. Further details regarding the research sample and locations can be found in Table 1 and 2 in Appendix A.

Eleven of the interviewees are professional tattoo artists, four have been practicing tattooing since the early 1990s, five have been tattooing for five to ten years and two are newer artists who had worked professionally for less than three years. Two of these artists are also tattoo shop owners. In addition, four other individuals work in the body modification industry; one person is a professional body piercer and three others work within tattoo shops managing daily activities and artists’ schedules. Other interview participants are employed in fields unrelated to tattooing and body modification. One individual is a fitness trainer and is also employed as a behaviour modification specialist; one is a fashion designer/seamstress; one is a student and works in television part time, and another is a self-employed contractor. Of the individuals remaining two are hairstylists and the three others work in retail sales. All interview participants are employed and, with the exception of a couple of individuals, have obtained some form of post-secondary education including a college diploma or university degree.

Individuals selected for interviews displayed heterogeneous characteristics. They differed in ethnicity, age, lifestyle, socioeconomic background, and religious beliefs. As well, the majority of interviewees described themselves as frequent (i.e. weekly) visitors to tattoo shops, and additionally all interviewees considered themselves to be invested members in tattoo culture.
regularly participating in cultural activities. However, the participants were not randomly sampled and therefore the sample is not representative of any larger population.

**Tattoo Shops: Gaining Access**

Tattoo shops are more available than they have been historically because as they are less segregated, appearing in more mainstream locations. This accessibility makes it easier for individuals to participate in tattoo culture and to meet other tattoo enthusiasts (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Koust 2006). Accordingly, tattoo shops become a desired destination and a place where individuals deliberately go to be tattooed and to socialize with similar others. However, there is a distinction between this ‘access’ into tattoo shops and ‘gaining access’ for the purposes of research. I encountered personal, professional and ethical challenges in addition to practical challenges, specifically pertaining to structuring relationships with, and gaining the trust of, individuals for whom tattooing played a major role.

Initially, gaining access into tattoo shops was possible as a result of existing relationships and personal experiences with tattoo enthusiasts, tattoo artists and tattoo shop owners. I contacted individuals who had large networks of relationships within tattoo communities or tattoo shop owners and discussed my research intentions. This process also involved degrees of snowball sampling; individuals recommended other individuals I should contact for the purposes of this research. The individuals with whom I had previous relations could attest to my trustworthiness and this proved beneficial when contacting new individuals. Overall, this increased my accessibility to additional tattoo shops. Subsequently, those who displayed interest were asked to participate, permission was obtained and access was gained to conduct research in specific tattoo shops.
Once I gained access into tattoo shops I had the opportunity to observe the individuals, physical settings and the interconnectedness of these elements; I began to recognize individuals’ characteristics and became more familiar with the tattoo shops’ environments. Throughout this process I interacted with tattoo shop attendees (visitors and employees) and continuously inquired as to whether individuals would be interested in participating in an interview. I selected a group of individuals to interview but often when I requested individual participation I had to renegotiate trust. More specifically, even though I had already gained access to tattoo shops, trust was not implicit and individuals had to be reassured of my intentions and how I was going to accurately depict their realities. This need for reassurance generally materialized for two reasons. First, heavily tattooed individuals could be tentative about disclosing information for fear of misconceptions of their unconventionality. Secondly, although I do identify with tattoo culture, in that I am visibly covered in tattoos, I am not considered (by many of my respondents’ criteria) to be a heavily tattooed individual. I would consider myself somewhere between an insider and an outsider and my unclear status could make individuals slightly apprehensive; therefore, I had to reassure individuals that my intentions were to depict their realities accurately.

**Active Research Methods**

Ethnographic methods, such as observation and interviewing, are valuable when research involves unconventional subcultures because importance is placed on deep direct personal experiences with members; ethnography allows the world to be examined from an insider perspective (Ambert, Adler and Detzner 1995; Douglas 1976; Humphrey 1970; O’Toole and Were 2008). Attention is paid to belief systems including the values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions of a particular group, which may also provide members with an opportunity for self-expression, satisfaction in sharing important life events or rewarding insights (Clark 2010;
Douglas 1976; O’Toole and Were 2008). Ethnography recognizes the value of space and how it is imbued with cultural meaning.

**Participant Observation**

Physical environments, social structures and other individuals, are all potential sources of data. Observational research strategies are ideal for a study, influenced by constructionist theory, because observation can capture the active nature of social interaction so as to better contextualize the negotiation of knowledge and the assignment of meaning by individuals (Bryman 1984; Lee 2000). This strategy permitted me to obtain non-reactive data from heavily tattooed individuals within tattoo shops, meaning that individuals were observed in their “natural settings” (Bulmer 1982; Clark 2010; Lee 2000; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest 1966).

Of the six tattoo shops in this study four were located in Toronto (ON). Each was established in a different neighbourhood, separated by several kilometers. The distance between tattoo shops made it highly likely that individuals in attendance would vary from shop to shop; occasionally certain individuals were encountered in multiple locations but this was an uncommon occurrence. The other two tattoo shops were located in less urbanized areas about one hundred and fifty kilometers outside of Toronto. The decision to observe both more urban and less urban tattoo shops was intentional and assured a broader representation of the activities and interactions that occur at tattoo shops.

On average I spent two to three days in each shop; each visit was between three and seven hours, and totalled approximately eighty hours. The length of time spent at each tattoo shop was dependent on the number of individuals present for observation. Typically tattoo shops hosted five to a dozen individuals at any given period although this number fluctuated regularly. Observations began with physical components that represent the “space” identified as the ‘tattoo
I explicitly observed both the external and internal appearances of tattoo shops, signage, flashiness, art, décor and shop layout; as well, I was attentive to noise levels such as music, tattoo machines and ambient chatter.

Observations involving artists included basic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, sex, style and quantity of tattoos; as well, demeanours of artists were observed. I also observed artists’ personal workspaces, with whom they interacted, (employees, visitors or other artists) and the social dynamic associated with each interaction. Furthermore, the content and style of dialogue were observed. For the most part, observations concerning visitors were similar with slight differences; focus was placed on types of individuals who entered tattoo shops, recognizing the same basic characteristics of age, ethnicity, sex and clothing style. Other observations included whether individuals were alone or accompanied when visiting tattoo shops and their initial actions upon entry. As well, demeanour, body language, dialogues and with whom interactions transpired were also observed. Observations were made regarding the purpose of the visit and whether visitors sought an appointment, a consultation, an inquiry or if the visit was a “social call”. Lastly, the duration and frequency of visits were observed, as well as the manner in which individuals departed and if they revealed intentions to return.

The observation process was participatory; therefore no attempts were made to conceal my presence. In each tattoo shop I was intentionally visible, jointly observing and interacting verbally and non-verbally with individuals. However, during the observational process interactions were transient, typically including a greeting and brief introduction before parting ways. Interestingly, few individuals questioned the reason for my presence, perhaps because within tattoo shops the norm involves people lingering and socializing. When individuals did question my presence, I disclosed my intentions honestly. The acknowledgement of my presence
alleviated individual uncertainties, limited any desires to manage impressions or report socially desirable impressions and allowed me to focus on obtaining non-reactive data from participants (Lee 2000; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest 1966). Observations from each tattoo shop were documented by keeping detailed written notes. As well, after each observation period I would spend approximately sixty minutes recalling the events of that day and documenting (on a computer file) additional details regarding individuals, interactions and the environment.

Observation permitted an insider perspective, moving beyond explicit superficial beliefs and typifications, and helped portray individual realities, perceptions and experiences through understandings of what transpires in tattoo shops (Lee 2000). Since the subculture of tattooing is itself unconventional, in that the social majority does not experience it, the interactions that occur within tattoo shops may appear obscure to the casual observer. Patterns in the thoughts and behaviours of heavily tattooed individuals were revealed during observation and consequently focus can be placed on their values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions. Subsequently, observational data will be used in combination with individual narratives to examine the role of tattoo shops as a ‘third places’ for heavily tattooed individuals.

The Interviews

The observational component of this research study created a convenience sample of individuals from whom I could request an interview; I conducted twenty-four interviews with heavily tattooed individuals. A detailed list of questions can be found in Appendix B. Prior to each interview letters of information and consent were provided to, and signed, by interviewees; steps were taken to explain the purpose of the research and the request of the individual, sufficiently describing risks and protective measures. Interviewees were also informed of their rights to see finished transcriptions and their rights to withdraw contributions at any time. These
one-on-one interviews prevented the effects of social influence and collective response, which could have distorted data (Charmaz 2008). The interview process was active and questions were designed to encourage the emergence of personal narratives (Charmaz 2008; Clark 2010; Lee 2000). In other words, the exchange of interview questions and responses involved multiple realities, interpretations and negotiations between interviewees and myself.

Interview questions were formulated to be flexible, unrestricting and adaptable. Additionally, open-ended questions minimized yes or no responses and allowed for probing when interviewees were selective with their information (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Primary questions activated interviewees’ knowledge and were an essential starting point from which probing or secondary questions arose. Primary questions included: Do you regularly attend tattoo shops, if so how frequently? Why do you attend tattoo shops and what do you do when you are there? Whom do you interact with and what types of conversations do you have? How do you feel in the tattoo shop environment and does this feeling differ from other social environments? Are there obvious benefits of interacting with others in tattoo shops or would you describe the tattoo shop as representing a beneficial aspect for yourself? Finally, do you consider those with whom you talk in the shop to be friends?

Secondary questions originated naturally from individual responses to primary questions; often questions materialized from a statement made by an interviewee, and at other times topics simply transitioned into a related topic. Secondary questions included how individuals were introduced to tattooing, if that introduction involved a tattoo shop and the feelings relevant to that experience. Additional questions asked about individuals tattoo shop experiences in comparison to historical or media depictions and the much discussed tattooing renaissance. Lastly, questions were raised about new commoditized tattoo shops and the possible effects this
trendiness may have within tattoo culture. By and large, secondary questions provided additional context because interviewees could expand on the details of their experiences and personal Understandings related to tattoo culture.

During each of the twenty-four interviews two methods were used to document both verbal responses and non-verbal behaviours. The primary method involved using a recording device to capture verbal responses and to prevent missing pertinent information. This method also allowed me to engage the interviewee and listen more intently throughout the interview process. Recordings were later transcribed onto a computer file, within two weeks of the interview, and thirty minutes of recorded data required approximately ninety minutes of transcribing. Concise written notes were also kept throughout each interview. These notes documented significant quotes, questions requiring further inquiry and any changes in interviewee demeanour. Furthermore, within hours of each interview additional notes were taken that included unrecorded observations, thoughts and questions from the previous interview. This required approximately sixty extra minutes per interview and ensured all relevant information was documented.

Interviewing required me to be aware of the reactivity of participants in order to obtain valid information about experiences within tattoo shops. More specifically I attempted to identify preformative language presenting participants in socially desirable ways and external phenomena that may have been the result of unique configurations of information in different contexts (Clark 2010; Denzin 2001; Douglas 1976; Goodwin and Horowitz 2002; Rapley 2001). I was also self-critical, self-conscious and self-reflexive during interviews acknowledging the possible effects of disclosing my personal information; for example I was mindful of the impact my position or biases may have had on interviewees (Becker 1986; Fetterman 2010; Fine 1983; Goodwin and
Horowitz 2002). These measures are critical in assuring interviewee perspectives and narratives are maintained, skewed perspectives are eliminated and findings are as accurate as possible.

Summary

This chapter detailed methodological strategies employed in this research including the influence of social constructionist theory. As well, I acknowledged my role in the construction of meaning and discussed how I gained access to the sample population, negotiated relationships, conducted participant observation and interviews in the research field. The next chapter will discuss how the overall character of tattoo shops is constructed, frequency and reasons for visiting, individuals, interactions and the processes through which individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their reality.
Chapter Four

Construction of Tattoo Shops

Tattoo Shops

This chapter will present research findings related to how heavily tattooed individuals construct positive social meanings through social capital resources in the tattoo shop, a ‘third place.’ While the following discussion is focused on the positive interactions, which occur in tattoo shops, it should be evident that more negative situations arise from time to time. As in any commercial enterprise, individuals can be unpleasant and experiences can be tainted. But largely, these findings demonstrate that despite the traditional constructions of tattoo shops as spaces where deviants congregate, tattoo shops function as spaces, which encourage collective interaction while nurturing individuality through the art of tattooing. To this end, attention will be paid to the patterns and frequencies of client patronage, the types of individuals and characteristics of individuals who visit, the conversational and interactional elements associated with these visits and the benefits derived from and emotional response to these visits. Overall, this chapter will address individual accounts of behaviour when examining the benefits of tattoo shops.

Character of the Tattoo Shop

Throughout the research process slight differences were identifiable among the tattoo shops observed, mainly the décor of shops. These differences tended to reflect the taste of the tattoo shop owners. Irrespective of these initial external differences, tattoo shops embodied a recognizable sameness comprised of several consistent and identifiable elements. This ‘sameness’ represents the character of tattoo shops more generally, meaning the uniformity that tattoo shops share. However, this character pertains to custom art tattoo shops, as opposed to street shops or
newer commoditized shops, because they attract more heavily tattooed individuals and custom shops were used during this research. In other words, street and commoditized tattoo shops are more likely to attract individuals who are minimally, if at all, tattooed. Street shops are designed as places where tattoos (and usually piercings) happen impulsively and quickly. Commoditized tattoo shops are more focused on selling merchandise, such as clothing or paraphernalia like bongs. Tattooing is used to draw individuals into the shops where they can make purchases, but it is not the main activity. Therefore custom art tattoo shops are distinct and attract individuals more heavily covered in tattoos and interested in collecting tattoos.

Aside from the role of client and artist, tattoo shops are explicitly “role-less places,” meaning individuals can ignore social roles they are required to play in other social environments. The occupations, family backgrounds or marital statuses of customers are not significant and individuals are not expected to take on any new roles. Alternatively, people are encouraged to embrace their uniqueness and to become tattoo lovers, collectors and admirers. Ray, an experienced artist explained,

When individuals are in the shop they aren’t a cop, teacher or banker, they aren’t a mother, brother or cousin, their skin, age or culture doesn’t matter, they are part of something different.

The character of tattoo shops is marked by this abolition of social distinctions, which further creates a foundation for the activities that transpire there, mainly tattooing and socializing.

In one sense, tattoo shops are about art since tattooing is an artistic outlet and tattoos are displays of these artistic creations. Within tattoo shops, tattoos are continually being discussed, drawn and executed and tattoo machines are regularly buzzing; accordingly art in any form is a frequent topic. Tattooing is evidently the main activity and the primary reason people attend tattoo shops; however, tattooing occurs in combination with conversation. Observation of
conversations that transpired in tattoo shops demonstrated similarities in interests, enthusiasm and involvement. Furthermore conversations were filled with light-hearted, mischievous and humorous topics. The conversations are lively, reciprocal and unaccompanied by any obligation. Individuals noticeably engage in these types of conversations because they want to, and although more serious or emotional topics do arise, typically tattoo shops echo with laughter and sarcastic joking tones. Specific types of conversations will be discussed in more detail later on in the chapter.

Individuals come together and come to life within tattoo shops. Interactions and conversations are enthusiastically anticipated because a mood is created that is positive, happy, exciting and always changing. The dynamic power of the mood is contagious, which is illustrated by the fact that on several occasions, people who were not even being tattooed revealed their intentions to return. The ambiance, conversations and ability to be oneself in tattoo shops are essential features that construct the character of tattoo shops.

In addition to the aforementioned features, the location of tattoo shops is important. Historically tattoo shops have been found in relatively marginalized places, making them less accessible. Recently tattoo shops have been established in more central or popular locations near retailers and offices. An artistically displayed sign generally notifies individuals of the exact location. For instance, one tattoo shop I visited was marked by a small sign above an unassuming door near a staircase that led to the shop; whereas another shop was marked with an open illuminated storefront and signage. The fundamental similarity among tattoo shops is that they may be accessed by anyone. However, although tattoo shops are available, they maintain a signature low profile, which means no gimmicks or false representations are involved and there are no surprises regarding the activities that occur.
Ultimately, individuals shape the overall character of tattoo shops by creating a particular atmosphere and experience. Heavily tattooed individuals are presented with, and visit, a myriad of possible social environments such as restaurants, record stores, coffee shops, parks, bars, malls and so on. But heavily tattooed individuals tend to select tattoo shops for purely social interaction because they impart symbolic and behavioural elements absent in those other environments. Individuals, in combination with their actions, are what generate this environment. Subsequent sections will present these findings in greater detail.

**Subject Characteristics**

Visitors to tattoo shops form a diverse group; one ethnicity is not more common than another, although the more rural shops that I visited did have predominantly white individuals in attendance. Men and women, including artists and visitors, were equally represented and there was a wide range of ages from early to late adulthood. Based on outward appearance (physical features, dress) individuals were distinct, with the exception of one feature: tattoos were visibly displayed on arms, legs, necks, chests, hands, feet, heads and occasionally faces. In addition, individuals alluded to also having their backs, chests, rib cages and buttocks tattooed. The tattoos themselves did vary with respect to images, placement and style. Although these individuals could be described as “tattooed”, individuals who lacked tattoos were also present in tattoo shops, but their agenda differed. For example some were simply inquiring about tattoos, the shop or an artist. Finally, individuals who were less familiar with tattoo shops visited in pairs or small groups, generally for support and comfort; but the majority of individuals arrived unaccompanied demonstrating a level of solace and intention in their visit.
Tattoo Shop Visitors: Patterns of Regularity

Observation revealed discernible patterns in how individuals visit tattoo shops; some visits were planned, some were spontaneous. Tattoo shops always have scheduled tattoo appointments. Whether the purpose is to consult about design or get a tattoo, the planned visit is a recurrent event and involves no surprise for either party. At other times, individuals visit with no prior plan, making statements such as “I’m in the neighbourhood” or “I had some free time.” The unplanned visit may be brief, but the point is the visit rather than its duration. There is no deliberateness to unplanned visits, meaning no time lines, goals, or intentions; they are relatively flexible and are comparable to that of a planned visit. Throughout the course of a day in tattoo shops these two distinct types of visits begin to suggest a pattern.

Artists within the observed tattoo shops usually had two or three appointments per day ranging from two to seven hours. Scheduling regulates the frequency of planned visits through the course of the day as well as over the period of time it takes to complete the tattoo or, as large tattoos are called “the piece.” For instance, larger “pieces” require regularly scheduled visits over long periods, perhaps every three weeks for five months. However, this does not eliminate the possibility that individuals will visit between their planned/scheduled appointments in an unplanned, more casual manner.

The unplanned visit occurs much more frequently and randomly because of the absence of a schedule. Unplanned visits occur throughout the day at a typical tattoo shop. Daily or weekly-unplanned visits appeared exceptionally common for individuals Jeremy a tattoo shop visitor, stated, “I definitely stop by the shop at least once or twice a week to say ‘what’s up?’” Another visitor, Elle, said, “I’m at the tattoo shop almost every day, sometimes twice a day…once you are there it’s hard to leave.” As the study progressed I began to recognize these repeat visitors.
Tattoo Shops as Social Destinations

Tattooing is an art and an alternative and unconventional means of self-expression. The principal motivation of individuals who visit tattoo shops is to be tattooed but also to socialize. Individuals discover tattoo shops in several ways, for instance through existing relationships and the sharing of information. The shop may be sought out, for a specific artist or location, or the discovery of a shop may be serendipitous, perhaps stumbled upon in one’s neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the primary visit to the tattoo shop is intentional: there is a desire to be tattooed.

Robert remembered,

I went to my first tattoo shop as soon as I was seventeen, like right after my birthday. I walked in and was like hey man what are you going to tattoo on me? He had the time and we just sat down and tattooed…it went bang, bang, bang and in a flash before I knew it I had a tattoo.

Ann also recalled, “I got my first tattoo when I was younger than eighteen so I lied about my age on the waiver, but I went to one of only two tattoo shops in my hometown…a little hole in the wall place.”

Notably, tattooing can occur in alternative locations, such as a house or the back room of a business. In such cases an artist may be visiting or lacks a shop to work in. Other times the artist is new to tattooing and developing their skills by practicing on friends before working in a tattoo shop. Ray, an artist, recalls receiving his first tattoo at a friend’s house,

I got my first tattoo at 17, it was Easter Sunday on a friends kitchen table, it’s sonic the hedgehog. I got the outline done and then went home for dinner and then went back and had it filled later that night.

Some cases suggested more unusual circumstances, Scott claimed,

I was in “juvey” when I was younger so I got a bunch of homemade shit originally…but when I got out of that crap I went to tattoo shops and started getting things covered up.

Despite such tales, it remains true that the majority of tattoos are completed in tattoo shops.
It is within tattoo shops that individuals discover others who share a common interest in tattoos, despite other differences that might separate them. As individuals frequent tattoo shops they become mindful of how these shops permit social experiences that are effortless, enjoyable, dynamic and perhaps unavailable in other contexts. Olive, a visitor of one shop said,

I go to just say hi, it’s a good atmosphere, good people, good music, so I go have conversations and chill…it’s nice to be able to do that with no other motive for being there, it’s a nice experience. Some places are not comfortable for heavily tattooed people because the attention can be either good or bad, but overwhelming nonetheless. Some people will say oh that’s beautiful and others can be like why would you do that? People just grab you, I feel like an animal in the zoo sometimes. It’s not like that in tattoo shops.

Similarly Liam said, “I hang out there a lot and just shoot the shit or whatever,” and Stacey stated: “I normally stop by on my way home from work, it’s a nice end to the day.”

Jeff, an artist, stated: “The amount of times that I have clients and people just come by and say hi and hang out for a couple minutes, hours, or whatever it may be you know, it’s common.”

Any time of day appears to be acceptable to “drop-in” and say hello. However there are times that are more opportune because artists make commitments, and tattooing requires attention and focus. Ray explains,

Obviously we are rad dudes, so people want to come visit us but a lot of people know this is where we work and you can’t hang out all the time but people do regularly stop in to say hey and hang out.

Artist Benny also remarked,

People do hangout for extended periods and that’s cool but sometimes when you’re really busy it’s less convenient to hang out. Normally people just stop in and say ‘hey’ and chat briefly and that’s always pleasant. In general it’s amazing to have my professional life so intertwined with this great environment and people.

As well, shop owner Dannie clarified, “It’s not a hangout like a bar kind of situation where you can stay all night, but people come by to say hello, chat and visit.” Evidently, social visits are a
recurrent event in tattoo shops even though individuals may not always be able to visit for prolonged periods of time. But what visits lack in length they make up for in frequency.

It should be noted that visitors sometimes have negative experiences in tattoo shops. Occasionally, an artist is not as skilled as a client has been led to believe, and a tattoo is “botched”, which means that it is scarred, distorted or misplaced leaving the individual feeling regret and resentment. In a related way, participants disclosed encountering artists who were rude, unfriendly individuals, Alan remembered,

I went to this tattoo shop and not to hate on them but I asked about a tattoo, which would have been my second one, but the dude couldn’t see my first one and I’m also a tiny dude…anyway he was all like ‘that depends on how long you can sit’ and I was getting vibes that he was making fun of me so I was like okay and I left. Who really needs that unnecessary attitude you know?

Ann also described a negative encounter,

I will never forget going to a shop that was in a city close to my hometown. It wasn’t my first one by any means but I just had an idea for something small. When I explained it to the artist at the shop he actually started making fun of my tattoo idea right to my face. His sarcasm and ignorance were disgusting, I mean who did he think he was judging what someone else liked and wanted to put on their body? Needless to say I left immediately, never went back and spread the word to avoid that shop.

Some artists also discussed their encounters with unhappy visitors who were described as “demanding,” “unrealistic,” “difficult” or simply possessing a “negative attitude or energy.”

However, these negative experiences occur less often than pleasant experiences, for both artists and visitors.

Juan an artist paraphrased a quote from the famous tattoo artist, Lyle Tuttle,

…love him or hate him this statement rings true, ‘it doesn’t matter what the tattoo is, if you didn’t love the experience you won’t love the tattoo forever.’ It’s something I strive to remember while I’m dealing with even the most difficult client, I try to maintain the frame of mind that each client needs to enjoy the experience thoroughly.
Alicia professed, “they are always laughing and smiling there, it’s always fun energy,” and accordingly artist and shop owner Gregory said: “The experience is part of the draw for sure I can’t deny that.”

**Social Conversations and Interactions**

Up to this point tattoo shops have been described as places that represent a space to participate in the art of tattooing, in addition to a site of informal socializing. There appears to be joy that comes from being in the presence of individuals within tattoo shops and the conversations that occur there are a large part of this enjoyment. The conversations generate the mood in tattoo shops and topics of conversation are limitless. Stories and jokes are selected in a manner unfettered by more conventional social norms and expectations. Individuals within tattoo shops are all involved in the open, honest and amusing interactions, all of which materialize favourably.

Recurrent themes were in the conversations that occurred within tattoo shops. Humour is a large component of conversational content, but mainly sarcastic humour and jokes about topics more generally avoided in wider society, such as bathroom behaviour, sexual activity and social or cultural taboos. Richie, a client said, “There are a lot of jokes, sarcastic and dirty jokes, but in a comfortable way, it’s a funny charismatic place.” These jokes are intended to amuse and are told in inoffensive ways; the intention is not to insult anyone and the jokes resemble an observational-type humour popular with many stand-up comedians. All such ripostes occur in the context of more general conversations. Amy said, “Sometimes you can get a lot of shop talk and conversations about like TV and bands, what’s going on that day.” Accordingly Matt agreed, …It’s just more light-hearted; conversations are never really to heavy. Sometimes the conversations can be very art related since people are always working on something artsy, this provokes questions because you can’t help but be interested in what they are doing.
Characteristic of conversations in tattoo shops is the way in which any individual can
discuss anything with anyone; conversations or humour not acceptable in other social
environments can occur in tattoo shops. An artist and tattoo shop owner Billie recalled:

I have had people flat out say I would never have this conversation with this person
or these people or I would never talk like this at work. I believe they are finding a
place to express within the shop.

Other artists seemed to agree, Jeff portrayed everyone as “pretty chill”, stating:

I think the environment is just sort of right for letting people be who they are, there
is no transition like at home or work. People can come in and talk about whatever
sort of comes to mind.

Reese an employee (not an artist) explained, “So much weird and funny stuff comes up. Like
people wouldn’t necessarily act or talk that way in other environments.” Finally, Harry summed
it up by saying,

Tattooing is still taboo, well maybe not taboo necessarily but there is an un-
mainstreamness about it, so in line with the conversations everything falls in suit;
same thing if you look at the art on the walls or the people there, it’s not
conventional.

Whether topics are common, unconventional or humorous, the unpredictability and enjoyment
of conversational exchange is enticing for individuals who visit.

The data also reveal that tattoo shop occupants experience less energized moments when
individual visitors are few. On these quieter days there are instances when the only noises are the
buzzing of tattoo machines and music playing in the background. The energy and volume within
tattoo shops is also reduced when artists are immersed in work. Harry explained, “You know the
shop can be a really boring place, anyone who has been tattooed knows that, it’s not always
lively and exciting.” Tara expressed that sometimes “… jokes are made for sheer entertainment
because it can be relatively boring.” However, even in the quietest, most boring moments tattoo
shops embody a space for unconventional individuals to converse, express themselves and be introduced to one another.

**Tattoo Shops Visitors**

I previously discussed differences I observed pertaining to characteristic elements of individuals who frequent tattoo shops (ethnicity, age etc.). There were no foreseeable social restrictions based on these differences and the diversity seemed to be supported and embraced within tattoo shops. Accordingly, the heterogeneity of individuals who occupy this space is essential in the production and character of tattoo shops. Glen illustrated this point:

I tattoo the entire police squad, fire men, local teachers, lawyers, bankers, musicians, both men and women of all ages, races and ethnicities, and that’s in addition to the usual suspects that get tattooed. My clients are all over the place, it’s pretty crazy.

Bennie, a long time artist, agreed:

The individuals who visit our shop vary…that’s expected I guess. I mean from my experience there is no one race or sex or age even that appreciates tattoo art more than another. People are there because they love tattoos; diversity simply makes things more delightful.

Individuals return to tattoo shops in order to replicate these social experiences. Relationships begin to form, considered by many as genuine friendships. Customarily referred to as “friends of the shop,” individuals who visit regularly were described by artist Amy as, “…friends for sure…we have gained really good friends from people who visit the shop, we even consider some like family, a sort of extended family.” Juan, another artist, also remarked, “There is a kind of category of people who love their tattoo shop and love their artist. They become like cool friends and family, it’s like a home kind of.” Tattoo shop visitors describe similar feelings. “I spend a lot of time with these people and it goes deeper than just knowing them, they’re definitely friends,” said Liam. Julie agreed, “I have been lucky enough to build so
many friendships in this community through tattoo shops. Despite other differences, tattoos and
tattoo culture creates an instant beautiful unspoken bond.” Individuals are distinct with the
exception of the unconventional interest in tattoos, a uniting similarity that enables positive
feelings for those who visit tattoo shops.

**Tattoo Shops: The Construction of Positive Feelings**

At one point, every individual who visits a tattoo shop is new. Richie remembered,

> I was definitely really scared at first it was very nerve racking but I was probably as comfortable as you could be your first time in a shop. I think a lot of people experience that, you know. It’s intimidating if you don’t know anyone or what you want for a tattoo. You hear all the old stories about the old timers doing crazy shit and like shops being full of fist fights and people freaking out, oh my god just the craziest things going down in peoples shops and tattooing just having a bad reputation of being you know a rebel thing or like whatever sort of connotation it had. But the intimidating feeling passes quickly, shortly after you have that experience walking into a tattoo shop becomes like being able to exhale, like woooah I’m here this is where I belong.

Others described similar experiences. Brent said “I was definitely a little intimidated, I was younger and felt like a little kid with all these older dudes staring at me” and Maddy recalled, “I was greeted by a big bearded man, he ended up being so nice but I was certainly intimidated at first.” As well Ken reminisced, “I had no connections in tattoo culture so entrance into that world was intimidating.” However, I observed that apprehensiveness vanishes and calmness ensues as individuals assign positive meaning to their tattoo shop experiences.

To a large extent, individuals say tattoo shops make them feel comfortable; numerous comments were made to this effect from visitors and artists. For example, a number of visitors proclaimed: “In the tattoo shop you’re yourself and no one is going to stare at you for having tattoos”; “I am very comfortable, it’s like my home, like a family ”; “…it’s like a community, you’re comfortable in this place and immediately become an extension of this community.”

These feelings also transferred for individuals from one tattoo shop to another. Gene said:
The tattoo shop is one of the most comfortable places I could ever go and it doesn’t matter where or what tattoo shop, when you go in and you’re received well it makes that place all the more comfortable.

As well Elle claimed, “I feel like I could go into any shop and be okay. In most shops I feel like it’s a home.” Statements such as these were exceptionally common among “friends of the shop.” Artists are also mindful of these feelings. One artist, Henry, said, “People are comfortable and can be themselves, let loose, have fun and not worry about what others are thinking.” Dannie also pronounced, “because people are like minded about tattoos in the shop it makes the atmosphere a comfortable one.”

**Benefits of Tattoo Shop Environments**

Humans have a powerful need to associate and share with one another, to feel comfortable and be themselves; data reveal that tattoo shops permit these experiences. As discussed, tattoo shops provide an environment for individuals to be expressive and enjoy conversations; as a result positive feelings are nurtured. Accordingly, this space nourishes sociability and people begin to experience benefits associated with being in tattoo shops. These benefits became apparent as several participants revealed how tattoo shops enable them to feel a sense of “belonging” or “acceptance,” because they are able to experience their own uniqueness. For heavily tattooed individuals being unique enables feelings of acceptance when there are others with whom this “uniqueness” is shared, as within tattoo shops. As well, the acceptance by others promotes harmony and increases self-esteem and self-validation. Allie, a visitor of tattoo shops describes the benefits of visiting shops as a daily necessity. She said:

I enjoy the atmosphere so much, I dread leaving. In a society that always seems so intense it’s nice to enter a welcoming artistic place…the coolest people are there from the unexpected to the heavily tattooed and I can interact with everyone, something I couldn’t do in any other place really. I feel like I belong there and I can be myself.
As well, Natasha, another visitor commented:

Tattoo shops are the most comfortable place for me to be. It’s a judgment free environment where you can say what you want and be yourself; people don’t come in and judge you. It’s probably one of the only places like that. Like when I’m at the grocery store and someone sees my art it can create negative reactions. Whereas in the shop people expect it…it definitely feels different. I would rather hang out in any tattoo shop anywhere then anywhere else.

Individuals in other social environments, for example community spaces such as restaurants, malls or parks, tend to observe more traditional, conventional or mainstream understandings of appearance. In turn, these individuals may condemn or be less tolerant of individual differences in appearance; tattoo shops however, embrace these differences. There is no critical requirement or expectation of individuals, and people freely exhibit themselves and their tattoo art, as well as body modification projects such as piercings. This form of acceptance is encouraging and increases individuals’ eagerness to visit tattoo shops, to be tattooed or purely socialize, because it brings about positive feelings both personally and collectively. Henry, an experienced artist, remarked,

Tattoo shops are like churches, without a common place of worship all you have is a bunch of people that are just going on faith, like there is nobody there to reinforce what’s right or their beliefs or anything. But once you go to this place you look around and realize okay I’m not the only one, there are others like me.

Unquestionably, individuals demonstrate a desire to visit tattoo shops because their overall character promotes acceptance of ones-self and of others. Both verbal and non-verbal data communicate a declaration of this space as a “judgement free” and “fun” environment. All factors considered, tattoo shops appear to be a social space where unconventional heavily tattooed individuals go to be tattooed, to interact socially and to belong. The concluding chapter will discuss individuals’ assignment of meaning to tattoo shops and examine how this space
represents elements of a *third place.* Strengths and limitations of the current research will be discussed, as will some suggestions for future research efforts.
Chapter Five

Tattoo Shops as ‘Third Places’

Tattoos Shops and Tattooed Individuals

Heavily tattooed bodies stray from standard interpretations of appearance that are built into the symbolic realities and theoretical legitimations of others (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Consequently, challenging these proclamations about appearance results in negative experiences requiring neutralization, which can be achieved through the construction of new positive social meaning. This research attempts to understand how tattoo shops bear resemblance to ‘third places, ‘ which assist heavily tattooed individuals in obtaining social capital. I will also examine the strengths and weaknesses of this research study and address my future research intentions.

Re-construction of Deviance and Third Places

As discussed in Chapter Two, knowledge about deviance is “learned as objective truth in the process of socialization” and becomes internalized as subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966:64). Accordingly, individuals are not inherently deviant; instead behaviours are considered “deviant” based on the social context in which those behaviours occur. In Westernized cultures, the modification of one’s body with tattoos is largely considered “deviant” and these assumptions are socially constructed through academic literature, depictions in popular culture, and historical associations with body modification (Adams 2009; Atkinson 2002, 2003; Berger and Luckmann 1966; DeMello 1993, 1996, 2000; Irwin 2000; Vail 1999). Heavily tattooed individuals may also be perceived as “doubly deviant” because their tattoos are both unconventional (in their appearance) and self-imposed (onto their bodies) and this leads to forms of social stigma.
Stigma is a sanction that accompanies non-compliance of appearance norms, but despite the repercussions of “stigma” individuals still participate in and display tattoos (Goffman 1963). This is because heavily tattooed individuals are attempting to reshape their realities through individual consciousness; they are utilizing tattoo shops as a means to establish social capital and negotiate positive social meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1963; Oldenburg 1989). Within tattoo shops, deviant labels and devalued ideas about identity cease to exist, and among unconventional others, heavily tattooed individuals can validate and harmonize their sense of identity and self in a beneficial manner (Becker 1963; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969, 1971, 1986; Lemert 1967; Mead 1934).

Heavily tattooed individuals are not negligent, resistant or savage, although social constructionist theory helps us understand they are perceived as such (Atkinson 2003; DeMello 2000; Irwin 2000; Vail 1999). Consequently, I have argued that tattoo shops represent ‘third places’ where individuals are accepted and can build social capital, with no questions and no requirements. Despite their unconventional appearance individuals are encouraged to embrace and internalize positive self-acceptance through informal socialization. Furthermore, I argue that positive social meaning becomes apparent and stigma is managed as individuals shed uniform roles and expectations of daily life when they interact within tattoo shops (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1963).

Because tattoo shops can be considered ‘third places,’ as also discussed in Chapter Two, the interactions that occur there are invaluable to individuals, whether they recognize it or not. Tattoo shops exemplify the characteristics of the “place around the corner,” (Oldenburg 1989:21) where newcomers and regulars alike are welcomed, where unity, care and entertainment are offered, and where bonds of engagement are encouraged. Because these spaces are separate from
home (first place) and work (second place) individuals can ignore social and institutional hierarchies by shedding uniform conventional social roles. Research shows that undeniably, the quality of individuals’ lives improve based on the interactions that occur in ‘third places’ (ibid.)

Why Tattoo Shops?

Tattoo shops are initially sought as places to get tattooed, but according to my research tattoo shops represent something more substantial for heavily tattooed individuals. For many heavily tattooed individuals they are places to seek refuge from social norms and be released from social constraints; places to detach from otherwise compulsory ‘social roles,’ and compliance to those roles (Berger and Luckmann; Goffman 1963, 1959). As ‘third places,’ tattoo shops are spaces fashioned by the individuals who visit and are not inhibited by “tyrannical forces” of social control (Oldenburg 294: 1989). Tattoo shops move beyond the portals of home or work where individuals gather to socialize and as a result build social capital. This social capital helps encourage, create and maintain positive feelings pertaining to social and self-acceptance. Consequently, tattoo shops become a realm for satisfaction and social cohesion.

The Novel Space

Home and work are contained worlds; they are places where “surprise, adventure, risk and excitement are alien commodities” and regularity and routine are imperative to the success of their respective functioning (Oldenburg 1989:45). Home and work environments may also be conventional, conservative, and bureaucratized, where associations can lose diversity because certain individuals are encountered too often and others too infrequently (ibid.). Tattoo shops are places of their own making, they are novel in that their novelty emerges out of the “collective ability of the assembly to create it” (Oldenburg 1989:49). Within tattoo shops no social order is followed, thoughts and actions are not prearranged, and no one person is responsible for making
the environment what it is. As well, because there is a “richness of human variety,” each visit comes with uncertainty of who will be there, which creates excitement and anticipation (Oldenburg 1989:45). This “unpredictability” is usually limited by the customary routines and contexts of everyday life, but this novel feature of tattoo shops helps create looseness in the structure.

Tattoo shops become a space where all individuals can feel at home; a space that ignores individual differences, creates social bonds and promotes eternal sameness, civility, democracy and engagement (Atkinson 2004; Oldenburg 1989; 2001). Although individuals feel at home in these spaces they do not produce stress the same way home can, or other social environments do; alternatively tattoo shops function as a means to reduce stress for individuals (Oldenburg 1989). For instance, within tattoo shops heavily tattooed individuals are not required to justify, rationalize or negotiate their identities or the motive for their tattoos, a situation that frequently occurs in other environments. Tattoo shops are less consequential for individuals inasmuch as they are novel and function as places in which to form new relationships; therefore people who visit the shops are happy, and immunized against judgement, stigma and loneliness.

**Individual Mental Health and Spirituality**

Social environments create high degrees of specialization that brutalize relationships individuals have with one another; compartmentalization further leaves individuals ignorant to the interests, ideas, habits, problems and the likes and dislikes of those not in one’s immediate social circle (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Oldenburg 1989). This results in distorted ideas of humanity and the benefits of human association. However, direct involvement and active social participation improve individual experiences because “what improves social creatures improves their relationships with others” (Oldenburg 1989:112). Tattoo shops and their visitors create
harmonious relationships thereby generating enjoyment and functioning as a form of therapy; individual spirits are actually lifted during visits to tattoo shops.

Within tattoo shops, humour and laughter are also more than simple interactions; they unite people through the promotion of belonging, and eliminate human alienation, moral speculation and prejudices. Humour is used as a means to relieve frustration and deprivations that may affect the daily existence of heavily tattooed individuals. Moreover, tattoo shops align with the ‘flesh and blood humour’ found in ‘third places,’ meaning jokes are extracted from real situations and people; “the ludicrous content applies with painful accuracy to the very people who do the laughing, no insult intended and none taken” (Oldenburg 1989:52). This laughter reduces anomie and is perceived as the human experience that binds people together.

Tattoo shops are spaces that promote the perfect union of “egoism and altruism” and work as a form of immunity against unhappy or discontented interactions regularly engaged at home and work (Oldenburg 1989:165). The space represents an inclusive attitude of the mind and inclination of the spirit, welcoming all ages, sexes and nationalities; it brings about social relaxation through joy, vivacity and relief (Oldenburg 1989; Simmel 1964). Ray Oldenburg put it eloquently, “…third places are shelter against the raindrops of life’s tedium and more than a breather on the sideline of the rat race” (1989:21). Consequently, tattoo shops provide a time-out from the more formal duties and drudgeries of life; individuals make one another’s day and feel better about having received and bestowed acceptance, of which the benefits on the human spirit are monumental (Oldenburg 1989; 2001). To be with such company is about the experience and relationships found there, relationships derived from sociability that heavily tattooed individuals could not find elsewhere.
Building Relationships in Tattoo Shops

The type of relationships formed within tattoo shops extend beyond those of compulsory or familial relationships. Elsewhere, when individuals select others with whom to form relationships, they often and strategically stick with those who share occupational and/or social class categories, whereas relationships built within tattoo shops occur in a manner free of these associations. Individuals are engaged when desired and do not burden, complicate or disappoint one another (Oldenburg 1898). For example family members have access to private facets of one’s life and accordingly personal information must be managed and protected; as well individuals who “hold your hands may also hold out their hands” when they require assistance, which can cause strain on relationships (Oldenburg 1989:216). Within tattoo shops, relationships are created based on modest requirements; everyone befriends everyone else, there is no affiliation to one friend, there is no cancelling or complicating plans and there is no waiting on one another (ibid.).

Friendships are of a larger variety and informal affiliation creates a steadiness of new associations within tattoo shops, mainly because individuals from all walks of life acknowledge one another, an event less likely to transpire outside of these spaces. This acknowledgement has tremendous positive effects for an individual’s self-esteem; individuals become enriched from these relationships and this broader contact with life adds to “wisdom and self-assurance” (Oldenburg 1989:290). Large groups are less emotionally demanding as they require less emotional output and the sheer volume of individual connections enhances feelings of acceptance; as well, the assembly of friends creates a “high” that cannot be duplicated when individuals are met singly (ibid:64). These relationships generate a distinct form of social capital because they are not created accidentally; they are purely for socializing, they avoid disharmony,
they cannot be found outside of the tattoo shops and they are conducive to individual mental health and happiness.

**The New ‘Third Place,’ The Tattoo Shop.**

Drawing on the insights of social constructionism, I have discussed how individuals who participate in tattooing may be perceived as deviant or engaging in deviant behaviour. The belief that heavily tattooed individuals are “deviants” usually occurs in more conventional environments that hinder unconventionality and is accompanied by social sanctions. Consequently, individuals are required to re-create positive meaning within their lives, and tattoo shops provide a space conducive in this achievement. Heavily tattooed individuals have claimed that introductions to tattoo shops opened up a new world; in this space they could feel part of a larger community and are immune to the powers of society and the determinism of other places and spaces. Within these shops, tattoos are the norm and other individual’s differences are disregarded; judgement is absent and individuals can avoid glances and beliefs that their bodily displays are inappropriate, unacceptable or wrong.

My research conceptualizes how tattoo shops provide unique and tranquil worlds and how they offer a judgement free space for social and self-expression. Symbolically, tattoo shops are “the place around the corner,” where everyone knows your name. For client or artist, newcomer or regular, tattoo shops are a casual space where enjoyment comes easily, informally and incidentally, and where individuals are motivated to be themselves. However, I would argue tattoos shops embody a higher degree of “protection” than an average ‘third place,’ (such as a bar or community center), because their function extends beyond shedding uniform social roles and expectations. Within tattoo shops, individuals are protected from judgements that their unconventionality is bad because it is different and they can truly disconnect from deviant labels
and stigmas; in tattoo shops they are unquestionably normal. But this is in addition to tattoo shops’ epitomizing ‘third places,’ which creates new positive social meaning for the heavily tattooed.

**Study Strengths and Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the current study. This is necessary in order to address if the selected methods were appropriate and efficient (Bryman 1984; Maxwell 2008; Silverman 2004). This section will attempt to highlight the most relevant strengths and limitations, but all studies are subject to criticism regarding their methods, and findings here are not exhaustive.

**Study Strengths**

Prior to this research study I had some level of involvement in tattoo culture. I had the opportunity to establish mutually respectful relationships with several heavily tattooed individuals. These relationships developed mainly as a result of my own experience. When I began conducting research for this study these relationships became beneficial as they facilitated access to individuals within the subculture. Individuals freely introduced me to other clients and artists who assisted in my research. From these relationships, I was able to complete ethnographic fieldwork in several tattoo shops and with numerous individuals in Toronto (ON) and surrounding areas. However, data collection was challenging and demanded great amounts of trust and respect so as to not misrepresent individuals (Bengtsson, Ostberg and Kjeldgaard. 2005; Fischer 1975, 1995).

The ability to observe actions within tattoo shops proved extremely beneficial and permitted an opportunity to gain firsthand experience, which strengthened this study. Observation allowed for an understanding of individuals’ contextualized meaning systems and
strengthened the reliability and validity of this study by attempting to retrieve the most natural and true information, through management of socially desirable impressions and trying to understand socially patterned ways (Bryman 1984; Lee 2000; Maxwell 2008; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest 1966). The use of interview methodology also strengthened this study. Interviews were structured to be flexible and unrestricting so as to enable participants to express their individual narratives; as well, the questions allowed each interview to proceed in a fluid conversational manner. Although observation within tattoos shops preceded interviewing, both methods of fieldwork were undertaken at various shop locations in an aim to strengthen supplementary information and best address the issue under study. Lastly, this study attempted to strengthen its findings by placing significant weight on heavily tattooed individuals instead of including all tattooed individuals, because the reality of heavily tattooed individuals is demonstrably different. For instance, it is assumed that an individual with one hidden tattoo will experience different realities than an individual with a largely recognizable tattooed body, both in and outside of the tattoo shop. Interestingly, I also feel that my being a female researcher, who is visibly tattooed, heightened the degree and exchange of information through the sharing of individual stories and lived experiences. Individual narratives about the reality of being heavily tattooed, and how social relationships are negotiated in the context of the tattoo shop, is the overall goal of this research; the most amendable attempts have been made to do this through the language and perspectives of heavily tattooed individuals’.

**Study Limitations**

It is equally important to acknowledge areas of weakness or limitations associated with the present study. A suggestion of potential limitations materialized during the literature review process because there was a minimal literature about tattoo culture that was unrelated to
masculinity and deviance. Although some literary accounts attempted to examine issues independent of these factors, such as tattooing as a form of communication or as fine art, most of the academic studies promoted a narrow sociological understanding of tattoo culture.

Geographical locations of the tattoo shops also posed limitations for study. Despite attempts to include both urban and less urban tattoo shops, all shops were located in Central Ontario, specifically Toronto (ON) and the surrounding area. This study could have been more exhaustive if it included a larger sample of tattoo shops in other towns, cities and provinces.

The intimate involvement with participants during observation and interviewing also created limitations. Both of these data collection methods can affect causal inferences and collaborative interpretations of reality, in addition to the reactivity of both the participant and the researcher (Bryman 1984, 2006; Clark 2010; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Fetterman 2010; Maxwell 2008; Silverman 2004). The production of data can be a complicated achievement when the researcher’s experiences influence social interpretations or when meaning is created jointly. Consequently I had to be particularly aware of participant reactivity and manage my own reactivity, as to not gather false socially desirable data or to influence individual’s responses. Furthermore, attempts have been made to acknowledge my perspectives and biases in the hope of reducing the effects of these limiting elements.

**Future Research**

My research has concluded that tattoo shops function as ‘third places’ for individuals; they are spaces where positive social interaction happens, which creates social capital, thereby increasing social and self-acceptance. As well, within tattoo shops interpretations from those outside of the shop are irrelevant and implied associations of deviance are non-existent. However, these findings appear to contrast with current mainstream media depictions of tattoo shops. For
example television shows like NY Ink or LA Ink show regular explosive scenes between artists and employees. Yet participants of this study revealed that the display of negative behaviours portrayed in the media does not reflect what takes place within most tattoo shops.

Based on my research, tattoo shops are pleasant places and what occurs there is usually far from dramatic. The organizing themes are the love for tattoos, and tattoo art, and the individuals who visit merely make the environment more enjoyable. Benny, an artist summarized the effects of the media as a “double edged sword,” razor sharp on both sides:

It’s a double-edged because tattooing was so underground and subversive and media popularized it…like mainstream does to everything; punk music, hip-hop, art movements. Everything becomes popularized and palatable for mainstream society. Media has presented this idea that regular people can come and get tattooed now and it’s okay because it’s validated through TV. But media does have this ill effect as far as the culture is concerned because it displays tattooing and tattoo shops in really dramatic ways. I mean its TV so they have to. But like people don’t conduct themselves like that, just because it’s a tattoo shop doesn’t mean people are being crazy, especially in a negative way.

These inaccurate dramatizations and depictions assist in constructing perceptions of heavily tattooed individuals, which can be largely inaccurate. Predominantly these displays lack validity and are intended to spark interest and entertain. In addition to misleading and misrepresenting what occurs in tattoo shops, the “trend” of tattooing is damaging to the culture. Juan, an artist, stated:

With any trend it starts underground and it’s sort of cool and then it becomes popular and is in everyone’s face and then people get sick of it in their face and then there is backlash. It’s the natural progression of a trend. The most unfortunate thing however are trends tend to end in scorched earth. Those shows and producers are not part of the culture and are seriously harmful to us in that at the end of the day when everyone has kind of turned on tattooing and people are shitting on it, these guys are going to be gone on to the next project, like America’s top bus boy or whatever. We are going to be left with these pieces and looking like bellbottoms, you know what I mean…like people being like ‘it was so crazy I got my tattoo in the 2000’s and now I’m a more serious person’. The long term effects are just not good.
Prior to dramatic media demonstrations or external social affirmation, tattooing and tattoo shops have sustained momentum and when the trend fizzles out the more serious artists and tattoo collectors will survive and continue to have ‘respect for the mark.’

The results of this study suggest new areas of research pertaining to tattooing and tattoo shops, mainly in relation to how the media illustrates what occurs within tattoo shops and the trendiness presented around tattooing, for example through television. My study primarily drew on ethnographic strategies involving individual interactions and meaning-making about the function and importance of the tattoo shop space. Future research might explore behavioural interactions within tattoo shops more explicitly in comparison to media displays and attempt to abolish hyped, planned or inessential dramatizations. As well, it would be interesting to gain a better understanding of the of the media’s influence on ‘tattooing trends’ in connection to actual experiences of ‘tattooing.’

Concluding Comments

This thesis has attempted to document how tattoo shops epitomize ‘third places’ and how heavily tattooed individuals utilize these spaces to build social capital and negotiate positive social meaning. However, because this study focused on a non-representative sample of shops, artists and customers in one urban area, the findings from this research cannot be generalized beyond this study. I have argued how reality is socially constructed and how unconventional individuals, such as the heavily tattooed, can be contextualized as deviant based on their differences in behaviour (becoming tattooed) and appearance (displaying tattoos). Tattoo shops are a place where individuals can escape these interpretations and benefit from effects consistent to those of ‘third places.’ As mentioned, tattoo shops also provide a degree of protection for individuals allowing them to escape judgement from others. This research represents an original
perspective about tattoo shops, what they represent and why they are significant to the individuals who attend them.
References


### Appendix A – Table 1: Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Participants</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visitors</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Tattoo Shop Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Location 1 Population</th>
<th>Location 2 Population</th>
<th>Location 3 Population</th>
<th>Location 4 Population</th>
<th>Location 5 Population</th>
<th>Location 6 Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>2,615,000</td>
<td>2,615,000</td>
<td>2,615,000</td>
<td>2,615,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39,700</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B – Interview Questions

Primary Questions

1. Do you regularly attend tattoo a tattoo shop or shops?
2. How frequently do you attend tattoo shops?
3. Why do you attend tattoo shops?
4. What do you do when you are there?
5. Whom do you interact with?
6. What types of conversations do you have when you are there?
7. How do you feel in the tattoo shop environment?
8. Does this feeling differ from other social environments you attend?
9. Are there obvious benefits of interacting with others in this type of environment?
10. Would you describe the tattoo shop as representing a beneficial aspect for yourself?
11. Do you consider those with whom you talk in the shop as friends?

Secondary Questions

1. How were you introduced to tattooing?
2. Did that introduction involve a tattoo shop and if so what feelings did that experience create?
3. How did your experiences compare to historical or media depictions of tattoo shops?
4. Do you think tattooing is going through a renaissance?
5. How do you feel about ne commoditized tattoo shops and the new trendiness surrounding the culture?
Appendix C - Letter of Information and Consent Form

Project Title: Tattoo Shop: A ‘New’ Third Place

Identity
I, Brooke Silversides, am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Queen’s University and the information being collected will be used for my Masters Thesis.

Request
This is a request to participate in a research project that will be looking at how heavily tattooed individuals negotiate positive social meaning in a constructed society. The central focus will be on the creation of relationships and networks utilized through interaction in the tattoo shop, a ‘new’ third place. This research will benefit participants by illuminating the social structures surrounding tattoo culture. Additionally, participation in this study will contribute to the existing and sparse material available about tattoo culture and any interested participants are entitled to a copy of the research results.

What Participation Entails
If you agree to take part in this study I would like to observe and interview you within the tattoo shop. This will be a short interview ranging 30-60 minutes and will include semi-structured open-ended interview questions. These questions will give you a chance to express your feelings and experiences about participation in tattoo culture and as a heavily tattooed individual. Your permission will be sought should a recording device be used throughout the interview.

Risks
There are no foreseen risks to your participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation
It is important to emphasize participation in this study in voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer questions that you feel are objectionable or make you feel uncomfortable and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Please note, there are no unstated expectations and non-participation will not produce any negative consequences. Your signature below is meant to confirm that you understand this element of voluntary participation.

Confidentiality and Anonymity
My supervising professor (Professor Vincent Sacco) and myself will be the only individuals with access to the information from both interview and observational field-notes, which will be stored in a locked safe in a secure office. The research data will be destroyed at the end of the study and your identifying information will be protected through the use of an alternative name to protect your confidentiality. Furthermore, permission may be sought from you for the use of quotes to incorporate in the study. Initialling a statement below will provide your consent to this request. Finally, your signature below is meant to confirm that you understand this element of confidentiality.
Publication
At this time there is no anticipation this study will be published beyond its purpose as a graduate thesis and will be accessed only by required faculty of Queen’s University. However, although this information has no foreseen secondary purposes permission may be sought should this study encounter other publication possibilities.

Contacts
If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research study and/or procedures you may contact me, Brooke Silversides, at (613) 449-4069 and/or 7bs5@queensu.ca or my supervisor, Vincent Sacco at (613) 533-6000 ex 74429 and/or saccov@queensu.ca.

You may also direct any questions about study participation to a departmental representative Rob Beamish at beamishr@queensu.ca. Finally, any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at (613) 533-6081 and/or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Consent
I have read the Letter of Information about the study being conducted by Brooke Silversides, under the supervision of Vincent Sacco, of the department of Sociology at Queen’s University. I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate.

NAME: _________________________________________

DATE:  _________________________________________________________________

SIGNATURE: ___________________________________________________________

Note: Permission is sought for the use of recording devices during the interview and quotes from the interview; as well as permission to publish any findings, by initialing the statements below,

_____ I am granting permission for the researcher to use a recording device during the interview process.

_____ I am granting permission for the researcher to use any direct quotes.

_____ I am granting permission for the researcher to use any information in future publications.

Please return a copy of the Letter of Information/Consent Form and keep one for your own records.