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TITRE DE LA THÈSE - TITLE OF THE THESIS

**Indelible Impressions
Tattoos and Tattooing in the Context of Incarceration**

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INDELIBLE IMPRESSIONS

TATTOOS AND TATTOOING IN THE CONTEXT OF INCARCERATION

Jodi McDonough
2001

Submitted to the Department of Criminology,
University of Ottawa, in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Professors Colette Parent and Sylvie Frigon for their direction and support throughout the writing of this thesis. I would also like to express my thanks to Professors Bob Gaucher, Michael Petrunik and Chris Bruckert for providing me with the inspiration to pursue this topic. Thanks to the lifers for sharing their stories with me, and for making this research possible. To my friends and family, thanks for being there and providing me with the encouragement I needed to complete this thesis. And last but not least, my thanks go out to tattooed folks everywhere...keep on beautifying this world with your art.

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ABSTRACT

Among mainstream society, tattooing is commonly conceived of as a rebellious and non-conformist practice, traditionally engaged in by groups such as sailors, bikers, and convicts. Despite isolated academic attempts to challenge and expand such interpretations, the majority of existing research on tattoos correlates the decision to obtain ink with such traits as criminality and delinquency. For instance, the fields of psychology and psychiatry have conducted many studies in order to identify differences in the biology and psyches of tattooed populations.

Although worthy of inquiry, research which assumes that the decision to obtain a tattoo is necessarily a function of one's personality and character neglects to examine the impact of context on action, and the effect of one's lived reality, material location, and structural environment on the significance, function, and appeal of tattoos for groups and/or individuals who commonly opt for the marks.

In consideration of the prevalence and popularity of tattoos among our prison population, I argue that the disciplinary institution and the carceral experience may have an effect upon the function and value of tattoos for the prisoner. My approach to analysis is informed by the application of discourse analysis in the work of James Messerschmidt on the construction of masculinity, and Michel Foucault on the body of the condemned within the dynamics of the disciplinary institution.

Given such insights and theoretical underpinnings, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore whether the prison and the experience of incarceration has an effect upon the meaning, value and appeal of tattoos among Canadian prisoners, and more specifically, among men serving life sentences. I conducted eight non-directive interviews with incarcerated lifers concerning tattooing and their tattoos. Following the interviews, I undertook a time frame analysis in order to organize and examine the subjects' experiences with tattooing during three different time periods, these being, prior to incarceration, during incarceration, and today. Given the exploratory nature of my study, my research may be more accurately conceptualized as an exercise in logic of discovery rather than an exercise in the logic of verification.

The results of my analysis indicate that the lifers' retrospective constructions of tattooing from pre-prison days, throughout their incarceration, and today suggest that they view the meaning of tattooing and tattoos in their lives as having altered. The findings also reveal that tattoos obtained in prison largely derive their value and appeal from the context in which they emerge from. For example, a life sentence seems to transform the prison into a world of its own, where lived realities dynamically interact with prison culture to create a specific variety of masculinity and collective social identity. This identity accepts and embraces tattooing as a positive, useful, feasible and effective mode of expression, symbolizing everything from resistance and identity, to solidarity and individuality.

My findings suggest that the practice fulfills many needs within the context of imprisonment. For instance, a general pattern in the research indicates that while tattooing meant very little to the subjects prior to incarceration, the practice of tattooing and its symbols are very much a meaningful part of their lives today.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the ancient origin of tattoos¹, the modern history of Western tattooing begins in the mid to late eighteenth century with the exploratory voyages of Captain James Cook and his encounters with tribal tattooing in the South Pacific. Following these encounters, Captain Cook introduced the inkings to the West, where the phenomenon quickly became popular among seafarers. Many sailors adopted the marks to symbolize their travels at sea, and to protect them from drowning and other forms of trouble. Given the social perception of sailors and "the less savory elements with whom they associated" (Sanders, 1988; 401), tattooing soon became frowned upon by the middle and upper classes in both Europe and North America (Steward, 1977). By the mid twentieth century, tattoos were popularly conceived of and firmly established as the products of unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dirty shops in city slums.

Despite the fact that such perceptions are still prevalent in today's society, it appears as if the practice is expanding, undergoing what some have called a 'renaissance'. Although still perceived as a deviant practice by the majority of society, tattooing is now a widespread commercial enterprise (Sanders, 1988). Younger tattooists, frequently with university or art school backgrounds, are becoming involved in the practice, specializing in more custom design work than traditional tattooists (Tattoo, 10/98), and employing more selectivity in their clientele (Wojcik, 1994).

Despite the current popularity of such things as tattooing, piercing and hair dyeing, the new generation is not the first to have embraced different forms of body

¹ The word tattoo has its roots in the Polynesian word 'tatau' which means "to mark" (Sanders, 1988).

adornment. According to the literature on body modification, there exist many forms of body alteration other than tattooing, ranging in degrees of popularity, acceptance, extensiveness and permanency. Sanders, a cultural criminologist, notes that "reshaping the body to meet criteria of beauty is a common practice in many cultures" (1998; 398). Practices throughout history have ranged from mutilation, as in the formerly condoned practices of 'Lotus Foot' in China and Tight Lacing in England, to the current Western practice of plastic surgery (Brain, 1979). Although plastic surgery is not commonly equated to 'mutilation', it still qualifies as a substantial and permanent form of body alteration, as seen in evidence that 5% of the American population have submitted to cosmetic reconstructions of the body "in order to erase signs of aging, unwanted fatty tissue, increase or decrease breast size, or otherwise move the recipient into the currently approved range of physical beauty" (Finn, 1984, *in* Sanders, 1988; 399). The difference between obtaining plastic surgery and obtaining a tattoo may be that the outcome of the former does not noticeably alter the appearance of the body, and noticeably distinguish it from the next. Less permanent forms involve such things as piercing, hair dyeing, shaving, putting on makeup, and 'working out' (Bartky, 1988).

Although many body alteration procedures are largely undertaken for aesthetic reasons, the research illustrates that there are certain forms which serve additional purposes. Among such practices, the most commonly identified are tattooing, and scarification (Brain, 1979), both of which are permanent in nature. Scarification rituals, as traditionally engaged in by African populations, are still the dominant form of permanent body alteration, particularly since tattoos do not show up well on darker skins. The markings are said to be highly valued among these groups, serving to proclaim such

things as identity and group membership (Brain, 1979), often constituting a rite of passage (Sanders, 1988).

Tattooing has similarly been employed by other groups throughout the world, including the Aztecs, Maoris, Lakotas, Ainus, Bengal, Egyptians, and Australian Aborigines (Taylor, 1998). Many of these groups, similar to tribes in Africa, continue to engage in tattooing for traditional and cultural reasons. Such reasons include protecting the living and aiding the dead, and identifying the individual in the afterlife.

One of the earliest findings concerning these marks involves the recent uncovering of the 'Iceman', an ancient human said to have been trapped inside an alpine glacier for over 5300 years. The tattoos that were found on his body include blue parallel lines on his lower spine, a cross behind his left knee, and stripes on one of his ankles. Another early display of tattoos which was uncovered on a 4000 year old mummy of a Royal Egyptian child, was an image of a Sun God, that had been inscribed on his body with a bone needle and a mixture of soot and animal fat (Taylor, 1998).

Despite the cultural significance of tattooing to various groups as well as the renaissance the practice has undergone in recent years, changes in the way the art is socially perceived appear to be more slow in coming. In spite of the wide range of individuals who currently engage in the practice, tattooing is still predominantly viewed as an activity engaged in by non-conformists subcultures such as bikers, carnies, and convicts.

Although much research has been dedicated to the study of tattooing among such cultures, most hypotheses tend to reflect the presumption that the decision to obtain ink is necessarily related to an individual's psychology, or character. Mirroring the mainstream

conceptualization of tattooing as a non-conformist activity engaged in by the less savory elements of society, the majority of research tends to assume that there is something inherently different about and/or within the tattooed individual, and as such, tends to gear itself towards identifying those personality traits which distinguish the tattooed from the non-tattooed.

In light of the academic pre-occupation with the psychology of tattooed groups and individuals, it seems imperative to undertake a study which looks more to the sociological / cultural significance and value of tattooing among those groups which are typically associated with, and have traditionally embraced the art of 'tatau'.

Such is the focus of this study of tattooing among prisoners serving life sentences. As opposed to examining why these individuals have chosen to tattoo themselves in order to correlate such reasoning with identifiable character traits, this study is geared towards exploring the meaning, value and appeal of the inkings from the point of view of men restricted to a life behind bars. Instead of assuming that convicts' tattoos are related to such traits as impulsivity and anti-sociality as is typically suggested in the research, the researcher believes the acquisition of tattoos in prison may somehow be related to a meaning and appeal that is specific to the context of imprisonment. This exploratory approach resembles that taken by Howard Becker's in his study on marijuana users, as well as the approach taken by various other symbolic interactionists in their research.

The formulation of this belief can be credited to a number of sources. In terms of criminological theory, James Messerschmidt's elaborations concerning the impact of social context upon the construction of masculinity, when applied to the realm of prison tattooing, suggests to the researcher that prison may have an impact upon the availability

of resources that men traditionally employ to achieve a specific variety of masculinity. As such, it is possible that a focus on appearance and overt masculinity may become of heightened importance. More specifically, in such a context, tattoos may reveal themselves as a useful tool for achieving hegemonic masculinity.

Aside from the influence of James Messerschmidt, Michel Foucault's philosophical elaborations in Discipline in Punish can also be credited for the development of my research hypothesis. Foucault draws attention to the subtle coercion and power exerted by the omnipresent and omnipotent disciplinary techniques and processes of the prison. Tattooing, in such a view can be looked upon as a way of expressing resistance to particular normative standards and conformity to others.

Lastly, research findings which indicate that many individuals enter prison with no or few tattoos, yet commonly depart bearing extensive inkings, can also be credited for the researcher's interest in exploring whether the prison and the context of incarceration affect the way in which one interprets and experiences the appeal and significance of the practice. Interestingly, should this study generate findings which indicate that the prison does affect the way in which one interprets and evaluates tattooing, the implication may suggest that there is little difference between the 'psychology' of the tattooed and the non-tattooed. To the contrary, such a finding may suggest that the context of imprisonment and isolation may alter the meaning and appeal of inking one's skin, hence implying that any individual isolated within this same context may find him/herself more attracted to the permanent form of bodily art.

In order to explore whether the prison affects the way in which prisoners evaluate and experience the art of tattooing, I have conducted eight non-directive interviews with

men serving life sentences in a Canadian penitentiary. As one of the goals of this study is to capture the meaning and value of tattooing from the point of view of the incarcerated, the non-directive interview design has been designated as the most useful in achieving these ends, in so far as its (non)structure permits the subjects to freely explore their own experiences, without imposing exterior meaning and direction on to their discussion.

In order to ascertain, from the subjects' introspections and retrospections, whether prison has had an impact upon the way in which they conceive of tattoos and the art of tattooing, it is necessary to explore how the subjects viewed the practice and its products at different points in their life. More specifically, I have chosen to organize the data according to how the men retrospectively construct the meaning tattooing has had for them during three time frames in their lives, these being "Prior to Incarceration", "During Incarceration" (focusing on the evolution in perception during the early years of their imprisonment), and "Today". Such a time frame analysis will permit me to discern whether or not the men believe there have been shifts in the way they have interpreted and experienced tattooing over time and across different life experiences. Following an examination of perceived changes in the lifers' perceptions of tattooing over time and throughout their incarceration, it will then be possible to explore the degree to which the prison is considered to be responsible for any shifts in one's evaluation of and participation in tattooing.

Findings in relation to the three time frames described above can be found in chapter four. However, before delving into a discussion of findings specific to the three retrospectively constructed time frames, it is necessary to undertake a discussion of relevant literature, theory, and methodology. Accordingly, a discussion of the existing

research on tattooing is present in Chapter One. This chapter serves to expose the current state of knowledge on tattooing, as well as the dominant perspectives among the variety of disciplines which have explored the phenomenon.

Chapter two, in turn, presents a discussion of Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish, as well as James Messerschmidt's Doing Masculinity, which serve as the theoretical underpinnings for this study. The third chapter reviews the methodology employed in the course of the research, detailing everything from data collection to content analysis research design. The fourth and final chapter provides research findings pertinent to the subjects' experiences with tattooing prior to incarceration, during incarceration, and today. The thesis concludes with an overall summary of the study, and suggestions as to possible avenues for future research.

After broadly introducing the research topic and the wider context of body alteration, I then address existing research and influential findings in relation to the practice. The research conducted to date can generally be classified into one of four areas, these being, public opinion/stereotypes of the tattooed, motivations for becoming tattooed/tattooing among specific (sub)cultures, personality traits of the tattooed, and information provided through Canadian prisoners' experiences with tattooing. For the purposes of clarity and organization, the most significant findings regarding tattoos will be classified into one of these four major themes in the literature.

CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Tattoo

*Born a momentary flash
 Evidence of rude events
 Judgment rash, squandered cash,
 Rash of youthful impudence;
 To inscribe your indiscretion,
 Veteran of stage and screen;
 To record your proud progression,
 Marching to the guillotine.
 Mark now Nature's fatty rolls,
 The coarser hair on lip and back;
 Hateful holes, malicious moles,
 Drooping wattles soft and slack-
 From flaking scalp to horny toes,
 I am the only mark you chose.*

(Gray, 1993)

John Gray's poem, 'The Tattoo', in many ways reflects the differing perceptions of the meaning and value of tattoos in contemporary Western society. While tattoos tend to evoke a reaction of distaste in mainstream society, signaling such things as anti-conformity, rebellion, and deviance (Grumet, 1993; Steward, 1990; Brain, 1979), research in the area reveals that despite the disapproval experienced by those who embrace this permanent form of body modification, those who sport the marks tend, at least for a period of time, to regard the permanent inkings in a very different light, valuing their role as a willful form of expression (Sanders, 1988, Coe et al. 1990).

According to the literature, unfavorable evaluations of tattoos have arisen for a variety of reasons. Although novelty, religion (Gray, 1993) and permanency (Brain,

1979) have been identified as having played a role in securing the stigma attached to tattoos, research in the area seems to reveal that negative perceptions of tattoos are most strongly related to the pre-existing unfavorable social images of those groups or individuals which most commonly opt for the markings (Brain, 1979). As consistently reported in the research, mainstream perceptions of those cultures most closely associated with tattooing in the Western World, such as sailors, bikers and convicts (Steward, 1990) are generally negative, contributing to the social construction of tattoos as a "voluntary mark of disaffiliation" (Sanders, 1988; 395). As elaborated by John Gray, "to the unmarked, tattoos are often interpreted as the expression of the criminal, the carny, the promiscuous woman, and the unclean lover (1993; 1).

Research conducted as to the frequency of tattoos among specific populations suggests that, like the stereotype dictates, tattoos are more popular among certain populations than others. In terms of the perception that tattoos are the mark of the 'criminal', research reveals that while 10% of the world's population (Sanders, 1990) sport a tattoo, approximately 60% of the Canadian prison population (Tozer, 1999) and upwards of 85% of the Russian prison population (Birkenes, 1996), sport at least one tattoo. Moreover, a survey of 5000 prisoners across Canada revealed that 45% of them had obtained a tattoo behind bars (Munro, 1997).

Such findings suggest that persons in prison are more likely to have one or more tattoos than persons in the general population. Although such statistics may offer insight into Demello's characterization of tattoos as part of the 'convict body' (1993), what this research fails to tell us is whether the decision to obtain a tattoo is a matter of the individual and his/her character traits and lifestyle, or whether this decision is more a

matter of the individual's material location and his/her structural environment.

Moreover, these findings reveal little as to the motivations and meanings behind an individual's decision to obtain a tattoo.

Despite such limits, existing research has substantially informed several aspects of the phenomenon of tattooing. More specifically, most of the prominent research to date has entailed inquiry into one of four areas. The most significant findings will be classified into one of these four major areas.

1. Public Opinion / Dominant Stereotypes of the Tattooed

Research in the area consistently indicates that there exist many negative attitudes and perceptions concerning tattoos and those individuals who choose to adorn their bodies with them (Brain, 1979; Steward, 1990; Difrancesco; 1990). Both historical and public opinion research reveals that, to the un-tattooed portion of the population, tattoos are most commonly interpreted as symbols of non-conformity, rebelliousness, immorality, deviance, disaffiliation, desecration and voluntary stigmatization (Gray, 1994; Brain, 1979; Steward, 1990; Wodjick, 1995). As succinctly elaborated by Clinton Sanders, a noted cultural criminologist, "those who choose to permanently modify their bodies in ways that violate prevailing appearance norms -or who reject culturally prescribed alterations-risk being defined as morally inferior" (1988; 396). A study conducted by Houghton *et al* (1995) illustrates just how deeply entrenched the nature of such perceptions is in our society, in so far as children under the age of ten have been shown to already possess such attitudes. More specifically, this study revealed that children as young as six years of age generally hold negative attitudes towards tattoos,

with almost all participants associating them with illicit activities. Despite the contribution of this research to the area of social perceptions, Houghton's neglect of those perceptions held by children whose parents have engaged in tattooing can be described as a limit of this study.

The perception that tattoos symbolize a voluntary disaffiliation necessarily implies that tattoos are consciously and necessarily opted for in order to indicate a removal of oneself from mainstream society, or similarly, disagreement with mainstream norms. The interpretation that tattoos symbolize disagreement with norms or an allegiance to alternate values somehow becomes 'dangerous' in the mind of the observer, as allegiance to a culture other than the mainstream one is interpreted as a necessary rejection of the dominant values. The research also indicates that this stereotype largely persists because of other stereotypes associated with those groups and individuals that are most closely or traditionally linked with tattoos, as well as non-conformity. For groups of individuals such as bikers, sailors, convicts, commonly conceived of as 'sub-cultures' by mainstream society that represent the classic image of a tattooed individual (Gray, 1990), it appears as if the tattoo is transformed and hence understood as the outward and symbolic display/affirmation of non-conformity and rebellion in the mind of the observer. Brain, an anthropologist who has conducted extensive research on assorted body modifications and their significance, argues that:

"in modern society, physical differences are almost an insult to the ideals of community conformity...the tattooing of gangs and groups is considered anti-social, since it symbolizes individual allegiances to ideals outside the ideals of mass democratic society. Tattooing and scarification on the skin of a drug addict, punk, or an ex-convict are permanent reminders that these individuals have refused to conform, and authorities struggle ceaseless to suppress the marks just as they struggle to suppress the anti-social groups" (1979; 162).

Aside from the interpretation of tattooing as a form of body modification which deviates from mainstream values and standards of appearance (Sanders, 1988; Brain, 1979), the extensive and permanent nature of scarification and tattooing are additional reasons why they are often looked upon with disdain in Western societies (Brain, 1979).

2. Motivations/Significance

In contrast to the stereotypes held by those who choose not to ink their skin, research reveals that from the point of view of the tattoo wearer, the reasons behind obtaining a tattoo are much more varied and symbolic. However, it has consistently been reported that certain motivations are more common than others, both among prisoners as well as the general population. The most common motivations uncovered include such things as expression, identity, masculinity, and aesthetics (Steward, Sanders, Brain, Wodjick). However, differences in gender, personality, and situational context have all been found to impact the decision to ink one's skin.

Most of the research that has revealed the significance of tattoos as a mode of expression has been conducted in relation to prison or prisoners. In exploring the frequency and significance of convicts' tattoos, David Kent, a historian, examined data from the indents of ships transporting convicts (2333 men and 513 women) from England to Australia. Kent noted that over one quarter of the males, and one tenth of the females had tattoos. In terms of significance, Kent (1997: 78) found that the majority of the tattoos expressed affection for loved ones, "and the convict's desire not to forget either them or his /her own sense of identity".

Although informative, Kent's research may be limited in applicability to contemporary society, as the data employed date back to the early nineteenth century. Moreover, such research precluded interaction with the tattoo wearer and therefore involved much subjective interpretation on the part of the researcher. However, Kent found that the most common images reported were those of women, names, or another's initials, thus somewhat permitting the interpretation of meaning behind them.

More recently, research conducted by Margo DeMello, an anthropologist, through interviews with prisoners and guards at Folsom State Penitentiary, as well as ex-convicts, also determined that tattoos fulfill purposes of expression and identity for the wearer. DeMello's interviews revealed that tattoos operate as "signifiers of ethnicity, class, and convict status" (1993; 10), both within the context of imprisonment and on the outside. Demello adds that tattoos help to establish and sustain distinct communities within the prison through such expressions, and help to create the 'convict body', incorporating in the tattoos "both the context of imprisonment and the affiliations of the convict" (1993; 13). Research conducted in various penal institutions in Quebec by communications professor Elizabeth Seaton is also consistent with both Kent and Demello's findings. Seaton attempts to discern the uses and meanings of tattoos in this population, and concludes that tattoos serve expression purposes in so far as tattoos are seen by prisoners as "signifying practices that embody the prisoner's struggle and resistance against the prison, serving as both disclosure and disguise" (1987; 17).

Although such studies explore the meaning of tattoos in relation to the context of imprisonment, inquiries into the motives and significance of obtaining tattoos among the general population reveals similar findings.

Clinton Sanders, a cultural criminologist, conducted an extensive ethnographic study on becoming and being tattooed, using data collected during participant-observation in four tattoo studios in the Eastern United States, as well as interviews and questionnaires. A large part of his query focused on the process of becoming a tattooed person, probing one's motives for wearing a tattoo, and distinguishing them from the motives underlying the decision to enter into the actual tattooing event.

Like the research conducted within the context of imprisonment, Sanders found that identity and aesthetics have much to do with the reasons for becoming tattooed. More specifically, Sanders argues that the decision to become tattooed is motivated by how the recipient defines him or herself. Sanders develops this argument in relation to research respondents who commonly revealed that that the marks made one unique, symbolizing freedom and self-control, and satisfying an aesthetic desire to decorate the physical self. An added contribution of Sanders' research is his analysis of the element of gender. He notes that for males, the tattoo is primarily an identity symbol- "a public display of interests, associations, separation from the normative constraints of society, and most generally, masculinity" (1988; 415), whereas females primarily define tattoos as "a decorative and intimate addition to the body" (1988; 415). The finding that females choose to obtain tattoos in discreet locations such as the breast, back and hip can be interpreted as evidence and support for the idea that females tend to regard tattoos as a permanent body decoration "primarily intended for personal pleasure and the enjoyment of those with whom they are most intimate (Sanders, 1988; 414).

Similarly, the finding that the vast majority of males choose to have their tattoos placed in a visible location can be interpreted as support for the finding that tattoos

largely fulfill identity and expressive functions for males. In light of the finding that 81% of 111 males (Sanders, 1988) and 98% (Scutch and Gotch, 1974) of 2000 males chose to obtain their first tattoo on their arm, and moreover, that the primary audience for tattoos are other males (Coe et al , 1993) it is seen that the symbolic function of tattoos for males constitutes a more public display of the self.

Sanders' analysis is consistent with the general research findings into motives, i.e. identity, expression, solidarity and aesthetics are motives which have consistently been identified in the literature. Sanders also furthers knowledge in this area through his analysis of the actual tattooing 'event', noting that it has all of the characteristics of an impulse purchase, i.e. based on very little information or previous experience.

Research conducted by Samuel M. Steward, a former English professor and tattoo artist, with the help of Alfred Kinsey, a sex researcher, also looked into the issue of motives and produced findings which are consistent with other research as to motivations. Steward also identifies motivations which have not been replicated or uncovered in other studies.

Steward gathered his data over the course of several years through his work as a tattoo artist, in the form of interviews with clients and other artists. He identified motives which include the following: pastimes, national/ethnic origin, celebration, possession, aliveness, compulsion, imitation, existentialism, compensation, herd instinct, utilitarianism, bravado, and advertisement (Steward, 1990). Steward's research is questionable, however, as he and Kinsey specifically probed for motivations that were sexual in nature. The sexual motivations uncovered include exhibitionism, narcissism, decoration, sadomasochism, crypto-homosexuality, masculine status, and fetishism.

Despite the knowledge Steward has contributed to the area, one must be critical of his expectation/intent to uncover 'sexual' motives, in so far as they may have impacted his findings. Moreover, many of the interviews/examples cited in his work reveal ambiguous responses, whereby the classification of motives would have entailed much subjective interpretation on the part of the researcher.

3. Personality Traits of those with Tattoos

There has been considerable research which has aimed at uncovering the personality traits of those individuals who choose to tattoo their bodies. While some studies seem to conceptualize the tattooing act and the decision to obtain a tattoo as highly 'social', a greater proportion of the research conceives of tattooing as highly anti-social. Despite the abundance of the latter, the findings are still questionable, as most of these queries already begin with the presumption that there is something 'different' in those people that choose to obtain the markings.

Among the research which conceives of tattooing as a pro-social activity is Clinton Sanders' conceptualization of tattooing as a highly social act, usually experienced with close associates (Sanders, 1990). This conceptualization arises out of Sanders finding that the tattoo event frequently involves a ritual commemoration of a significant transition in the life of the recipient. This finding is replicated in a Coe *et al* (1993:1997) study on cadets in American military college, which characterizes tattooing as a "pre-meditated social bonding act" that is highly cooperative rather than rebellious or deviant. Similarly, through the application of stimulation theory, social psychologists Copes and Forsythe (1993) investigated the extroversion level of people with tattoos. Their findings

support the theory, which conceives of tattoos as the result of an extroverted personality type, as opposed to indications of psychological or personality disorders. Unfortunately, the generalizability of these findings is limited, as the samples were based on convenience, and consisted primarily of American male college students. Moreover, the researchers failed to examine the extroversion levels of individuals with no tattoos, thus limiting the significance of these findings.

More commonly reported in the literature is the finding that increasing numbers of tattoos reflect a preference for risk (Grumet, 1983), and an association with criminality (Harry, 1987). A related finding revealed that most of the tattooed prisoners and military paratroopers in a research sample, in contrast to non-tattooed prisoners and paratroopers, came from large, broken, or conflictual families and had belonged to adolescent gangs. Most of these participants had multiple tattoos and 35% of the content was deemed to be aggressive and/or anti-social by the researchers (Beauzry et al, 1983). Another psychiatric study of male prisoners found the possession of tattoos to be related to the commission of crimes involving personally assaultive behaviour (Newman, 1982). A study conducted by Britt in 1972 into the incidence of tattooing in a male criminal population somewhat replicates Newman's conclusions, as the results show that tattoos are most common in inmates who had committed crimes against person. Not only have tattoos been correlated with violence against others, but violence against oneself as well. To illustrate, in comparing the bodies and body image of tattooed and non-tattooed men incarcerated for violent offenses, Harry reports that the tattooed group possesses a higher level of scars on their bodies, i.e. self-inflicted cuts. Let it be noted that problems of

internal validity in Harry's study preclude the possibility of drawing definite conclusions here.

While there are findings which characterize tattoos as representative of normal functioning and adjustment, there seems to be greater agreement that tattoo wearers are often anti-social, or somehow involved in criminality. However, this agreement is specific to the fields of psychology and psychiatry, and such findings have not been reported when other fields of study such as sociology, social psychology and criminology have examined the issue. Even more questionable than the starting point of the psychological researchers (i.e. assumption of inherent difference) are the samples upon which conclusions of anti-sociality have been drawn. Whereas findings put forth by Sanders which conceptualize of tattooing as social are based on representative samples and a large cross-section of tattooed individuals, much of the psychological and psychiatric research has drawn its conclusions from samples of tattooed individuals in therapy for a personality/mental disorder, or in psychiatric or penal institutions. As such, the likelihood of uncovering 'negative' character traits in such a group of individuals is necessarily greater. There is also evidence that a convict's tattoos are actually used by psychologists and psychiatrists to affirm the existence of these 'negative' character traits, suggesting tautological reasoning. For example, the quality, location, and distinctiveness of prison tattoos has been deemed significant in a portion of the psychological and psychiatric literature, as it has been suggested that repeated 'amateur' tattoos can be diagnostically useful and revealing (Grumet, 1983). Similarly, DiFrancesco develops and presents the notion of 'multi- unprofessional tattoos' in her research, arguing that the prison markings represent pictographed, auto-biographical graffiti (1990).

4. The Tattoo Experience in Canadian Prisons

Academic research surrounding the tattoo 'event' in the context of imprisonment, where the act is forbidden, is virtually non-existent. However, several issues of the monthly magazine "Tattoo" have devoted attention to this topic, through showcases on prison art and the elaborations of various prisoners. Moreover, information produced and presented by prisoners, although not considered empirical or academic, has also greatly contributed to the state of knowledge concerning tattoos in the context of imprisonment, as such information constitutes first hand knowledge of the issues.

More specifically, such elaborations have contributed to current knowledge into such things as tattoo procedures, and risks associated with illicit tattooing in prison. In terms of tattooing procedure, the lifers at Joyceville Institution, in a video entitled "Art Beneath The Skin" explained that prisoners often used needle and thread from the institution's tailor shop in place of the traditional electric tattoo gun used on the outside. They also explain that more recently, electric guns have been constructed in prison, making use of such things as tape recorder or walkman motors. In the place of India ink, they frequently burn a candle against the cement and scrape off the soot, or they burn toilet paper and crumble the ashes in water. Although carbon, the basis of the professional tattooist's black ink, is obtained through this process, the ink substitute lacks iron oxide which serves to stabilize the ink and prevent it from fading and turning blue (Tattoo; 04/98).

Research on the procedure involved in giving and receiving a tattoo in prison indicates that the practice often takes place at night or in secret, due to the fact that

engaging in the act is forbidden and subject to punishments ranging in severity from infraction slips to time in solitary confinement (Joyceville Lifers, 1994). Steward notes that "two cellmates will often crawl under the blankets while one painfully and elaborately tattoos his buddy" (1990; 72).

As sterilization autoclaves are forbidden in prison, the Lifers at Joyceville institution relayed that they often use bleach to sterilize their equipment. According to the literature, the recent availability of bleach in Canadian prisons is proving to be somewhat effective in terms of harm reduction (Maharaj, 1996). However, the rates at which Hepatitis C and HIV are contracted through tattoos are still disproportionately high in comparison to the rates of infection in the general population (Munro, 1997). It has been suggested that the re-cycling of ink is the most common cause of contraction of these diseases. Although most ink on the inside is homemade, India ink still manages to get inside the prison walls. As it is difficult to come by, the tattoo artist, or tattooee, frequently pours the leftover ink from the cap back into the bottle hence contaminating the rest of the batch (Joyceville Lifers, 1994).

In light of the popularity of tattooing in prisons, as well as the increasing awareness of health risks associated with illicit tattooing, there has recently been a move within Correctional Services Canada to legalize tattooing in prison, and moreover, to implement prison-operated tattoo shops. According to the literature, 30-40% of the Canadian Federal prison population is infected with Hepatitis C, and 1% with HIV/AIDS (Munro, 1997). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that 93% of the Canadian Federal prisoners see legal tattoo shops as a good harm reduction tool (Maharaj, 1996).

Although tattooing in prison is likely to be legalized in the near future, the rate at which tattooing procedures are evolving in the outside world appears to be much quicker. In 1998, the Internal Research Corporation of California obtained a patent for L.C.D.'s or liquid crystal displays, which entail skin art being digitally programmed and animated. As opposed to being inked into the skin, a receptor is implanted into the flesh, which is then programmed with images that project through the skin (Tattoo, 04/99). Such a drastic change in procedure is bound to have an impact on people's perceptions and evaluations of tattoos. As such, a possible avenue for future research may be to explore the implications of such a technological advancement for the meaning and value of traditional tattoos, and more specifically, on the meaning and value of the change to prisoners, as they possess their own rituals when it comes to the tattooing event (Tattoo, 04/99).

According to the Lifers at Joyceville themselves, there is great meaning and value placed on traditional tattoos, and the functions they serve. Aside from discussing the procedures and risks associated with tattooing in prison, the Lifers sought to educate the public on the motivations for getting a tattoo in prison, as well as their significance. As well as citing motivations that were consistently reported in the academic literature, the Lifers elaborated on certain motivations that seemed to be especially relevant to the context of imprisonment. To illustrate, the Lifers cited such things as self-expression, identity, ownership/possession, i.e. something that the institution can't take away, artistic value, 'showing off', pride, popularity/peer pressure in prison, relief of boredom, and the 'addictive' nature of the procedure itself. One prisoner in the video expressed that the act of getting a tattoo had nothing to do with criminality, "as some might think". Victor

Hassine, a man doing a life sentence in a penitentiary in Pennsylvania, argued that tattoos in prison have a 'survival' function, in so far as they assist one to appear older, and tougher. (Audio conference, University of Ottawa, fall 1998; CRM 4316). He also argued that tattoos in prison have a conformity function, in that many prisoners obtain tattoos inside to show their allegiance to a certain group or gang.

Conclusion

The majority of the research on tattooing seeks an understanding of the tattooed individual within him/herself, and his/her affiliations and/or lifestyle. Such research, although useful, fails to look at the impact of social context on one's decisions, experience, and understandings. While such things as an anti-social personality or deviant nature may well have an impact on one's decision to become tattooed, so may well an individual's experience within a certain environment or context. As Messerschmidt points out, the link between structure and action is ongoing and ever-present. As such, it seems relevant to explore the appeal and meaning of tattoos in different situational contexts, looking at the individual's experiences within this context.

The abundance of psychological research on tattoos, with its focus on the individual and those personality traits which attract one to tattoos, offer many solid findings in regards to the tattooed population, many of which are consistently replicated in subsequent research. Although insightful in terms of revealing the motives and character traits of those individuals who choose to wear tattoos, very few have looked to the impact of social structure on the action of becoming tattooed, and the significance and

meaning of tattoos to the wearer. This gap in the research stands as the first limit of the available research on tattoos.

Relatedly, there exists little ethnographic research on those groups or individuals who most commonly opt for the markings. Although many studies explore the tattooed population in general, very few attempt to seek a rich understanding of tattooing and its significance through the voices of convicts, or other groups where tattoos are commonly found in substantial numbers. The lack of such research represents a second limit of existing research on tattoos.

A third limitation of the existing research is that most of it is from the United States. While Americans and Canadians share much in the form of language and culture, there may exist subtle cultural differences which in turn affect perceptions and meanings of tattooing. In terms of the nature of this research, although the field of psychology predominates, a variety of disciplines have explored the phenomenon, ranging from history and communications, to social psychology and English. As such, the research is often scattered and contradictory, depending upon which field is exploring the issue, and what its starting point is. Although the variety of disciplines which have looked into tattooing offer several interesting findings and understandings, only the most prominent and replicated findings will be discussed in this literature review.

In addressing patterns in the research, there appears to be more consensus in some regards than others. For example, there seems to be more consistency in the findings related to stereotypes and motivations than there is concerning the meaning of tattoos, and the character traits/context associated with obtaining a tattoo. This may be due to such factors as the nature and evaluability of the variables studied, the background

and starting point of the researcher, as well as the extent to which the topic requires interpretation on the part of the researcher. A major drawback to the limited amount of research that exists in regards to certain topics, such as tattoos and religion, or the tattooing ritual in prisons, is that it has allowed what has been written on the subjects to go unchallenged.

Despite the lack of knowledge in certain areas, it must be noted that tattoos and tattooing are very broad phenomena, involving numerous aspects of interest to various field of study. As such, there seems to be an endless number of questions that need to be addressed. Moreover, there seems to be a need for different disciplines to address similar questions, in order to bring to light differing interpretations and explanations for similar findings.

This seems imperative in the field of criminology, given the existing association of tattoos with criminality (Harry, 1987) and 'deviant' subcultures (Brain 1979) in the literature. Alternate explanations other than those provided by researchers in the fields of psychology and psychiatry need to be furthered in regards to the high incidence of tattooing among certain populations such as prisoners. Although such research may not be generalizable to the population as a whole, the highest concentration of tattoos and tattooing is found among more specific groups within the general population, somewhat legitimizing the focus or sampling such research would entail.

As opposed to elaborations which conceive of tattoos as both the cause and effect, or signifier of criminal associations and/or lifestyle (Grumet, 1983), critical criminological research needs to address the significance, meaning and utility of the markings to those bodies which are subjected to the power, control, and discipline of the

disciplinary institution (Rabinow, 1984). As elaborated by Coe *et al*, “future studies of tattooing should focus on the act as cooperative, [as well as] rebellious or deviant” (Coe *et al*, 1993; 204).

In light of the gaps in criminological knowledge pertaining to tattoos, this thesis will be geared towards discerning whether the prison, and the experience of incarceration serve to shape the meaning and value attached to tattoos for prisoners. Such an analysis should provide a context for understanding the existing knowledge as to prisoners’ motivations for obtaining ink, and the meanings they attach to the marks.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Role of Theory

Although many fields of study, i.e. psychology, sociology, anthropology, communications, etc. have constructed and applied theories in order to explain different aspects of the phenomenon of tattooing, very few criminological works have centered around a discussion or explanation of tattoos and their significance². Even fewer works exist which attempt to incorporate the voices of those groups and individuals who most commonly opt for the markings.

Nevertheless, there exist several theories within criminology which can be applied to the phenomenon of tattooing. There are two theories in particular which can extensively inform how different aspects of the prison and incarceration might serve to shape the value and meaning attached to tattoos for those 'inside'. Although neither theory specifically addresses tattooing in their elaborations, both can be used as a conceptual lens to guide our exploration and understanding of prison tattooing.

The most relevant theories in terms of furthering this knowledge are those elaborated by James. W. Messerschmidt, and Michel Foucault. Although research conducted by the likes of Erving Goffman and Sandra Lee Bartky also possess explanatory power into the phenomenon of prison tattooing, their elaborations have been reserved for application in later chapters.

J. Messerschmidt: Masculinity as Structured Action

Messerschmidt's work has been described as a sociology of masculinity, in that its focus is on "the gendered content of male behaviour" (1993; 62). In accordance with this focus, Messerschmidt conceives of masculinity as something socially constructed, in the sense that males situationally accomplish, or 'do' masculinity in a variety of ways.

Related to Messerschmidt's characterization of masculinity as 'situated accomplishment', he asserts that it is also a "structured action" (1993; 62). By using the concept 'structured action', Messerschmidt is noting the link between social structures and social action., in the sense that social structures both "constrain and enable" social action. In the words of Messerschmidt, "social structures arise and endure through social action, and permit and preclude social action" (1993; 77).

Messerschmidt identifies three social structures that primarily shape gender relations, and hence, the notions of masculinity and femininity that arise from them. These three relevant social structures are the gendered division of labour, power, and sexuality.

Messerschmidt makes use of Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' here to denote the idealized form of masculinity that arises out of these dominant social structures. Some characteristics of this masculinity, as emerging from the three structures, are described by Messerschmidt as; being a 'good provider', having paid work, possessing authority and control, and being heterosexual and sexually aggressive. Moreover, Messerschmidt notes that hegemonic masculinity emphasizes practices

² The significance of tattooing is addressed in The Female Offender, C. Lombroso and G. Ferrero (1895).

towards "individualism, independence, aggressiveness, and the capacity for violence" (1993; 84).

However, Messerschmidt contends that the capacity to exercise power is distributed unevenly among men. Furthermore, Messerschmidt notes that "this capacity is always a reflection of one's position in social relations" (1993; 72). As such, he argues that the differing degree of power among men strongly impacts the varieties of masculinities constructed" (1993; 72). In this sense, 'masculinity as structured action' is "what men do under specific constraints and varying degrees of power" (1993; 81), as they construct masculinity in specific social situations, according to the resources or tool of doing masculinity at their disposal.

Because men reproduce masculine ideals in structured specific practices, Messerschmidt affirms that there are a variety of ways of 'doing' masculinity. Messerschmidt also postulates that because social relations place each of us in a common relationship to others, "shared blocks of knowledge and particular masculine ideals and activities evolve through interaction" (1993; 81), which are drawn on when constructing masculinities. This postulation suggests that there are ways of 'doing masculinity' which become institutionalized, emerging as a result of "sharing structural space" (1993; 81).

Although a lot of men can't or don't meet the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, Messerschmidt notes that most often, "they still try to relate to, or attempt to construct differently the cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity...by means of practices that reflect their particular positions in society (1993; 82-83).

These means and practices take a variety of forms, as men attempt to express hegemonic masculinity through "speech, dress, physical appearance, activities, and

relations with others”(83). Messerschmidt adds that “these signs are associated with the specific context of one’s actions and self-regulated within that context” and that furthermore, masculinity is a social construction that is “re-negotiated in each particular context” (83).

Tattoos as a Resource for ‘Doing’ Masculinity

In order for Messerschmidt’s concepts and ideas to assist in furthering our understanding as to the value and meaning of tattoos to prisoners, one must establish that tattoos are generally a masculine phenomenon, hence constituting a resource for ‘doing’ masculinity. There exists varied evidence that tattoos can accurately be conceived of as such a resource.

For one, tattoos are most popular among male dominated subcultures, typically marking the bodies of such groups as bikers, sailors, and convicts (Steward, 1990). Furthermore, character traits commonly assumed to exist in those who sport a tattoo, i.e. toughness, aggressiveness (Grumet, 1983), closely reflect the traits of hegemonic masculinity, as elaborated by Connel and Messerschmidt. Moreover, the act of permanently inking one’s skin has been described in the literature as an act which constitutes claiming the body as one’s own (Tattoo, 1998), an act which reflects hegemonic masculinity’s emphasis on “practices towards individualism and independence” (Messerschmidt, 1993; 82). Lastly, research findings indicate that tattoos operate as a social bonding or distancing act for males, and that furthermore, the primary audience for tattoos are other males (Coe et al., 1993). These findings support the conceptualization of tattoos as a resource for doing masculinity, in so far as the social

bonding function of tattoos reflects Messerschmidt's assertion that the attempt to sustain, produce and reproduce hegemonic masculinity "provides the primary basis for relationships among men" (Messerschmidt, 1993; 82).

According to Messerschmidt, masculinities are re-negotiated in different contexts, according to resources, social position and social milieu. The idea that masculinities are re-negotiated according to context may offer insight as to why men who don't have any or many tattoos before getting to prison, often opt for the marks inside. For these ideas to offer insight, one must conceive of the prison as a context which limits and lacks many traditional resources for masculine accomplishment, such as the capability of maintaining "paid work, heterosexual relationships, and authority and control" (Messerschmidt, 1993; 82).

A study conducted by Britt, in 1972, seems relevant in asserting that tattoos may be especially viable in constructing masculinity among those who most strongly feel the decrease in ability and resources to meet the traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity upon entering prison. To illustrate, Britt found that among prisoners, tattoos are most common among white, formally educated, young persons who had committed crimes against person (Britt, 1972). As these characteristics suggest an individual who is likely to have resources and traits at their disposal on the 'outside' to construct the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. education, authority, aggression, one can infer that they will also strongly feel the change in resources for doing masculinity upon entering prison. Following this logic, one may interpret this group to be the most likely to struggle to maintain the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, albeit in a different form, on the inside, by focusing on their appearance (Messerschmidt, 1993), and obtaining tattoos. Although the

masculinity hypothesis may help explain Britt's findings, let it be noted that alternate explanations of this finding are also plausible. For example, the individuals Britt speaks of may not obtain more tattoos because they most strongly feel the change in resources for constructing masculinity upon incarceration, but rather because they spend more time in prison, thus allowing for a greater expose and involvement with prison tattooing.

As ways of constructing and achieving masculinity through 'behavior' are made more difficult in prison, constituting a context in which masculinity may be 'threatened', "sex category is held more accountable, and physical presence, personal style, and expressiveness take on an increased importance" (Messner, 1989; 82, in Messerschmidt, 1993; 122). In this way, tattoos and their role in displaying maleness, emerge as a viable and valuable resource. In this light, the research finding that tattoos among prisoners are located in more visible places than tattoos among non-prisoners (DiFrancesco, 1990) can be interpreted as evidence that tattoos are more popular and useful in constructing masculinity in a context where other ways of 'doing it' are limited.

Similarly, the idea that masculinities are re-negotiated in different contexts also offers insight as to why some men may wish to have their tattoos removed once they get out of prison, in the sense that on the 'outside', there are other resources at their disposal to achieve masculinity in a different way. For example, it is now possible to earn at least minimum wage, to have more authority and control, and to engage in regular sexual acts with women.

However, the increased ability to construct masculinity in alternate ways should not be interpreted as the sole variable affecting the desire to re-negotiate the construction of masculinity upon release. Instead, the desire for re-negotiation may also constitute a

response to the traditionally negative conception of tattoos in the outside world, and the stigma often attached to the presence of prison-style tattoos. Similarly, the construction of a masculinity based on 'appearance', i.e. tattoos, muscles, etc. may not be congruent with standards of hegemonic masculinity in the outside world, thus also shedding light on the desire to re-negotiate one's masculinity in different contexts.

In speaking of the idea that men negotiate masculinities in different contexts, it is important to note that a prison sentence ensures that an individual will remain in that context for a pre-determined length of time. As such, one is cut off from the possibility of constructing masculinity in different contexts, for at least the length of his sentence. The invariability of context, as ensured by incarceration, can be used to explain the opting of 'marks' which are permanent in nature. In a context where one is guaranteed to be in the same place for a set amount of time, tattoos may emerge as a resource which serves to permanently and consistently affirm and display one's masculinity. In this sense, tattoos and their permanence emerge as a resource which reflect and meet the needs of an invariable context.

Looking closer at the context of the prison, one can also conceive of it as "structural space", whereby "shared blocks of knowledge and particular masculine ideals evolve through interaction" (Messerschmidt, 1993; 81). Conceiving of the prison as a context whereby particular masculine ideals become 'institutionalized' proves useful, in so far as it provides an explanation and rationale for the existence of what has been described as , 'the convict body' (DeMello, 1993). Tattoos, and the process of becoming tattooed in prison, are said to help create the 'convict body', "incorporating both the context of imprisonment, and the affiliations of the convict" (DeMello, 1993; 10). The

idea that there exists a "convict body" irregardless of the individual, reflects Messerschmidt's assertion that "although masculinity is always individual and personal, "specific forms of masculinity are available, encouraged, and permitted" (Messerschmidt, 1993; 81) depending upon one's social situation, and prevalent structural potentials and constraints.

Messerschmidt also puts forth the idea that institutionalized varieties of masculinities evolve in relation to specific spheres of life, or situations, i.e. the school, the street, the workplace, the family. When one looks to the context of the prison, and considers those within its walls, it is apparent that most prisoners are there for traditional 'street' crimes, such as drug offenses, breaking and entering, theft, violence, etc. It has been elaborated by the likes of Messerschmidt, as well as Jack Katz, that the construction of masculinity in the street revolves around creating the look of the 'bad ass' (Katz, 1988), whereby physical appearance, and movements attempt to demonstrate that one is 'tough'.

In this regard, prison can be conceived of as a context in which a certain type of masculinity can persist, in somewhat the same fashion as it did on the outside. As such, the 'convict' body can be seen as an extension or even amplification of the masculinity of the streets. Amplification in the sense that additional resources for doing masculinity are available in the street, i.e. women, which are not available in prison. Therefore, the focus on appearance becomes heightened. This conceptualization may shed light as to why many of those entering prison already have tattoos, and continue to obtain tattoos 'inside.

One last issue emerges as relevant when conceptualizing tattoos as a resource for accomplishing masculinity, one which is rendered especially viable in the context of

imprisonment. This issue revolves around the current debate in CSC as to the possibility of allowing tattoo artists in prison, and implementing prison-operated tattoos shops in Canadian prisons (Munro, 1997). These tattoo shops would be implemented in hopes of curbing alarming Hepatitis C and HIV rates, which stand at 30% and 1% respectively. These diseases are easily contracted in the prison-tattooing process, in the sense that "illicit tattooing includes the use of both dirty needles and ink" (Munro, 1997; A1).

Although the move to legalize tattooing in prison may prove successful in reducing health risks associated with illicit tattooing, there are other, more covert implications which may be inferred. In terms of a Messerschmidt analysis, there is the possibility that prison-operated tattoo shops would take away the value of tattoos as a resource for doing masculinity, in so far as the illicit nature of tattooing can be seen as more valuable in meeting the ideals of 'prison' hegemonic masculinity. For example, some of the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity are toughness, and independence. In terms of the characteristics associated with traditional prison tattoos, i.e. painful, needle and thread, prisoner to prisoner and/or self-inflicted, the 'illicit' procedure seems to more accurately reflect and reproduce the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in a prison context.

Limits

Although Messerschmidt's theory possesses considerable explanatory power in addressing the prevalence and utility of tattoos among incarcerated populations, there are limitations to what this theory can explain. The first limit relates to Messerschmidt's lack of discussion and elaboration of certain elements of his theory. For example, although he distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from subordinated masculinities, and discusses the

different ways men go about reproducing the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, he neglects to look at different groups' perceptions of 'other' ways of doing and sustaining hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, Messerschmidt fails to discuss the opinions of those who meet the ideals by very traditional resources, in regards to those who achieve masculinity via less traditional means, i.e. tattoos.

Another limitation relates to Messerschmidt's emphasis on masculinities, and neglect of 'femininities'. Although he describes his work as a 'sociology of masculinity', it may be self-defeating to fully exclude women from any analysis, as Messerschmidt asserts himself that "social structures arise and endure through social practice" (1993; 62). As social practice and social relations generally ensure contact between the two sexes, a complete analysis of masculinities might entail also looking at how different varieties of doing femininity affect and shape social structures, and the forms of masculinities that arise from them.

Michel Foucault's Elaborations on the Body in 'Discipline and Punish'

In order to comprehend how Foucault's work furthers our understanding as to how the prison and the experience of incarceration may shape the value and meaning attached to tattoos, one must first look to the four rules of his study. These rules underlie his thought, and subsequent elaborations on the changing faces of power, discipline and punishment.

His primary rule asserts that punishment is a complex social function. Accordingly, he looks at punitive methods as techniques possessing their own specificity "in the more general field of other ways of exercising power" (Foucault, 1975; 23).

Similarly, he makes the techniques of power the very principle both of “the humanization of the penal system and of the knowledge of man” (1975; 23). Foucault also looks at the changes in punitive methods “as the basis of a political technology of the body” (1975; 23). Lastly, Foucault states that a common theme in all times is that “systems of punishment are situated in a certain political economy of the body” (1975; 24).

However, Foucault indicates that the 18th century discovered the body as object and target of power. As such, he conceptualizes power as being increasingly exercised in ways which attempt to discipline, and render bodies docile. New 18th century techniques include an increase in the “scale of the control, the object of control, and its modality” (1975;137).

Although Foucault concedes that discipline operates at all levels, everywhere, at all times, Foucault argues that “discipline is most evident in settings like prisons...it is not necessarily quite as subtle...” (1975; 135). Furthermore, he asserts that the success of disciplinary power derives from instruments such as “hierarchical observation”, “normalizing judgment”, and their combination, “examination” (1975; 170). The body subjected to this heightened discipline has been described by Foucault as ‘the body of the condemned’, in so far as power relations have an immediate hold upon it.

In order to code this lack of power, Foucault argues that you need to “locate the body of the condemned man” (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984; 172). Foucault suggests locating this body in terms of legal status, ceremonials, and the theoretical discourse surrounding him. In light of Foucault’s assertions that the body is “the inscribed surface of events” (Foucault in Rabinow, 1984; 83), and that power relations “invest it, train it, mark it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks...” (1975; 25), it seems relevant to also locate

the body of the condemned man in terms of physical appearance, and the ways in which power relations and the context of the prison shape and reproduce the construction of “the convict body” (DeMello, 1993) and its accompanying lack of power and use of tattoos.

In looking at the ways power operates to create a “productive and subjugated body” (1975; 26), Foucault identifies ‘marking it’ as part of the process. In this way, the development of a ‘convict body’ which characteristically includes multiple tattoos, can be seen as a contributing factor to the subjugation of bodies within the disciplinary institution. It is interesting to note that the word tattoo evolved from the Polynesian ‘tatau’, which when translated, means ‘to mark’ (Sanders, 1988). In so far as power relations operate to ‘mark’ the ‘condemned body’, the prisoner’s construction of the ‘convict body’ can be seen as the outcome or reflection of the power relations and disciplinary techniques of the prison, rather than a simple matter of human agency and self-expression. In this sense, “the supposed failure of the prison (in reforming individuals) emerges as part of its functioning”(1975; 271). More specifically, tattoos as a method of resistance can be conceived of as a method whose significance has been alternately interpreted by the disciplinary institution, in the sense that tattoos can be used by the institution to locate, affirm and diagnose the existence of the delinquent within the offender. There is substantial evidence that institutions endow tattoos with symptomatic significance, in so far as tattoos can assist correctional staff to ascertain delinquency, and levels of docility. For example, upon admission to a correctional facility, a ‘preventive security unit’ examines the offender’s body, in order to note the amount, size, location, and description of his/her tattoos. The unit then proceeds to classify the tattoos’ content in terms of such categories as ‘aggressive’, ‘love-romantic’, ‘mystical’, ‘criminal’, and

'membership'. Once entered into the 'Offender Management System' database (Tozer, 1999), opinions concerning the character or 'docility' of the prisoner are formulated, which subsequently affect their 'distribution' and 'treatment' within the institution (Arthur, 1999).

Moreover, psychiatrists' assertions that the number, location, and quality of 'amateur' tattoos can be diagnostically useful and revealing, (Grumet, 1983), and that 'multi-unprofessional tattoos' can portray "pictographed auto-biographical graffiti" (DiFrancesco, 1990; 1909), seem to suggest that character, lifestyle and condition can be ascertained through the presence and content of crude and unpolished prison tattoos. In this way, tattoos, despite their viability in resisting the tight control of the body, can be interpreted as a method of resistance which has been appropriated and incorporated into the institution's instruments and techniques of power, i.e. classification, and normalization (Rabinow, 1984).

However, the situation is complex, as it is impossible and inaccurate to deny that there is human agency involved in marking one's body and affirming one's identity and sense of expression through the use of tattoos. While the end product, i.e. the production of a stigmatized and apparent convict body, may emerge as part of the institution's functioning, the convict may nevertheless be achieving a sense of self-affirmation, expression and/or resistance through his/her engagement in the act itself, as well as the images chosen.

Therefore, although one may interpret the convict body as serving the intent of the disciplinary institution, Foucault's thoughts also offer several insights as to the utility and meaning of tattoos for the body entangled in the context of the disciplinary institution.

Foucault asserts that the micro-physics of power exert pressure on bodies, "just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them" (1975; 27).

Using Foucault's ideas concerning the tendency to resist pressures exerted on the body, tattoos can be interpreted as resistance of the discipline and tight control of the body. The resistance of this discipline can be seen on different levels, and in different ways.

On one level, simply engaging in the 'illicit' act can constitute a resistance of the modality of the control in the prison, i.e. ever-present surveillance, in that the activity is forbidden and punishable by various means (Joyceville Lifers, 1996). The repercussions for engaging in either giving or receiving a tattoo range from an infraction slip, to time in solitary confinement (Joyceville Lifers, 1996).

In addition, tattoos function to defy the "increased and more accurate surveillance" (1975; 137) of the modern prison by constituting a "non-verbal, secret language among prisoners" (Birkenes, 1996; 1), which serves to relay and communicate specific information about oneself to others in the prisoner subculture. In this sense, tattoos hinder the attempt to decrease affiliations and communication among prisoners by increasing the modality of control.

Relatedly, tattoos can also be interpreted as a general expression of resistance to the 'deprivation of liberty' one is subjected to in prison. Resistance of this principle is achieved in the sense that marking one's body constitutes an act and display of freedom (Tattoo, 04/1999).

On another level, tattoos, and their potential for inscribing one's beliefs, experiences, and identity, can constitute resistance. Many traditional prison tattoos reflect mistrust in the system, and literally oppose the expression of power in their content. To

illustrate, one traditional Canadian prison tattoo reads, '13 1/2' to signify "12 jurors, one judge, and half a chance" (Rives, 1994). Another reads, 'guilty until proven innocent' (Quick, 1999). Making use of Foucault's observations here, these messages can be interpreted as the condemned person's inversion of the 'power-knowledge relationship', in so far as the tattoo's content serves to de-objectify the condemned's body through making the system and the expression of power, an "object to be known", and the prisoner the "subject who knows" (1975; 27-28). The reversal of the power knowledge relationship also has implications for the individual vis-à-vis the prison community, in so far as the reversal endorses the prison society as a legitimate one, one which stands in contrast to the power relations and operations inherent to the carceral institution and the criminal justice system.

Tattoos can also be interpreted as a resistance of the scale of control in the prison, characterized by attempts to render every individual body part, movement, and attitude docile (1975; 137), in the sense that obtaining ink constitutes claiming one's body as his/her own. Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep has suggested that the process of obtaining a tattoo involves movement through the three stages of a 'rite of passage'. These three stages are separation, transformation, and reincorporation. In terms of resistance, the separation stage emerges as most relevant, as the process of getting a tattoo has been described as constituting the decision to "claim one's body as his/her own" (Tattoo, 04/1999; 45). The situation is complex however, as the prisoner is separating/distinguishing himself from authority while simultaneously affiliating him/herself with other convicts through the construction and embracing of the "convict body". In this sense, tattoos create a solidarity among large numbers of the prison

population which opposes itself to the control exerted on individual body parts by literally and concretely claiming these body parts as belonging to oneself. The enduring quality of tattoos can be seen as functional in this light, as the permanency of the ink can serve to reflect a drastic and continuous affirmation of ownership/control over one's own body.

In comparing tattoos as a method of resistance to others, such as escape, or refusal to follow orders, marking one's skin emerges as a more viable and feasible method of resistance. For one, escape and refusal to follow orders involve resistance on the level of behaviour which result in serious repercussions if caught, including the possibility of being sent to a higher security facility. In comparison to escape and disobeying orders, it is just the relatively short process of obtaining a tattoo that involves *conduct* which opposes the prison's regulations.

Once the tattoo has been obtained, its image and content can be seen as embodying resistance of a more ideological, symbolic and continuous sort, over and above the level of behaviour. Moreover, tattoos as a method of resistance use the same vessel, i.e. the body, to resist the discipline which makes 'the body' the target of power.

As tattoos emerge as both a more useful and feasible method of resistance in comparison to other options, the disciplinary institution and its punitive techniques can be seen as shaping the 'methods of resistance', and the likelihood that one will be chosen over another. In this sense, the choice to obtain a tattoo over other modes of resistance can be seen as influenced by the context of prison. This idea denotes Messerschmidt's conceptualization of the link between structure and action, in the sense that the disciplinary institution constitutes a social structure which both shapes and is constituted by social action, i.e. obtaining tattoos.

In response to the observation that the prison renders certain methods of insubordination more accessible than others, one must look to the utility of doing so for the disciplinary institution, in light of Foucault's assertion that "the whole apparatus"...via different mechanisms of coercion and punishment, "aims to render individuals docile and useful by means of precise work upon their bodies.." (1975; 231).

In considering how the creation and construction of the 'convict body' can be useful for the disciplinary institution, the construction of the criminal "as existing before the crime and even outside it" (1975; 252) emerges as relevant. Foucault argues that the convicted offender, upon entering prison, is substituted for the 'delinquent', "an object that is defined by variables which at the outset were not made part of his trial...in the penal institution, the delinquent is seen as a strange manifestation of an overall phenomenon of criminality" (1975; 253).

The emergence of the idea that tattoos say something about the anti-conformity and utility of the wearer dates back to the 18th century, at the time tattoos were first introduced to the Western world. Incidentally, the earliest construction of negative associations in regards to tattoos coincides with the classical age's discovery of the body as "object to be known" and "object and target of power" (1975; 136).

As Brain, an anthropologist states:

"in modern society, physical differences are almost an insult to the ideals of community conformity...the tattooing of gangs and groups is considered anti-social, since it symbolizes individual allegiances to ideals outside the ideals of mass democratic society. Tattooing and scarification on the skin of a drug addict, a punk, or an ex-convict are permanent reminders that these individuals have refused to conform, and authorities struggle ceaselessly to suppress the marks just as they struggle to suppress the anti-social groups" (Brain, 1979; 162).

In noting the authorities 'attempts to suppress the marks', Brain alludes to the function of suppressing the marks in society in terms of promoting the ideals of mass democratic society. Using Foucault, one can consider the context of the prison, and the function served by forbidding tattooing within its walls. The application of disciplinary recourse to prison tattooing, aside from attempting to limit the prisoner's identity and sense of self (Goffman, 1961), can be seen as constituting Foucault's notion of an infra-penalty that the disciplinary institutions established to "partition an area that the law had left empty" (Foucault, 1975; 178). By penalizing a practice that is legal in the outside world, docility becomes a matter of coercion, as "the slightest departure from correct behavior becomes subject to punishment" (1975; 178). The attachment of punishment to areas untreaded by law ensures the creation of a norm (Rabinow, 1984), whereby "any mark indicating difference from the homogeneous social body allows you to classify, hierarchize, and distribute rank" (Rabinow, 1984; 196). In this sense, forbidding tattooing 'inside' is useful for the disciplinary institution, in so far as obtaining a tattoo in prison indicates deviation from the 'norm' and facilitates the formulation of opinions as to the docility and character of the individual.

Limits

Although Foucault's elaborations allow for many such insights into the phenomenon of prison tattooing, let it be noted that there are also several limitations to what his thought can offer and explain.

One such crucial limitation relates to Foucault's neglect of the discussion of women and the method and effects of disciplinary techniques upon their bodies. Instead, Foucault has left it up to feminist writers such as Sandra Lee Bartky to extend his ideas to

the situation of women. Such writers have ascertained that the techniques of power are exerted and applied in ways which render the female body more docile and useful than that of men's (Bartky, 1988). Such an analysis begs the question, "how, and to what extent is woman's physical appearance affected by power, and altered to resist the attempts to render her body docile?"

Conclusion

Despite limitations, ideas elaborated by theorists such as James Messerschmidt and Michel Foucault offer much in terms of analyzing whether prison and the experience of incarceration shape the value and meaning attached to tattoos for prisoners. These theories are especially useful, in so far as they can inform different aspects of the issue. As for Messerschmidt's theory, his ideas provide a framework for understanding tattoos as a resource for doing masculinity, as well as the dynamicity of the relationship between the prisoner, tattoos, and the prison. Foucault, on the other hand, provides a basis for understanding the significance of tattoos and the convict body for both the condemned man and the prison. Moreover, his thought provides insights as to how the 'convict body' is both shaped, and used by the disciplinary institution to solidify notions of delinquency.

In consideration of the frequency of tattoos among incarcerated populations, it seems relevant to explore the meaning, understanding, experience, and popularity of tattoos among prisoners, from their point of view, and to locate this understanding within mainstream perceptions and the multi-disciplinary academic discourse surrounding the phenomenon of tattooing.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

As described in the introductory chapter, my research question involves exploring whether the prison and the experience of incarceration affect the meaning, appeal and significance of tattoos. This research question has been informed from the hypothesis that one's material location within an environment such as the prison has an impact upon one's form and choice of expression, as possibly achieved through tattooing, the practice of permanently inking the skin's surface. While much research focuses on an individual's personality traits or subcultural associations in order to explain the decision to obtain ink, I expect to find that influences outside the individual and his/her associations affect such a decision, with tattooing possessing a certain altered meaning and significance, and perhaps purpose, in the context of incarceration.

This chapter will serve as a review of the methods I employed to collect the necessary research data. This includes a discussion of the information gathering methods used, as well as sample selection, ethical considerations, and limitations of the research methods employed. Finally, this chapter concludes with a description of how I will proceed to analyze the data collected, as well as ethical considerations.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Approach

In my review of possible methodologies, I decided upon conducting qualitative research. In weighing both the qualitative and quantitative orientations, the former seemed more compatible with my research goals, as well as more feasible considering the barriers involved with conducting research in a prison. Although quantitative research has many strengths, given the limited nature of existing research on prison tattooing, the

lack of substantive data on the subject precludes the formulation of well grounded quantitative research question.

Moreover, issues of accessibility and money complicate the feasibility of conducting quantitative research on the issue of prison tattooing. Conducting good quantitative research would involve collecting a large sample, which is both costly and difficult considering the limited number of lifers in the Ontario region and specifically at the institution the researcher has access to. While the quantitative approach poses such difficulties in the circumstances of my research, the qualitative approach seems to offer ways around these barriers, all the while possessing advantages of its own which are consistent with both the research subject and goals.

For one, in so far as qualitative research entails getting at the meanings, concepts, definition, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things (Berg, 1994; 3), the strategies of such an orientation provide what is needed to capture the rich and detailed experiences, feelings and meanings associated with tattooing for incarcerated individuals. Although quantitative orientations are often given more respect, "reflecting the tendency of the general public to regards science as related to numbers..." (Berg, 1994), qualitative research is useful in that its focus is on capturing the "essence and ambiance" of a phenomenon. This seems especially pertinent in the area of prison tattooing, given the limited state of knowledge on the activity. In so far as qualitative research aims to capture the rich and complex experiences and stories of individuals, such an approach will enable the researcher to develop a greater depth of understanding of prison tattooing, thus allowing later research to formulate well grounded questions as to *quantity* (Berg, 1994), in order to complement and expand such an understanding.

Specifically addressing my research subject as guided by the qualitative framework, I am hoping that the findings that emerge from my analysis will contribute to the social understanding of tattooing as a practice of varying multi-layered meaning, significance and importance, as affected by material location and experience in society or in this case, prison. Such an understanding may potentially affect the current mainstream understanding of tattooing as a simple rebellious or non-conformist act engaged in by “the less savory elements of society” (Steward, 1993).

Data Collection: Interviews

Although there are several possible methods to collect the necessary data, I selected interviews as my data gathering method for several reasons. Although I considered using questionnaires, I concluded that such a method would have limited the subjects' responses and that moreover, the use of questionnaires risked imposing meaning on certain areas related to tattooing which may not have been deemed important or relevant on the part of the subject. Instead, interviews allow the subject to explore their own experience with tattooing and to act as the initiator of much of the discussion (Berg, 1994). Also, the oral nature of interviews allows the researcher to pick up on nuances and meanings inherent or implied in the subject's language and tone, a benefit absent in the analysis of written expression/sentiments.

Non-directive interviews initially seemed ideal in relation to my research goals, as such an interview style would avoid leading the subject's responses through a list of pre-determined questions which risk imposing the researcher's hypothesis and understanding on to the subjects. Instead of guiding the subjects to talk about certain topics deemed

significant by the researcher, a non-directive approach allows the subject to discuss what they feel is important or relevant to their experience.

In order to fully explore their own experience from their point of view, I constructed a non-directive interview organized along the lines of time, in order for the subject to retrospectively explore their experience with tattooing before prison, and trace its evolution throughout incarceration. Although I wished to avoid leading the discussion through a direct line of questioning, it was necessary to construct categories organized along the lines of time in order for the subjects to distinguish between pre-prison feelings and experiences concerning tattoos, and their experiences today. Such categories were also necessary in order for the researcher to eventually distinguish, in the analysis phase, whether the prison has an impact upon the meaning and significance of tattooing. Such a framework is useful in so far as it allows me to clearly distinguish whether the subject's experience with tattooing evolved as a function of the prison.

While staying true to the time framework, once in the interview setting, it was discovered that a non-directive interview, which asked the subject to explore their experience in regards to 1) their opinion of tattooing before prison 2) how they decided to get their first tattoo 3) how they feel about them today and 4) how they feel 'different' others perceive their tattoos, would not be sufficient in getting the subjects to fully explore their experience. Instead, the subjects occasionally had to be assisted through the use of questions, as evidenced by their specific request for them during the interview. As such, what had been constructed as non-directive interviews translated into interviews which at times, required asking questions.

Although the researcher assisted the subjects by asking questions from time to time, the questions posed most often reflected an element of what the subject had already touched on, or if necessary, a topic that had been commonly addressed by subjects in earlier interviews.

There emerge several reasons, which, in combination, explain why the interviews occasionally required the researcher to assist the subjects by posing smaller questions within the non-directive 'time' framework. Such reasons include the setting itself. As the interviews were conducted in a small, restrictive space within the prison in plain view of correctional officers, I do not believe the setting was ideal in putting the subjects at ease. Secondly, the time of the interviews was determined by the institution as opposed to an agreement between the subjects and the researcher, and as such many interviews took place at eight o'clock in the morning, shortly after the subjects woke up. As a result, many participants were still groggy, and possibly unfamiliar with such heavy discussion at that time of day, given that their daily routine typically involves going to work in the morning, and not conversing about such complex issues as their lifelong experience with tattooing. Lastly and perhaps most significant, many subjects indicated that tattooing was a topic that they had never explicitly thought of or discussed before in the sense of my research and that therefore, they needed some questions from time to time in order to assist them in exploring their experience.

Following the interview, I presented the subject with a short questionnaire to complete. The sixteen questions asked the subjects for factual information such as age, time served, sentencing year, parole eligibility, year first tattoo was obtained, number of tattooings, etc... Such questions were necessary in order to compile a 'quick reference'

sheet (Berg, 1993) in the data organization stage, and accessing information subjects may have left out in the interview stage. Moreover, such information makes it possible to look at the relationship between variables, i.e. time served, and one's evaluation of tattooing.

Research Sample

As for the research sample, I selected eight subjects to interview. Of this sample, all are male, and all are serving life sentences for murder. I specifically selected Lifers as my subjects because of the experience they have had with both tattooing and incarceration. Having been sentenced to life, the population I have selected have had, or will have, a longer exposure to the prison context than someone who has received a sentence with a warrant expiry date. As opposed to someone serving a short sentence who may continue to 'live' for their life on the street, a lifer is special, as his 'life' is now in prison, having had to adjust to the possibility that they may never see the streets, or that, even if they do, it may be a long time away. As such, one can assume that the prison will have a bigger impact on a lifer than a short-termer, and hence more strongly impact on other aspects of him/herself, such as identity, body image, attitude, as possibly reflected through the use of tattooing. It is primarily for the rich experience specific to men doing life sentences that I have chosen to interview Lifers for the purposes of my research. In addition, a comfort level has been established between myself and the research participants through my years of continued involvement with the Lifers group, which I expect to positively contribute to the interview process.

The age range of the subjects is considerable, spanning 21 years of age to 40. In terms of tattoos, one of the subjects had no tattoos prior to prison but has since obtained

ink behind bars. Another individual had obtained tattoos prior to prison but ceased to obtain them in prison. The rest of the subjects obtained tattoos both prior to prison, and once incarcerated. Although I will note the distinctions between the three situations in my research, i.e. reasons for abstaining from ink whether it be outside or inside..., how the decision to obtain ink came about outside or inside, I will not focus my analysis around these distinctions since it is outside the purpose of the research.

In terms of other characteristics of the research sample, 'time served' is another variable to entertain in both the data collection and analysis phases. While a number of the subjects have served upwards of twenty years in prison, others have only just begun their life sentence. As one can imagine, the effect and experience of prison may well be different for someone who has endured long term incarceration than for someone who has just started doing time. While possibilities like parole or an appeal may be within sight for some, others may have become accustomed to the idea that they will spend the rest of their lives in prison. Such qualities may well have an impact on one's evaluation or experiences with tattoos, and are definitely worth considering in the interview and analysis phases.

Limits

In discussing the research sample, it is important to address the limits of the group selected for study. Upon first glance, one may assume that a major limitation of the research is sample size. However, I did conduct enough interviews to somewhat saturate the four categories of retrospection. More specifically, I chose to stop after eight when I discovered that the majority of experiences and understandings being relayed to me in later interviews began to repeat and overlap information accessed in earlier interviews...

Such overlap suggests that although there are a variety of experiences with tattooing in prison, the range of understandings and experiences is finite to some extent. As such, a continuation of interviews would prove exhaustive to the research, despite the chance that a small number of different themes or experiences may have been accessed had more interviews been conducted.

Due to the fact that the research categories enjoyed considerable saturation, (as evidenced in the lack of original experiences being relayed to me in later interviews), the information and findings that so emerge from them may be somewhat generalizable to other prisoners, and more specifically, to other lifers. Moreover, the variability in the age of the subjects as well as time served should represent a rich and diverse cross-section of experiences. However, as the variability in age and time served is limited due to the size of the sample, it would be inaccurate to claim that the findings that emerge in regards such specifics are necessarily representative of all lifers with similar characteristics. Nevertheless, the experiences shared should somewhat reflect the experiences of other lifers, due to the saturation of categories.

Although findings may be somewhat generalizable or representative of other lifers in Canada, let it be stated that this is not the overriding focus or concern of this research. Instead, the study is focused more on describing in rich detail the various understandings and experiences with tattooing through an exploration of the lived realities of men serving life sentences in Ontario.

Sample selection may also be interpreted as a limit of this research. As the sample consists of individuals with whom I had had contact with through a Lifers' group, the population from which the sample was formed was not representative of the whole

Canadian lifer population nor in one specific penitentiary. Despite this limit, those subjects who participated in the research were those who had agreed or volunteered to be interviewed following a short presentation that I made during a lifers' meeting.

However, there is no reason to believe that the lifers who volunteered to be interviewed, or their experiences with tattooing, are any different than those who did not. Moreover, it is impossible to discern what impact, if any, my prior relationship with these men had on the interviews themselves. Perhaps some of the subjects felt more comfortable having had prior contact with me, and maybe others did not.

Another limit, or rather, difficulty surrounding the sample selected, is related to the physical environment the subjects reside in. Of the original group of subjects who volunteered to be interviewed, three individuals could not participate due to situations involving involuntary transfers, or time in solitary confinement. As such, the researcher did not get to interview all of the original sample chosen for study.

A final limitation of the methodology is related to groups or subjects whose experiences the research is not exploring, such as women. Such analyses would only improve this research, however, the focus of this exercise in the logic of discovery is on male prisoners. Instead, I leave it up to future criminologists to explore how women see their bodies in prison, and whether the appeal of tattooing is affected by one's experiences inside the prison. As opposed to including women as an afterthought in the research, such an analysis would refrain from purely comparative research by studying women from an ethnographic point of view, capturing their own understandings and experiences.

Analysis of Interview Data

Following the completion of the eight interviews, I transcribed the tape recorded versions into a written format. Following the transcription, a qualitative content analysis of the data gathered was conducted. More specifically, the researcher read through each interview, noting any themes perceived as relevant to the research question. Each transcript was reviewed a second time, whereby the written content was coded according to the categories or themes noted in the preliminary reading. However, the findings chapters is not limited to a discussion of major themes.

Although there are several major themes that emerged, the researcher also wanted to include the unique experiences or viewpoints of the research participants. The inclusion of such elements seemed consistent with the goals of qualitative research in so far as the qualitative genre aims to capture the voices and individual understandings that people have constructed for themselves over time (Petrunik, 1998). Moreover, the inclusion of original and diverse understandings indicates and possibly affirms that people in prison are not a homogeneous group, despite being part of or sharing certain elements of a culture shaped by the disciplinary institution.

In order to vividly illustrate the major themes and unique understandings uncovered in the interview analyses, large excerpts and small quotes from the research participants have been used. Such a direct relation of material not only serves to exemplify and clarify findings but also serves to uncover the feelings and conviction behind the subjects' understandings, as much meaning is often revealed in the language itself.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the structural location of interview subjects and status as prisoners, there were several ethical considerations involved in constructing this research. Moreover, as prisoners are considered a 'vulnerable population' by the Research Ethics Board, great precautions had to be taken to ensure that their rights were fully protected and respected.

For one, voluntary participation was ensured through a recruitment process which asked those initially interested to sign their names on a sheet of paper, or see me in person if they felt uncomfortable signing their name. To respect confidentiality rights, each interview was conducted one on one in a prison interview room, where there are no cameras or tape recorders other than those of the researcher's. Each participant was presented with a consent form guaranteeing their rights to anonymity and confidentiality, and allowing them to withdraw from the study at any time. The consent form was explained and discussed orally before the subjects went on to read them on their own. I also instructed each subject that there would be no discussion of the crime they had been incarcerated for, or had committed in the past. Moreover, I also stressed that all names and locations would be changed, as well as certain details of tattoos to fully ensure their anonymity. During the course of the interviews, I also made note of all statements that the subjects wished to have omitted from later discussions. As for the treatment of the data, the forum in which the data would be presented was made clear, i.e. thesis, as were issues concerning access to the data. I explained that only my thesis supervisors and myself would have access to the transcripts and that moreover, they would be destroyed following completion of the thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

I. Experiences and Conceptions of Tattoos and Tattooing Prior to Incarceration

In order to address the question of whether the prison affects the meaning, value, or appeal of tattoos in any way, the researcher has had to organize the data in such a way as to conduct a time frame analysis. Categorizing the subjects experiences with tattooing before prison, during incarceration, and today, these three time frames allow the researcher to note the evolution in experiences, and any changes in significance that may have occurred over time.

In looking at perceptions and conceptions of tattooing prior to prison and how these have shifted over time, one can begin to look at how the experience of the prison may have contributed to such changes. Although other factors such as age, maturation and interests may also possess explanatory power, the prison is undoubtedly a variable worth considering, especially for those men whose freedoms have been ultimately limited as the result of a life sentence. The experience of incarceration reveals itself as worthy of consideration in light of elaborations concerning the impact of social structure and context on action. Such elaborations suggest that there are factors beyond the individual and his/her personal development that shape one's experiences and actions. In the case of men doing life in prison, it seems pertinent to look at what role, if any, the prison has upon the appeal and significance of tattooing.

Before discussing the findings in regards to the "Pre-Prison" time frame, it is important to note that seven out of the eight subjects in this study had tattoos prior to being incarcerated. Their experiences with tattooing prior to receiving their life sentence were explored in the interviews, and several themes emerged such as masculinity, identity, impulsivity/spontaneity, awareness of stigma, bonding, affection, and rejection. While some themes seem to be more prevalent among the seven who obtained tattoos, the rarer findings will also be noted following a discussion of the stronger findings.

In terms of the larger themes, it seems as if the majority of lifers in this study share a certain commonality of experiences. It is not to say that people in the general population do not share these early experiences with tattooing as well. I am limiting my analysis to the experiences of lifers because a discussion of pre-prison tattooing within this specific demographic is only relevant in so far as it serves as the basis of comparison for the other two time frames, in order to ultimately uncover the existence of any shifts in perceptions and experiences with tattooing that may be attributable to the prison and the experience of incarceration. While non-lifers or non-prisoners in the general population may share many of the "pre-prison" experiences, their current perceptions and feelings regarding tattooing and any changes that may have occurred can not be attributable or influenced by the experience of incarceration, should there be such an influence uncovered in this study.

Masculinity

A common understanding and function of tattooing for subjects before prison lies in the realm of masculinity /machismo. It appears as if for many of the subjects, i.e. 5 of 7, tattoos functioned to strengthen their social identity as males who conform to and almost typify the traits of hegemonic masculinity. Subjects describe that they believed their tattoos made them appear “cool”, “tough”, “rebellious”, “aggressive”, characteristics which are traditionally and typically linked with being “masculine”. In this way, the subjects used tattooing as a tool for achieving an outward and continuous display of a specific type of accepted and desired masculinity. While all subjects believed tattoos were the ‘tough guy’ thing to do, some subjects went so far as to suggest that tattoos are so masculine that they constitute the primary attracter of the female sex. One subject elaborates, “men look at women’s breasts, and women look at our tattoos, that’s how it works”.

Furthermore, not only did the act of wearing a tattoo serve to accomplish the ideals of masculinity, but the act of getting tattooed itself, whereby a needle rapidly penetrates the skin, also seems to have accomplished these ends. One subject named Red recalls thinking, “I can deal with the pain, I’m a tough guy”. This statement suggests that subjects drew on their ‘maleness’ to endure the process and pain of getting tattooed, and also enhanced their masculinity through the end product of this process, this being the tattoo itself.

Additional evidence that the subjects obtained tattoos for masculinity related ends before prison is located in the lack of concern for esthetics or meaning. Instead, just

having a tattoo was good enough for the subjects during this time frame, no matter the quality or design. This seems to suggest that tattoos were obtained more for the simple sake of having one and 'presentation to others' (Goffman, 1961) than for any personal significance. The fact that all these early tattoos have largely been covered up or reworked once incarcerated may also suggest that these early inkings were of little meaning to the wearer. As elaborated by Dan, "when I got that first tattoo, that sleeve was never fuckin' rolled down...I think it was for a little boost with the girls". Len adds, "I wanted to be perceived as a tough guy back then, and tattoos were a rebellious thing to do...".

Moreover, the early tattoos obtained depict images or symbols traditionally linked with masculinity. For example, eagles, daggers, and skulls were among the most common images tattooed, which typically symbolize such things as independence, strength, freedom, aggression, all of which are traits of 'hegemonic masculinity'. All things considered, it appears as if the construction of a 'masculine' social identity outweighed motivations related to personal identity, relationships, etc. in these years. More specifically, it appears as if the masculinity enhancing aspect of getting tattooed was three-fold for the subjects, in so far as the act of getting tattooed itself, the image chosen, and one's new social identity as a 'tattooed person' contributed to the construction of the desired social identity.

Identity

A second major finding in the pre-prison time frame is related to the subjects' identities and sense of selves. As opposed to obtaining tattoos which reflect or construct

a sense of personal experience or identity, it appears as if the majority of subjects obtained tattoos before prison as a means of establishing their identity in terms of a larger group identity. As opposed to conceiving of themselves as individuals with their own uniqueness as derived through experiences and feelings, their early experiences with tattooing indicate that the subjects situated themselves in reference to a larger group of people which they wished to belong to. The early imagery obtained by the subjects most often imitated the tattoos worn by older individuals looked up to by the subjects. In this way, the tattoos functioned as a means of belonging to a larger group of individuals, depicting both admiration and the desire to be accepted by a 'crew' of 'cool older guys'. Both the images themselves as well as the reasons behind the act of becoming a tattooed person suggest that the subjects early contact with tattooing had little to do with their identity in terms of self-reference and expression but rather with belonging and acceptance by individuals whom they admired.

To illustrate, one subject obtained tattoos of an eagle as well as a cross with points of light because the older friends he hung around with and looked up to had these symbols tattooed. In order to be like them and part of their crew, Mikey tattooed these images, despite their lack of meaning in terms of personal experience and identity. Another subject, Rick, said that he got his first tattoos because all the kids at his group home had one, as did the older guys he hung around with. Although he tattooed his own name as well as the word 'MOM' on his arm, images which may on the surface appear to be related to personal identity and affection, he chose to obtain these images because that was what the other guys in the group home had tattooed on their bodies. As such, the tattoos had less to do with personal significance and feelings than with 'fitting in' and

having the 'right' look. Another subject named Dan tattooed his name on his arm because he wished to be identified as part of a larger group, this group being the tattooed population in general. Dan elaborates that he wished to be part of a "tattooed rowdy crowd of older people" that he admired. As such, his tattoos functioned as the link to this crowd, expressing his desire to be just like them rather than his own separate identity.

Impulsivity/Spontaneity

Another finding, which is perhaps related to early self-identification in terms of a larger group identity, is that there appears to be a lack of thought or meaning, at least at a conscious reflective level, attached to early tattoos among the majority of subjects. Instead, it seems as if impulsivity is closely linked with the subjects' early decision to obtain tattoos. In so far as just having a tattoo back then was good enough for the subjects, no matter its quality or meaning, the subjects retrospectively qualify their pre-prison experiences with tattooing as "young and stupid". As explained by Rick, "there were no thoughts put into my tattoos back then...it was just the thing to do". Another lifer, Red, explains, "there was no real symbolism or meaning to my first tattoo...it was spur of the moment, you know, young and exuberant...." Brad adds, "when you're young, you just want a tattoo, you don't really care what it is". Explicit examples of this phenomenon are found in Dan's story, in that he often engaged in the spontaneous self-tattooing of his feelings on his body, with little reflection as to the long term significance or repercussions of the markings. To cite an example, Dan self-tattooed the word CUNT on his arm, below his girlfriend's name, after receiving news that she was no longer able

to date him....Dan admits that he often regretted the tattoos he gave himself shortly after having completed them.

The subjects' descriptions of their mindset and intentions with tattooing before prison coupled with suggestions that tattoo images were largely chosen on the spot, copied from an older friend, and obtained from poorly qualified artists seem to indicate that impulsivity and spontaneity were strong factors involved with the subjects' pre-prison experiences with tattooing.

Awareness of Stigma

Although the subjects seem to have engaged in tattooing rather spontaneously before prison, it is clear that prior to incarceration, most were already aware of the stigma and negative stereotypes attached to tattoos in mainstream society. More specifically, it appears as if most were made aware of such negative perceptions by a family member. Interestingly, the family member who forbid the subjects to obtain tattoos or advised them against it was most often a family member who themselves had a tattoo. Having experienced the social repercussions of sporting a tattoo, these family members tended to insist that their son or grandson never get tattooed. Although the subjects obtained tattoos regardless, they did take measures to ensure that their tattoos were disguisable and secret from their families, hence partially incorporating what they had been told regarding tattoos and stigma. However, the subjects explained that they were less concerned with social stigma than the fear of punishment by these family members.

An awareness of stigma, as well as impulsivity/lack of meaning, identity as located within a larger group, and masculinity are the major themes which emerge in the

pre-prison time frame. Although these four factors stand as the most prominent and common among subjects, there are others, although less frequent, which also offer insight.

Bonding Function

Common to the experiences of three of the subjects, is a bonding function achieved in the act of getting a tattoo. It appears as if subjects who obtained their pre-prison tattoos with a friend or loved one became closer to each other through the experience of getting a tattoo together. It seems as if the act of obtaining ink at the same time strengthened the relationship between the subject and the other person on many levels, in that the act of getting a tattoo itself entails experiencing a painful act together, as well as a symbolic one which represents a co-joint decision between the parties of which the end product will last forever. In Brad's words,

“...me and my friend both did it at the same time...we both got one at the same time so it was kind of an experience me and my friend going for a tattoo at the same time, I went with him when he got his done, he came with me when I got mine done, so it was kind of neat like that”.

He suggests that the tattoo experience was a memorable and meaningful marker in their friendship when he states that, “I know we both remember what we got...”. Another subject, Mikey, explains that he and his best friend each tattooed each other in the parking lot of a housing survey on the 16th of the month, the day the earth was supposed to come to an end, according to the Jehovah witnesses. He explains that they made the equipment together with a pen, thread and ink, and they each tattooed a traditional prison tattoo on each other's hand, because they had done a week in jail together. He says he remembers

thinking, “now that we’ve done time together, we can do this now, and we have to do it today because the world is gonna end!!!” This passage suggests that the tattooing here was related to friendship, and more specifically, the concretization / outward display of an experience they had both gone through as close friends. For these subjects, it appears as if the meaning of the tattoos was derived from the context in which it was obtained, i.e. intimately with a friend, as opposed to being derived from the image itself.

Affection and Rejection

Another less common phenomenon among the subjects, i.e. three of seven, was the inking of girlfriend’s names. As elaborated by the research participants, such inscriptions served to express their affection for their partner at the time. However, in the pre-prison time frame, it seems as if the lifers obtained their girlfriend’s names more for the other person than for themselves, in order to overtly display/prove their love for them and the significance of the relationship in their lives. Furthermore, the subjects’ retrospective reflections concerning these tattoos suggest that their identity at this time was largely located within their relationship with their girlfriend.

In discussing the nature of such tattoos with the subjects, the participants revealed that all had since had them covered up while in prison. Such a finding may suggest that these tattoos held only a temporal personal meaning for the subjects, somewhat limited and/or confined to the status of the relationship with their partner. While some tattoos may constitute indefinite expressions of personal identity, such markings seem to have drawn their significance from the relationship which inspired the tattoo. Once terminated, it seems as if the subjects experienced a rejection of the tattoo, seeking to

cover up the visual reminder of a relationship no longer congruent with the subject's feelings.

While two subjects tattooed their 'current' girlfriend's names on their bodies before prison, one subject chose to tattoo his ex-girlfriend's name, as an attempt to win her back. For this subject, the tattoo was purposeful, in that he used the ink as a means to of re-gaining something he had lost. The meaning of the tattoo for K was thus derived from what he hoped it would accomplish. More specifically, the tattoo's significance revolved around obtaining the ink, the anticipation of showing his ex, and his idealizations surrounding the impact the tattoo would have on his ex-girlfriend's actions. As K explains, "the tattoo didn't do fuck all". As such, the tattoo lost its meaning or value when it did not fulfill its intended purpose. Given the temporal significance of the tattoo for the subject, K's retrospection also suggests that he obtained the tattoo more for his girlfriend than he did for himself and that moreover, the 'affective' tattoo had little to do with his sense of personal identity. The fleeting significance of the marking may also be attributed to impulsivity, in so far as the subject used tattooing as a tool without considering the possibility that it may not succeed in achieving the desired outcome.

II. Evolution: Experiences and Perceptions of Tattoos and Tattooing During Incarceration

Although 7 out of 8 interviewees had already obtained tattoos before prison, the vast majority had limited their tattooing to one or two pieces in the years prior to incarceration. Regardless of the age at which the subjects were handed down their life sentence, all subjects (with the exception of one who chose to abstain due to health related concerns, negative experience of the prison, and identification related concerns) quickly became re-engaged in tattooing once incarcerated, obtaining several new tattoos within the first few months of their sentence. In addition to shifts in the rate and frequency at which the Lifers obtained ink in the context of imprisonment, the subjects also seem to have experienced shifts in terms of the appeal, role, and meaning of tattooing during incarceration.

While such shifts may be partially attributed to such factors as age and maturation, a careful analysis of interview data strongly suggests that the carceral institution does exert an influence on the way in which Lifers perceive and experience tattooing and their bodies. In so far as the Lifers' sense of identity, expression, freedom, relationships, solidarity and resistance, etc. have been affected or altered by the experience of long-term incarceration, it appears as if tattooing within this context emerges as both the inward and outward expression of the 'prison experience'. Often encompassing many different meanings and functions for the wearer, the act/process of obtaining a tattoo inside, the selection of images, as well as the act of becoming a visibly tattooed person constitute the different dimensions of tattooing whose meaning and experience have been affected by the context of imprisonment in some way.

Having been generally stated above, a discussion of findings pertaining to the 'incarceration' time frame will help illustrate the shifts and/or evolution in the meaning of tattooing and tattoos for those serving life sentences.

Heightened Appeal and the link to acceptance, solidarity and individuality

The first major finding concerns a shift in the appeal of tattooing once the subjects entered the prison environment. Although most of the Lifers had already obtained tattoos before prison, it was found that none were heavily tattooed or planned to become so in their experiences prior to incarceration. Moreover, the subjects elaborated that although they thought tattoos were "cool" before prison, they did not think a lot about them, as tattoos did not represent a central concern or pastime in their lives. In contrast, 7 out of 8 subjects suggested that the appeal of tattoos was sharply heightened for them once they began their life sentence. Most obtained four or five tattoos within the first few months of their incarceration, and continued to obtain them throughout their sentence. Due to this increased involvement in tattooing during incarceration, the average number of tattoos per Lifer in the research sample has risen to ten from a pre-prison average of two.

In accounting for this heightened appeal and involvement in tattooing, it seems as if the acceptance and appreciation of tattoos among prisoners and the "world" they now live in is central to the individual's decision to obtain tattoos inside. Although prison tattooing has been conceptualized in the literature as social action which attempts to resist dominant mainstream society (Demello, p.134), it must not be assumed that prison culture necessarily develops and defines itself in relation to the dominant culture. Given the elaborations of the lifers, prison tattooing must also be conceptualized as a practice

which constructs a solidarity among prisoners, in so far as the inscription of one's body rears a commonality among prisoners, i.e. that of a tattooed individual, while also signifying the embracing of a practice which extends the limits and boundaries of what is typically defined as an 'acceptable' body.

Therefore, although prison tattooing may 'indirectly' challenge notions of acceptable appearance in the outside world, one must not assume that the prison community necessarily employs the dominant culture as a reference point in the development of its practices. Instead, it must be conceptualized as a culture in its own right, whose norms and values may develop as a result of material location, social structure, and experience within a specific context (Messerschmidt, 1990). To assume that prison culture has taken shape by virtue of an inversion of mainstream standards of appearance and behavior may be inadequate, in so far as it discredits the beliefs and practices of that culture as legitimate enterprises engaged in for their own sake.

In terms of tattooing, five of the seven men who obtained ink inside explained that the appeal of tattooing inside is largely related to its popularity and support within that context. In the words of Mikey, "tattoos are perceived as art in prison...other guys don't stereotype you; you don't get paranoid walking around in here all tattooed up". This statement suggests that there is both a presence of positive reactions as well as the absence of negative ones amongst the prison population. The approval expressed by other prisoners in regards to tattooing suggests that part of its appeal lies in the receptive audience to whom the tattoos are displayed. Mikey elaborates, "whatever you get, if it's different, people like it...it's looked at as respectable art, nobody looks down on a tattoo...guys ask questions, give you compliments...". Rick adds, "tattoos are all right in

here...everyone has them, you're always around them, and they're not a big deal here". K also claims that, "in *this* world, everybody's got them...guys ask each other about them, who did them...".

K's referral to prison as "this world" explicitly denotes that the prison constitutes a separate and different environment than the street, one with its own norms and practices. More specifically, K's statement depicts the prison as "a world" where tattoos commonly operate as a topic of conversation and a favorable mode of expression as opposed to an indicator of deviancy, delinquency or character.

In so far as tattoos are accepted amongst the prison population, their existence on the body within the context of incarceration may be interpreted as a means of establishing a commonality of experience and/or situation. Whether intentional or not, a type of solidarity is constructed in the act of voluntarily establishing oneself as a visibly tattooed person, in that one now shares the general appearance of other convicts all the while evoking similar social reactions both inside and outside prison.

Although the subjects partake in the affirmation of a particular social identity and solidarity with other convicts in the *act* of becoming tattooed in prison, it appears as if once incarcerated, there is also a move towards individuality and personal identity in the acquisition of images that depict the individual and his experiences. As such, the meaning of tattoos in this context can be conceived of as operational on different levels. While one's social identity as a 'tattooed individual' is established through the adoption of an appearance which is congruent with the norms and standards of the larger prison community, one's sense of individuality is simultaneously established through the selection of art which differentiates him from the other tattooed individuals in the same

environment. Mikey's elaborations depict this multi-layered meaning when he says, "inside, it's gone to more personal stuff...a move towards tattoos that don't say you're with a gang but that you're just you....they want something different than any other guy but they all want a tattoo". K adds, "whatever you get, if it's different, people like it".

In this sense, not only is the appeal of tattooing in general heightened, but the importance of obtaining tattoos which are original and/or specific to how one sees himself is heightened as well. Whereas before prison, the images tattooed tended to reflect or copy those worn by individuals held in high regard by the subjects, once inside, such images have been replaced by those which reflect one's character, likes and dislikes, and/or those that serve to set oneself apart from others. Whereas before prison, the interviewees tended to opt for the same inking as a group of other people, the majority of lifers in the sample now stress the importance of personal meaning as well as uniqueness in their tattoos.

As the importance of obtaining unique tattoos increases for the lifers, it appears as if the quality of the art is somewhat sacrificed in favor of originality. For example, several interviewees explained that they now insist that the tattooist work freehand, in order to avoid a situation where the pattern could be repeated on another prisoner. As Jewels explains, "if you get a tattoo in here, it's for you, for what it means to you...I don't want someone else here walking around with my stuff on their skin...there's nothing I hate more in here than seeing three or four guys with the same piece... K furthers this idea, "tattooing inside is about getting what YOU want, what YOU like....if I want to get a dick on my forehead, I'll get a dick on my forehead".

Tattooing as a Symbol of Agency, Identity and Control: Renegotiating Masculinities?

K' last statement seems to allude to the sense of agency and control that is experienced in the act of tattooing and becoming heavily tattooed in prison. The importance of such aspects may be sharpened within a context such as the prison, where an individual's body and freedoms are highly determined and limited by those in power. In such an environment, tattooing may be interpreted as an act which constitutes claiming the body as one's own, especially if the image inked into the skin is one which reflects an individual's personal beliefs and experiences. In such a context, the tattoo may function as a permanent affirmation of personal identity/beliefs, one which is resistant to its being disciplined and/or modified by the state. As Rick puts it, "as far as I'm concerned, I'll put what I want on my body...no one has the right to tell me what I'm gonna do with it...I'll put anything I want on it". In K's words, "I can't wait to finish up my tattoos so that people get the message behind them...they're what I'm about...I'm a criminal, it's all criminal stuff...".

K's statement here seems to highlight the messaging and social identity function that tattooing accomplishes for him. Although seemingly contradictory to statements that stress his lack of concern for others' interpretations of his tattoos, a symbolic interactionist analysis suggests that, as evidenced in K's interview, individuals are full of contradictions. As opposed to signifying dishonesty, such contradictions instead reveal that an individual is capable of feeling several ways about a certain phenomenon, depending upon his/her mood, situation, audience, the novelty of an experience, etc. As such, it may be more useful to conceptualize the variations in K's statements as expressions of uncertainty, or as the experience of conflicting or multiple feelings.

In looking to the meaning of Rick and K's above statements, they seem to reflect a desire to regain or remain in control of one's own identity and body, thus also reflecting a tendency towards traits which are particular to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. As elaborated by Messerschmidt, 'independence' and the 'sense of being in control' are characteristics desired by males who wish to conform to the ideals and standards of 'accepted' masculinity.

In reflecting back on days prior to incarceration, it seems as if the subjects were already involved in the attempt to achieve the ideals of hegemonic masculinity before prison. However, the focus back then appears to have been placed on achieving these ideals through the 'appearance' of masculinity. Back then, it seems as if tattoos were desirable because they assisted in appearing "tough", "strong", "rebellious", etc.

Although the lifers' still appear to be involved with 'doing' masculinity, the 'ways in which' they meet the ideals of hegemonic masculinity seems to have shifted. Whereas before prison, it appears as if tattoos were sought out for their value in helping one 'appear' masculine, the lifers' elaborations suggest that throughout their incarceration, tattooing also provided the opportunity to exert and experience a certain amount of control and independence over their bodies. For example, Mikey's experience with tattooing inside emerges as one ridden with independent decision making and self-definition/ownership when he suggests that, "I didn't need talking into them, I knew I was ready, I had made up my own mind, I wanted them....". Brad's experience also suggests that a sense of agency and control is exerted in the decision to obtain tattoos inside. This is evidenced in his statement that, "if people are gonna get tattoos here, they should do it

for their own reasons...for me, in here, I only get what I want to get, what I decide I want on my body, what I like”.

In looking to the impact of context upon experience, it seems possible that the meaning of tattooing evolved for the lifers once entrenched in an environment where the loss of agency and control emerges as part of its functioning. In such a context, it is possible that tattooing takes on a heightened importance, above and beyond its potential for displaying masculine imagery and a masculine social identity. In an environment where one's independence and free-will is incessantly challenged, tattooing may become a way of proving that one's body belongs to oneself, that the individual is ultimately in charge of how he/she expresses him/herself. According to the lifers, tattoos whose imagery is unique and distinct assist in this enterprise.

In looking once again to the context of imprisonment, it seems plausible that processes inherent to the prison experience, i.e. 'depersonalization' and the 'systematic mortification of self' (Goffman; 1961), may also play a role in heightening the importance of originality when it comes to tattooing inside. In an environment where one's avenues of expression and differentiation from others, i.e. clothing, relationships, speech, are determined by forces outside of his/her control, the adoption of a tattoo may function as a means of re-claiming and affirming one's sense of individuality.

Although all subjects seem to stress the importance of individuality, there appears to be a split amongst the lifers in regards to their construction of a personal identity. It seems as if those subjects who already had a strong sense of self or identity coming into their life sentence, continued to obtain tattoos inside which reflect their sense of identity from the street. For example, a lifer named Len explains, “my tattooing inside was kind

of hanging on to old memories and stuff...like I got a club tattoo, and I got some Harley tattoos, it was just, that was me at the time". Therefore for Len, tattooing inside functioned as a way of preserving his identity from the street. Not wishing to re-invent himself within the context of incarceration, his involvement with tattooing in prison kept his sense of identity as a biker intact.

In contrast, other lifers chose to obtain tattoos which reflect how other prisoners perceive them. In this way, their sense of personal identity seems to have evolved as a function of their social identity within the prison. For example, the first tattoo K obtained inside was of a 'handle' given to him by other prisoners in the SHU, one which represents how the others perceived K's character. Jewels also obtained a tattoo of a weapon which symbolizes the nickname given to him during his first few months of incarceration. As such, it seems as if the images themselves (above and beyond the act of becoming a tattooed person), can also function as an expression of solidarity and camaraderie among prisoners.

While such tattoos may in part reflect the construction of a newly established personal identity, such tattoos may also be interpreted as the building blocks of a social identity within the prison. As for K and Jewels, their social identity may be interpreted as dynamic, in so far as their tattoos constitute a reflection of how they are already perceived by other prisoners.

Although the subjects were necessarily involved in the construction of a social identity through tattooing before prison, the social identity they attempted to construct back then seems to have focused less on specific imagery than it did on social identification as a tattooed person in general. Before prison, it seems as if the subjects

desired to be conceived of as a 'tattooed individual', as opposed to a specific type of tattooed person with a particular social identity. Evidence of this phenomenon lies in the imagery obtained before prison, in so far as the designs chosen were selected in haste, or tended to imitate those worn by persons they respected. Moreover, the subjects revealed that the esthetics and quality of tattoos were of little importance before prison. This finding suggests that social identification as a "tattooed person" was good enough for the subjects before prison.

In contrast, it seems as if there has been shift to a focus on the construction of a specific social identity upon incarceration. In an environment where the large majority of individuals sport tattoos, tattoos in and of themselves may no longer constitute enough of a distinguishing factor. As a result, the subjects seem to have renegotiated the focus of tattooing in prison. Upon incarceration, it appears as if the subjects become engaged in the construction of a social identity based more upon the quality and imagery of tattoos, attempting to transmit a 'specific' message to others. The aim of this enterprise can be described as a means of setting oneself apart from others through the actual images obtained, while simultaneously displaying allegiance to others inside in the act of becoming tattooed. In this way, the construction of a social identity in prison appears to be a task which requires a complex and delicate balance of fitting in while all the while being different. For example, K elaborates, "they want something different than any other guy, but they all want a tattoo...for me, I've devoted my body to themes of badness, cruelty, evil, and I'm anxious for my tattoos to be finished so that people get the message behind them". This statement suggests that K is attempting to project a certain image within the context of the prison, whereby other prisoners will attribute certain traits

to him and recognize him as unique and distinct from other tattooed men inside. Mikey's interview suggests this as well when he says, "inside, it's gone to more personal stuff, a move towards tattoos that say you're just you....".

Tattoo Imagery as Bound Within the Norms and Values of Prison Culture

Although there appears to be a move towards the expression of individuality inside, it seems as if the imagery depicted in tattoos is expected to be located within the rules and norms of prison culture surrounding acceptable artistic representation of individuality and solidarity on the body. For example, Jewels obtained a tattoo of a swastika in the early 1980's because as he explains, "back then swastikas were against the man....it was a sign of being anti-social and rebellious, not racist". Nevertheless, Jewels was weary of being identified as a white power zealot by other convicts in the inscription of this symbol and as a result, made sure to tattoo the image sideways on his body and leave the ends open. As he explains, "I didn't want other guys to think I'm racially sick towards other racial groups...there's only one enemy in prison and that's the guard, authority figures".

Similar to norms surrounding racial interaction are norms surrounding acceptable/unacceptable crimes among convicts, where sex crimes are deemed to lie among the latter. It appears that this code of behavior also affects the realm of tattooing inside, as seen in Mikey's experiences. For example, Mikey opted to alter a tattoo where a woman looks scared to one where she has fangs, reversing the image of a frightened woman to one where she is in control. As he puts it, "I didn't want anyone to see that and think I was sick, that I'd want to hurt a woman". This statement strongly suggests that Mikey is

conscious of how the prison audience will receive and interpret his identity through tattoos. Dan adds, "I think that any way an individual can express themselves or make any kind of significance about their personality or what kind of lifestyle they like to live, and it's in a non-violent way, it's okay...unless you're getting 'Kill All Women and Children'". Such a statement, along with those of Jewels and Mikey, also suggest that prison culture penetrates the individual in such a way as to affect their morals and values, as well as their expression of these values through tattooing.

Alongside this awareness of 'acceptable' behavior and its artistic representation on the body, is an awareness of acceptable behavior in terms of who one selects as a tattoo artist inside. Within the context of incarceration, it seems as if the subjects interpret the 'mark' of a specific tattoo artist as a sign that one is affiliated with this individual. Given the negative conception of informants within prison culture, as revealed in traditional prison tattoos such as 'Death Before Dishonor', obtaining a tattoo from such a character emerges as a serious no-no inside. In this sense, not only does specific imagery depicting beliefs outside the boundaries of prison culture evoke negative reactions inside, but imagery in general as well, should it be understood that the imagery was obtained from someone failing to live up to the prisoners' moral code.

Several of the lifers' statements as well as the reasoning behind their periodic withdrawal from tattooing inside strongly suggests that the character and reputation of a tattooist beyond his artistic ability is a serious consideration within the prison. In the words of Jewels,

"...I stopped getting tattoos for 5 or 6 years because a lot of the guys doing tattoos ended up being rats....if a guy does a tattoo, then checks in to protective custody, other guys will see the tattoo and recognize the work, and think that I'm a piece of shit too...I don't want these fucking goofs leaving their mark on me, I get choked over it..."

Dan explains,

"...my tattooist inside for years ended up being a fucking rat; at that time, I wanted to cut every fucking thing out of me that he's put on me eh...I was disgusted that I had to walk around the joint wearing the marks of that fucking goof".

While such statements explicitly depict the link between tattooing, the tattooist, social identity and prison culture, the subjects' choice of language here implicitly does as well. It seems as if the tattoo shifts from its conceptualization as 'art' or 'ink' to the more negative conceptualization as a 'mark' once its meaning changes for the wearer. Whereas the words 'art', 'ink' or a 'piece' connote respect or appreciation for the tattoo, the word 'mark' suggests stigma and disdain on the part of the tattooee.

These statements, as well as the language within them, imply that tattoos, on many different levels, can affect your personal identity as well as social identity and status among other convicts, in so far as they reveal elements of oneself to other prisoners, such as associations, affiliations, whether you're 'solid', etc. Because of the lifers' belief in the importance of upholding the prisoner code of honor, obtaining a tattoo from a 'goof' would necessarily constitute a break in this solidarity. This suggests that prison culture penetrates the individual in a way that he is always aware of how he'll reflect on his peers. As a result, trust and respect seem to be central elements of the lifer's quest for a tattoo artist inside. Once located, such elements appear to be

strengthened through increased involvement with the artist and tattooing, establishing a bond of sorts.

Establishment of a Bond Between the Tattooee and the Tattooist

The establishment of a bond/relationship between the tattooist and the tattooee is a shift that appears to occur once in the context of incarceration. In the 'before prison' time frame, the bond created through tattooing appeared to be located between the subject and the person he obtained a tattoo with. Moreover, the relationship to the tattooist seemed to be irrelevant to the experience and meaning of the tattoo. In contrast, it seems as if once inside, the experience of getting a tattoo now takes on a new meaning, where the act of obtaining ink now constitutes spending quality time with another person, i.e. the tattooist, in a non-sexual yet intimate manner. The bonding aspect of tattooing seems to shift from that which exists between those obtaining the tattoo at the same time to that which exists between the inker and the inkee. In terms of numbers, over half of the subjects alluded to the meaning and importance of the relationship with the tattooist inside. In Mikey's case, he allowed his friend to experiment with tattooing on him, even though this guy had never done tattoos before. He also let his friend choose the designs. Mikey seems to display a lot of trust towards the tattooist, which in itself can constitute a bond of sorts. As he explains it, "when you have a friend that does tattoos inside, it's like being with him...it's like friendship stuff". Dan suggests similar thinking in the statement,

"like a lot of times a tattooist in jail...if you know a tattooist and he may respect you and you respect him and you got some kind of camaraderie or whatever it's like, "oh, I gotta work on ya man! you got to let me fuckin

tag ya or something...like my buddy Al, he had to tag me before I left max and he gave me that, you know what I mean?"

He also adds, "if you find a tattooist in here and there's like a friendship right...I trusted him so much, he knew what I wanted". He even goes on to say that he asked a tattooist inside to sign his name at the bottom of the backpiece he had completed on him, "to show him the respect I thought he deserved for doing it. I said, "I want you to brand my work". Dan goes as far as refusing to touch up a shabby tattoo because of the respect he holds for the individual that did the tattoo. He says, "I've had so many opportunities to have it covered and touched up but I said no, it's like, no...that was Billy the Kid...it's like, he went with it, and we made the tattoo gun together, you know what I mean?"

In looking at the meaning of the subjects' statements, it appears as if there is a bonding that takes place both in the *act* of tattooing, i.e. spending time together, closeness, trust, and in the *end product*, i.e. the tattoo itself once completed, in the sense that one now sports the other's mark and permanently displays their artwork. In this way, both the act of tattooing and the tattoo itself become a way of expressing friendship inside. In attempting to account for the heightened value that these relationships seem to take on inside, one may look to the context of the prison itself to offer an explanation. In considering the ways in which relationships are established on the street and within the prison, it seems as if on the street, relationships are allowed more freedom and avenues to develop. Whereas on the street, one can engage in a multitude of activities in order to bond and become closer with friends, within the context of imprisonment, such activities are rendered more difficult. In prison, relationships are challenged and limited due to incapacitation, physical barriers, rules, norms, etc... As such, it is as if tattooing becomes

a way of 'doing' something together, a way of spending time together. In consideration of the subjects' statements, it seems as if for many lifers, time spent with a tattooist can act as a friendship solidifier, its end product the external signifier of mutual respect and trust.

This finding may also shed light as to the feelings of loss and anger experienced by the subjects when a trusted tattooist ends up checking in to protective custody. The high value that the subjects place on their relationship with tattooists inside may explain why subjects describe feeling "choked" and "marked" upon discovering that a 'friend' has disvalued the bond established through tattooing.

Tattooing as Resistance and Rebellion

While the above finding suggests that tattooing may construct a bond between the artist and the wearer as well as within the prison community in general, another finding surrounding the incarceration time frame conversely highlights tattooing as a form of resistance and/or rebellion towards the 'man'. While only one lifer explicitly states rebellion as the intended purpose of tattooing inside, many others allude to it in their statements or express it through their tattoos. Interestingly, these statements suggest a non - linear contestation of authority, as this resistance can be interpreted as operating on several different levels and dimensions within the context of incarceration.

For one, tattooing is forbidden in prison and as a result, any involvement with the practice may be sanctioned by the institution. On this level just getting away with the act itself, whether receiving or giving a tattoo in prison, can constitute a rebellion of sorts.

Jewels explains that he was attracted to tattooing early in his life because he had to “get away with it to get them”. He explains,

“...when I came in, I didn't have any tattoos and all of a sudden I got tattoos; start showing off, they can't do nothin...it's almost like I got one over on them, something I got away with that they didn't notice. I like to do things just to spite authority figures”.

Red adds, “I think a lot of guys feel they're getting one over on the ‘man’ by getting tattoos, you know, putting it to CSC”.

On another level, resistance is constituted in the wearing of ink itself, in that the presence of tattoos on the body is generally looked down upon by mainstream society. While popular culture defines which elements constitute an ‘acceptable’ presentation of self, tattoos in the western world have historically been interpreted as symbols which push such definitions. Due to such perceptions, tattoos are commonly interpreted as a type of rebellion against mainstream culture. As such, whether intentional or not, the adoption of multiple visible tattoos is generally understood as a ‘refusal to conform’ to the ‘system’. The lifers’ elaborations suggest that they are aware of such understandings, and although concerned about others’ perceptions of them on the street, continue to obtain tattoos. Moreover, the subjects’ decisions to continue to obtain tattoos regardless of stereotypical interpretations suggest that the meaning and value of tattoos to both the individual and the prison community as a whole outweighs the consequences of bearing tattoos in mainstream society. In the words of K, “I know that square johns are gonna think things about me when they see my tattoos, but you know what? Fuck em’. They don't know me, so I really don't care what they think of me....I plan to surround myself

with people who are positive anyways, so, if you don't want to talk to me because of my tattoos, I really don't give a fuck, don't talk to me....".

On yet another level, the images depicted in tattoos and/or the message behind them can also encompass a type of resistance. Whereas one's identity as a 'tattooed person' may or may not be called into question by mainstream society, the imagery depicted in many of the lifers' tattoos undoubtedly transmit an explicit message to the observer.

In response to their experiences with the judicial system and long-term incarceration, many of the subjects seem to obtain tattoos inside which depict their contempt and/or contestation of power relations, the prison experience, and the justice system as a whole. Whereas the processes of the prison have historically attempted to construct a relationship between power and knowledge whereby the prison constitutes 'the subject who knows' and the prisoner 'the object to be known' (Foucault), the imagery depicted in many of the lifers' tattoos seem to question and contest this relationship. More specifically, this resistance is achieved through a depiction of images which attempt to reverse the power-knowledge relationship, whereby the lifer now becomes the 'subject who knows' and the prison/society 'the object to be known'. The permanency of the ink may also play a role in resisting power relations, in so far as its long lasting character displays a continuous and overt objection to the status quo.

To illustrate, Jewels explains that he felt "angry and bitter" upon receiving his life sentence. Feeling the need to express and affirm his feelings of betrayal by society and the courts, upon entering prison, he inscribed "Fuck Society Before it Fucks You" on his forearm. Another lifer, Len, tattooed a 13 1/2 on his body upon beginning his life bit,

signifying "12 jurors, 1 judge, and half a chance". Another lifer named Joe obtained a tattoo which reads "guilty until proven innocent" during the first few years of his incarceration. While Brad states that he himself does not obtain tattoos with rebellious intent, he does note that there are a lot of angry people in prison for whom tattoos may function as a means of resistance. He says, "I feel that a lot of people here feel they've been fucked over in some way or another, whether it's by society or however and I guess they feel that [tattooing] maybe has some form of rebellion to it".

While many people who have not had direct contact with the legal system or any of its apparatuses commonly conceive of it as a just and honorable one, such tattoos clearly call into question the workings of a system experienced first hand by the subjects. More specifically, tattoos which proclaim such things as 'Guilty Until Proven Innocent' suggest a 'true' knowledge of the system, one which runs counter to 'official knowledge' and contests its rhetoric of impartiality and objectivity.

III. Experiences and Perceptions of Tattoos and Tattooing Today

Having discussed the lifers' experiences with tattooing prior to incarceration and its evolution throughout their sentence, it is now necessary to discuss how the subjects perceive and experience tattooing today.

An analysis of the lifers' current understanding and involvement with tattooing is central to this chapter, as it is only through such a time frame analysis that the evolution in the meaning and value of tattooing for the lifers may become apparent. Perhaps more importantly, an analysis which traces the lifers' experiences with tattooing over time (dating from pre-prison days to the present time) permits one to explore whether the prison and its experience has had an effect on the lifers' perceptions and use of tattoos within the context of incarceration. Such an analysis seems overdue, given the mainstream as well as academic tendency to locate the decision to obtain tattoos within the individual and his/her character. In order to complement and expand such understandings, retrospective interviews organized along the lines of time allow for explanations which look beyond the individual to the impact of social context and material location upon experience and expression.

In looking at how the lifers' perceive tattooing today in comparison to both pre-incarceration days and the first few years of their life sentence, it appears as though there have been shifts in the collective as well as individual evaluations of tattooing. Let it be noted again that such shifts may be partially attributable to such things as age and maturation; however, the lifers' retrospections concerning their past and current perceptions of tattooing suggest that evolutions in the meaning, value, and appeal of

tattoos can be located within the prison experience and more specifically, the different 'stages' one experiences in serving a life sentence.

Personal Identity

In looking to the first major finding as to how the lifers perceive tattooing 'today', it seems as if the overwhelming majority of subjects, i.e. 6 of 8, conceive of their inkings as a reflection of their sense of self; as constituents of their personal identity.

Interestingly, all subjects who elaborated such feelings also noted that only *certain* tattoos represent part of who they are today. For a variety of different reasons, tattoos obtained before prison tend to constitute those inkings that the lifers exclude from their personal identity. Often obtained in haste and without much personal meaning, these early tattoos seem to hold little retrospective significance for the subjects today. As a result, many of these early tattoos have since been covered or reworked by an artist in prison.

In contrast, the subjects suggested that tattoos obtained within the prison are truer to how they see themselves, more accurately reflecting their character and experiences both within and outside the prison. More specifically, it seems as if the subjects allocate more significance to those tattoos obtained by a 'solid' friend within the prison, and designed in conjunction with the artist. Tattoos obtained in memory of loved ones, or in commemoration of a death/loss whether inside or outside the prison, also represent the type of art held close to the subjects' hearts.

In the words of Mikey,

“my prison tattoos will always be a reminder of my time inside, I’ll always remember where I got them...even though none of them directly represent the prison in design, they reflect my time here...they’re who I am, I’ve spent most of my life here...”

K explains, **“my prison tattoos are who I am, they stem from your experiences here, and experiences are heavy in prison, everybody tattoos here to express that...”**. “ Len elaborates, **“while I was in prison, tattoos were a way of defining for myself who I was...most of my tattoos are real biker tattoos, cause I was a biker, they defined who I was, they identified what I was doing...”**.

Interestingly, Len experienced an evolution in personal identity upon his release from prison. He explains that he no longer identifies himself as a biker and as such, no longer considers his tattoos as representative of his personal identity. However, he does note that during his incarceration and self-identification as a biker, his tattoos did indeed represent who he was and how he saw himself.

Biographical Function

Just as the lifers tend to conceive of their tattoos as representative of their current personal identity, they also seem to conceptualize their inkings as part of their retrospective biography. More accurately, five of the eight lifers interviewed explained that their tattoos represent a diary of sorts, evoking memories and experiences particular to a specific period or moment in time. Four out of these five men explained that their prison tattoos reflect a period in their life like any other, vividly reminding them of their relationships, hardships, and will to survive the prison experience.

Rick explains,

“you know, prison tattoos signify a time in your life. You know, something that you can look at and you remember where you got it and what was going on in your life at the time. I guess it’s like keeping a diary of sorts; my tattoos signify a period of time. The first ones was when I was young, the ones after that is like family life, and the ones after are club life....it’s like pictures or photographs or something”.

K similarly alludes to the biographical aspect of tattooing in his elaborations. He explains,

“I did that tattoo 4 or 5 years ago, and so in these years a lot has happened, in here a lot more things happen in 4 or 5 years than they do on the street. The tattoo just reminds me that that’s how I used to think back then. It’s like when you get things and you look back in photo albums like, “oh my god, I used to wear that” . That’s what I was thinking at the time though, that’s how I was acting and stuff like that, so it means something to me...they represent that that’s what I wanted on my body at that time, a decision I made”.

Red’s discussion resounds similar feelings to those elaborated by K and Rick. However, he explains that he has chosen to abstain from tattooing in prison, as he does not deem the prison experience worthy of its inscription and recall through visual, permanent reminders on the skin. Despite his abstinence from prison tattooing, he explains that his tattoos also serve a biographical function. He says,

“to me today, looking back, my tattoos represent my lifestyle at different points in time. They represent my married years, my working years, and my motorcycling years... to me, there is nothing about this place [prison] worth remembering or making permanent through tattoos. It’s all negativity, and it’s not a period I want to dwell on...there is nothing here worthy of inking onto your skin ”.

The research participants’ conception of tattoos as symbols which evoke powerful memories and times in their lives may in part explain why subjects chose to cover up or

reject those tattoos reminding them of a relationship lost, or of a betrayal by a particular tattoo artist.

Commemoration/Meaningful Events

Aside from the biographical aspect of tattooing, it appears as if many of the lifers currently employ tattooing as a means of commemorating loved ones who have grown distant or close friends/family members who have passed away during their incarceration, whether it be in prison or on the street. This trend appears to be specific to those lifers in the latter years of their sentence, as those beginning their sentences appear to be more concerned with the accumulation of tattoos which proclaim a particular element of their personal or social identity, or masculinity. It appears as if all subjects involve themselves with the accumulation of identity type tattoos early on in their sentence, having not yet been familiarized or exposed to the extent and volume of losses common to prolonged incarceration.

As the subjects accumulate more 'time in' on their life sentence, tattooing as a representation of loss appears to become more common. The positive nature of this correlation may suggest that the experience of loss and disintegrating relationships tends to increase as a function of time served. The subjects' elaborations seem to illustrate this relationship, suggesting that as one grows farther into their sentence, it becomes harder to maintain relationships with loved ones in the outside world. Moreover, the lifers explain that while imprisoned, it is impossible to attend funerals or mourn the death of a loved one in the company of others experiencing the same loss. As such, tattoos become a

more feasible way of mourning, showing respect, or simply remembering a particular individual or relationship.

Although half of the subjects have recently obtained a tattoo commemorating a certain meaningful relationship in their lives, two other lifers who have not yet done so reveal that they plan or expect to in the near or distant future.

Mikey, who has already served twelve years of his sentence, recently obtained tattoos of his wife and daughter's names. Mikey explains that he and his wife have been having problems in their relationship lately, and that "this tattoo is for her". Because Mikey obtained the tattoo 'for his wife', the inking can be interpreted as a means of mending the relationship and the strains it has endured over the years, due to his prolonged incarceration. Mikey also shared that he is planning to obtain a tattoo of a tree on his body with all his family's names. He says, "I want to get a separate piece devoted to my mother, because she passed way while I was inside". In light of this statement, tattooing seems to represent a way of affirming the significance of his family relationships for himself, as well the respect he holds for the people for whom he is inscribing it for.

Dan, who has served 19 years of his sentence, also discusses his future tattoo plans. His plans, like Mikey's, also involve the commemoration of the death of loved ones. He expresses his affection for friends he has lost and the significance of the relationships in his life in the following:

"I've been thinking of getting something on my chest here...I got 2 friends that died, one at Millhaven, and one that did a lot of time with me but died on the street in 98'. I know before I die that I am going to put something on me for them. I mean, inseparable friendships. Our association's only been in prison, but a lot of years in prison...when one of my brothers

passes away, I'm gonna get ink for them right? And sometimes I think I'm gonna get something made, something very unique, and just use initials, first and last initials. Have them in some kind of scroll along those lines and, 'You Will Always Be With Me and Not Forgotten' kind of thing right?"

Jewels, who has served 16 years of his sentence, recently completed a tattoo commemorating Prisoner Justice Day. In explaining the symbolism of the inking, Jewels says, "it has deep fuckin' significance for me". He says,

"there is three tombstones here with initials and dates representing the names and years that my three closest friends died in prison. I was fuckin' choked man, like, heavy. Two were overdoses and one was a suicide. I couldn't believe it man...this here is blood from a gunshot, which represents a good friend of mine who got shot and killed in the prison yard at Millhaven in 87' by a guard. This is me here, struggling to climb out from all the rubble I've buried myself under after so many years in prison. This tattoo is all fuckin' prison man, everything that's got me stuck... drugs, death, suicides...because of my buddies man, I made a point of having it finished for August 10". [Prisoner Justice Day].

K, who has served 7 years of his life 25 sentence explains that he is starting to experience difficulties in maintaining relationships with his friends and family members on the street. In honor of his deteriorating relationship with his beloved sister, K inscribed her name on his chest a couple of years ago. He says, "I don't see my sister anymore, like I don't see her at all, so it's like, I don't even get to talk to her period. She's just like grown up now and she's older and independent and all this crap so I don't get to see her or nothin. So it's just a nice tattoo. It's also the only one that really means something to me". In speaking of commemorative type tattoos, K alludes to the expectation of further losses and negative experiences in prison. He says,

"Guys get all kinds of stuff in prisons all over the world stemming from their experiences, you know? You got guys whose girlfriends left them a couple of years ago while they were in the hole locked up and probably

overdosed and they lost their friend last week who overdosed on the block; and so everybody here tattoos something to remind them and let them know that this is an experience they had and this is something that they want to keep with them right? You see all the people in here with the 'Rest in Peace' right? I myself don't have thousands of memories like that yet, you know, like where I had so much I feel like...but I know I will, it's just a matter of time. Like I got this thing with my sister's name, my only thing like that yet, and the rest is just for myself..."

Regrets

Although particular tattoos may possess great value or meaning to the wearer in terms of identity, relationships, honor, etc., the lifers clearly expressed that they currently hold many regrets concerning their inkings. The regrets expressed by the lifers can be categorized into one of three areas, these being the quality or imagery of specific tattoos, the fear of identification and lastly, the anticipated reactions and perceptions of those in the outside world.

In response to such regrets, it appears as if the majority of lifers obtain cover-up work. Although most lifers voluntarily seek such cover-ups, it seems as though the acquisition of certain pieces have been initiated in response to pressure exerted by outside forces. It appears that when such pressures are exerted by the prison's authority figures, i.e. NPB, CSC, the lifers tend to opt for political imagery.

A) Aesthetics/Spontaneity

In regards to specific tattoos, five out of the eight lifers interviewed shared that they regretted obtaining *specific* tattoos, most often due to the lack of thought or meaning that went into their inscription. The subjects also expressed that they often wished they

had researched the tattooist's artistic ability prior to obtaining their early tattoos. Interestingly, those tattoos bearing regret were most obtained prior to the prison experience. In response to feelings of regret and unhappiness concerning esthetics, four out of five lifers got their tattoos covered or reworked in prison.

Mikey explains that looking back, he laughs at the tattoos he once thought were cool. He says, "it's funny, I got to walk around in here with this stupid thing on my arm all the time...it looks like his wings got zapped or something..." [speaking of the eagle he obtained before prison]. Similarly, Rick explains, "I regret my first tattoo because no thought went into it, it was just off the wall... I'm not really impressed with them...if I was gonna do it, I would have done it differently". Brad adds, "once I got to prison and developed a new appreciation for tattooing as a true art form, I really started to become unhappy with my early tattoos; I tried to cover them up as fast and as best I could".

Interestingly, those tattoos evaluated as esthetically displeasing by the subjects were kept on the skin when the inkings were obtained in prison by a friend or fellow prisoner for whom the subject had much respect for. This is not the case with poorer quality tattoos obtained on the street. Instead, the vast majority of subjects obtained cover-ups of such tattoos once inside.

B) Identification

Aside from esthetic regrets, the lifers also expressed concern regarding identification based upon their tattoos. More specifically, five out of the eight lifers explained that they regretted their tattoos out of fear that the 'man' could easily formulate a description of them should they experience future conflicts with the law on the street.

Having had many encounters with law enforcement agents in the past, the lifers seem to conceptualize their tattoos as the stigmatizing catalysts of these encounters. As Rick puts it, "I regret getting the first one cause then you're stamped, you have like an identifying mark, they know who you are, it's like a serial number...". Brad's elaborations concerning tattoo location also allude to concerns regarding identification. He says, "I would never get tattoos on my hands, neck or face; you can't hide out on the street if that's what you plan on doing, you can't blend in, it's easy identification". Jewels adds, "now, sometimes I wish I'd never got them. For one reason, identification, it's like carrying a piece of i.d. twenty-four seven on you". Red explains that he has largely abstained from obtaining tattoos inside due to identification-related concerns. He says, "once you get a tattoo, that's it, you're marked for life, they have a record or whatever, if you're in trouble with the law, there's no way of hiding the fact...there's no way around it, you're identified, it's an identifying mark..."

C) Social Identity

Besides identification-related concerns, the lifers expressed that they were just as fearful and/or worried about anticipated reactions to their tattoos upon release. Whereas the majority of lifers acknowledged that tattoos are accepted and welcomed among the prison community, the same number also expressed doubt as to such favorable reactions in the outside world.

In terms of inter-sample distinctions, 'time served' appears to have an impact on the extent to which the subjects express such concerns, as those lifers approaching parole seem to express the most anxiety regarding other peoples' reactions. While those lifers

beginning their sentence admit that they worry very little about a time where they will be in contact with 'straight johns', those lifers nearing parole (6 of 8 interviewees) reveal that they often worry whether their tattoos will stigmatize them in the free world. More specifically, the latter seem to be especially concerned with tattoos obtained in visible places, as well as those tattoos depicting imagery which they feel is likely to be interpreted as negative or hostile to the objective eye. This finding may explain why most subjects obtain the majority of their tattoos within the first 2/3 of their sentences, at a time when contact with the outside world seems intangible.

Throughout the interviews and the subjects' elaborations concerning their fear of stigmatization, the men often alluded to differences between the personal intent and meaning behind a tattoo and its likely social interpretation. Similarly, the lifers also alluded to differences between social reactions within the prison, as compared to the anticipated reactions of the outside world. While the lifers tended to evaluate the prison population's reactions to tattooing as favorable, the majority of lifers expressed that they do not anticipate a warm reaction from the general public. Mikey is a lifer who makes such a distinction. He elaborates,

"the street is not like in here...people on the street are intimidated by them more...guys on the street will look at you and you get paranoid, like walking through the mall with a tanktop on, people will look at you funny cause they're not used to it. They don't understand it".

Mikey also shares his personal concerns regarding his prison inkings. He says,

"tattoos in prison I'm getting I'll probably regret it later when I get out because they'll probably have a backlash, you know, jobs or something like that. I'll have problems with that or people saying stupid things that don't understand, you know?"

Dan, a lifer who has served 18 years, also worries about the social interpretation of his tattoos in the outside world. However, Dan is not so much concerned with his social identity as a tattooed person 'in general', but with the social interpretation of specific tattoos he's obtained over the years inside. For instance, Dan obtained a tattoo of a swastika while incarcerated in the early 1980's, which he now regrets. Although in the 80's, according to Dan, the prison population largely interpreted the emblem as an anti-authoritarian symbol, Dan's concern in the year 2001 is that the outside world will interpret the marking as a racist symbol. In his words, "people in here know that I'm not a racist, it's just a thing against the man...but on the street, a lot of people will probably take serious fuckin' offense to that tattoo. I regret getting that because of that, because I don't want to come off as rude and offensive".

Like Dan, Jewels expresses regret regarding the acquisition of a specific tattoo. Like Dan, Jewels' regrets are also attributable to the reactions he anticipates from the general population upon his release. Despite the personal meaning and value Jewels still attaches to the tattoo, (in so far as it expresses his personal experiences and mindframe at a certain period in time), he fears that the casual observer will misinterpret his intentions through his/her analysis of the tattoo. In the words of Jewels,

"I regret my "Fuck Society Before it Fucks You" tattoo because these people look at it like, this guy's walking around, he doesn't care, fuck society and all that shit....they think I'm pretty demented....I think people are taken aback by it, sometimes, they'll take it in a threatening manner".

In response to his concerns about social perceptions, Dan has partially covered up his tattoo with another design. He says, "I have to take it off because I'm a lifer, even though I don't want to. I can't have it exposed in front of the parole board".

Jewels' statement seems to suggest that his decision to obtain a cover-up was largely influenced by outside pressures. Even though he personally wants to keep the tattoo, he has been forced to weigh this attachment against the possibility of parole and a positive 'risk' assessment. Due to Jewels' awareness of such subtle coercion, he says he has chosen to cover the design with a Prisoner Justice Day tattoo. He explains that August 10th imagery is standard practice in prison when having been 'instructed' to cover up a specific design by the man. This practice seems to highlight the context of incarceration as one which embodies highly dynamic power relations. For example, although one may be coerced to cover-up a tattoo by the prison authority, the design selected will nonetheless reflect the prisoner's location within and contestation of the power relations imbedded in the prison experience.

Health Concerns

Aside from relating various regrets and concerns regarding the acquisition of tattoos, i.e. anticipated social perception of tattoos, issues of identification, lack of meaning....the lifers also express that they practice more caution when obtaining tattoos today. The caution referred to here not only applies to the thought and research that goes into the tattoo selection process but also to the hygiene and health precautions taken.

Whether it be due to maturity, public awareness & education campaigns, or personal experience, five out of the eight lifers explain that they are now concerned with the legalization/decriminalization aspect of tattooing in prison. The newly found concern among the lifers is revealed in statements which depict impatience and even outrage at the lack of Harm Reduction initiatives undertaken in regards to jailhouse tattooing.

Things such as needle exchange, licensing, and professional sterilization mechanisms represent those measures most commonly referred to by the lifers.

In the words of Jewels, “nowadays, getting a tattoo in prison is like playing Russian Roulette....right now I’m trying to push the issue with Healthcare at CSC...I think a prison-operated tattoo shop would lead to better hygiene and training and tattooing techniques...”. Red, the lifer who has abstained from the practice while behind bars says, “I’ve never gotten any tattoos in prison and I won’t, ever, get a tattoo in prison, it’s just too dangerous. Too easy to contract Hep C or any kind of disease, it scares me and I won’t do it...”

Brad, unlike Red, is a young lifer who has obtained substantial work behind bars and plans to continue doing so throughout his sentence. Despite differences in the two men’s involvement in prison tattooing, Brad expresses concerns about future tattoos which closely reflect Red’s reasons for avoiding tattooing inside. In the words of Brad,

“it’s crazy, as long as there continues to be prisons, there will always be tattooing that goes on in prison...as long as there’s been prisons, there’s been tattooing in prisons, it’s not something that’s ever gonna stop, so I don’t understand what’s stopping them from opening a shop in the joint or at least something to make it less risky....they say they’re concerned about our health but if they really were, they’d do something to really cut down the amount of disease people catch from tattooing in here”.

Due to the lack of response to such proposed initiatives, the lifers explain that they are relegated to taking the ‘available’ safeguards in order to reduce the risks of contracting Hepatitis C and HIV when obtaining a tattoo. Although by no means foolproof, the lifers explained that they engage in a variety of measures ranging from making one’s own tattoo gun to providing the tattooist with a new guitar string and ink, to

bleaching all parts of the homemade instrument. One lifer is so weary of the health risks associated with the illegal thus underground practice that he has chosen to abstain from all tattooing while behind bars. Although he has plans to obtain a tattoo of his girlfriend's name, he has chosen to delay the tattoo until he makes parole.

Tattoos as Evidence of Delinquency/Criminality

Aside from expressing emotions ranging from disbelief and lack of comprehension to outrage regarding the restriction of tattooing in prisons, let it be noted here that a substantial portion of the lifers also offered what they perceived to be explanatory factors as to its forbidden nature in institutions.

Although all lifers acknowledged that tattoos can act as resistance to the prison's role, techniques and power structure, i.e. attempts to correct prisoners, they also suggested that tattoos serve the ends of CSC in the long term. Brad explains, "you know that the man looks down on the tattooing that goes on in here. They just see it as proof that criminals are big risk takers. Tattoos are seen as risky both because of the diseases that are transmitted and because of how people look at you when you get out". Brad's line of thinking here seems to exemplify Foucault's discourse on the 'delinquent' and the 'supposed failure of prison' as integral to its functioning (*see* Foucault, 1978).

Despite an awareness of 'the man's' opinion of tattooing, it seems as if the lifers consider the nature and impact of such drawbacks in relation to the personal meaning, significance and potential they attach to tattooing. In comparing the short and long-term repercussions of tattooing within the prison to one's personal feelings and goals, it appears as if the latter typically outweighs the former for the lifers. According to the

lifers' elaborations on the subject, the need for self-determination and expression are central considerations in the decision to engage or abstain from tattooing inside. In the words of Rick, "I don't care what they say about me... I would rather tattoo for my own reasons than not tattoo for someone else's".

Although seemingly useful in expressing and somewhat resisting the prison's attempts to discipline and conform, as Brad highlights, CSC has found the means to appropriate the meaning and significance of prison tattooing. Not only does the practice constitute rule breaking behaviour within the prison, thus falling subject to distinct repercussions, CSC also endows the practice with symptomatic significance. In an industry whose very existence is dependent upon the identification of 'risk', tattoos have become useful tools in ensuring that such identification is continually renewed. As opposed to interpreting tattooing as an available/appealing form of expression in a controlled environment, for self-sustaining purposes, it is more beneficial for the prison to interpret tattoos as the external indicators of delinquency and criminality. More specifically, tattoos are used as evidence of risk taking behavior, and other 'problematic' criminal tendencies. As such, it becomes easier to establish a fundamental difference between criminals and non-criminals, thus legitimizing the prison's existence, function, and stake in correcting such individuals.

The forbidden nature of tattooing in prison can only assist in the prison's self-justification process, for not only are the 'delinquents' engaging in an activity that is largely frowned upon in mainstream society, they're also engaging in rule breaking behavior, further evidencing such things as impulsivity, anti-authoritarian tendencies, non-conformity, and other traits typically associated with criminality.

Jewels' experiences with both prison psychiatrists and the Parole Board seems to exemplify the prison's appropriation of prison tattoos. Despite having explained the meaning behind his "Fuck society" tattoo, Jewels claims that a psychiatric profile indicated an 80% chance of re-offending, an evaluation he feels was largely based on the significance of the tattoo as determined by the 'expert'. Among the tattoo centered commentaries, Jewels was assessed as posing a high risk for future violence.

Jewels explains,

"I told the guy I had full support for parole, and a job lined up on the street. When he asked me about the tattoo, I explained that I was a 20 year old kid just getting a life sentence, bitter towards society, thought I knew it all. I explained that that's how I felt at the time, and that I no longer felt that way. But they won't let it go, they want to dwell in the past".

The formulation of an 80% risk assessment on the basis of tattoo content seems to evidence that tattoos can and are being used for diagnostic purposes in certain contexts, as suggested in the psychiatric literature on prison tattoos (see Grumet, Di Francesco). In light of the lifers' elaborations concerning the subjective significance of their tattoos, the use of tattoos as objective diagnostic criteria emerges as a questionable practice. While specific tattoo imagery may suggest an identification with criminality and 'badness' in general, the use of tattoos in predicting behaviour and diagnosing personality and/or mental health emerges as problematic. The expert's imposition of objective meaning in the form of diagnoses seems inadequate at best, given the neglect of context, experience, and subjective meaning sought in such processes.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the prison and the experience of incarceration have an effect upon the meaning, value and appeal of tattoos among prisoners. Evidence that certain meanings and qualities of the subjects' experiences with tattooing emerged as result of the prison can be seen is the shifts in significance that have occurred over time, the nature of the art itself, and the context/lived realities in which the images emerged from. As interpreted through my theoretical and analytical frameworks, the subjects' elaborations indicated that tattoos become a way of expressing and outwardly affirming experiences altered by the prison and/or specific to the prison, such as boredom, acceptance, identification with prisoners, criminals and tough men, frustration, powerlessness, rebellion, resistance, and commemoration. An analysis of retrospective interview data indicated that such themes quite specifically relate to the subjects' interpretation and experience of a life sentence, and its simultaneous experience and expression through tattooing.

Although the prominence and prevalence of such themes among the subjects indicate that the prison and its experience affect the value and appeal of tattoos, so does the evolutionary process in which subjects experienced such qualities. From pre-prison days to the present, the significance of the practice and its symbols has changed with the subjects' continued exposure and adaptation to the world of the prison. Whereas tattoos, regardless of the subject's age upon incarceration, were only of limited significance to the research participants before prison, the subjects currently express that the inkings have much more meaning for them today. Although, as stated in earlier chapters, factors such as maturation and character may also be credited with explanatory power for the shifts in

the subjects' perceptions, prison has undoubtedly affected the prisoners' evaluations and conception of tattooing and tattoos.

For instance, I found that while confined to the rules and boundaries of the prison, tattoos become a feasible way for one to express affection, loss, sorrow, anger, resistance, rebellion, masculinity, sadness, respect, honor, as well as a variety of other feelings amplified by prison life. Moreover, the acquisition and collection of tattoos becomes a way of spending time together, a way of displaying both individuality and solidarity, a way of remembering, a way of affirming identity, freedom and self-ownership, a way of expressing the internalization of prison culture's norms and values.

Although the majority of subjects expressed distinct regrets in relation to their tattoos, regrets were most often associated with fears of stigmatization and identification upon release. Very few tattoos were disvalued due to a lack of personal significance or meaning. When they were, it was most often due to the tattoos' (ir)relevancy to the subjects' current life experience, in the sense that some tattoos no longer reflected a part of life that they wished to remember, or how they currently sees themselves.

To further elaborate on the developmental aspect of such experiences, I found that shifts that occurred in the subjects' conceptions of tattooing over time can be attributed to the prison on many different levels, such as the individual's experience of his sentence, the dynamics of prison culture, and the institution itself. It would be false to imply that these findings speak to the entire Canadian prison population, however, one can expect that they are somewhat indicative of lifers' experiences, given their quality as a typically distinct group within the prison.

One saw that tattoos can also function as a bond in prison, one which constructs a type of solidarity and camaraderie among the prison community as well as one which establishes a relationship between the individual obtaining the tattoo and the tattooist.

One can also see that the prison can, at times, operate to shift the power knowledge nexus in such a way that prisoners' attempts to define the relationship are appropriated and removed from the context of original intent. As a result, the personal significance of the lifers' tattoos was often re-constructed by the disciplinary institution to reflect evidence that the offender was indeed a delinquent, an individual with profound distinctions from 'law-abiding' citizens. Tattoos have thus become a mechanism in the processes of the prison, a symbol that is now inadvertently functional to its regimes, schemas, and ideology. The inscriptions on the prisoner's skin can now be used to ascertain, as well as affirm, criminality and pathology.

Although it has been reported that legalizing tattooing in prisons would serve to decrease the health risks associated with obtaining illicit tattoos (Maharaj, 1996), I leave it up to future research to explore legalization's effect upon the resistance and rebellion function of tattoos. The fact that tattooing would be permitted, perhaps even endorsed by the prison, raises questions about the meaning of tattoos for prisoners in the future. The hypothesis that legalization may have an impact on tattoos as symbols of freedom, contestation, masculinity, identity, camaraderie, solidarity, etc. stems from the assumption that tattoos would no longer necessarily constitute defiance of the control, surveillance, and regulations of the institution.

Although the legalization and subsequent tolerance of prison tattooing may alter the role and value of tattoos in terms of defiance / resistance of prison policy and power,

its legalization may also negatively impact the institution. For example, the act of condoning tattoos may displace and direct the prisoner's resistance efforts to areas which may prove to be more detrimental to the institution and its functioning, i.e. riots, escape attempts, etc. As such, one may expect that the legalization of prison tattooing would imply both positive and negative outcomes for the institution as well as the incarcerated.

I also leave it up to future research to examine how women in prison perceive their bodies and different forms of expression transmitted through the body. If one were to pick up where I have left off, they may begin their research with the hypothesis that women also engage themselves gender-influenced routines in the attempt to 'do' femininity, in whatever specific form these routines may take. One may even expect to find that females in prison have constructed and draw from a particular variety of hegemonic femininity, one available and desirable to women due to gender expectations, material location and experiences of the prison.

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APPENDIX A

FACTUAL SHEET

****The purpose of this factual sheet is to obtain any additional information that may not have been included or discussed in the oral interview.**

****Please note that you may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.**

1. How old are you?
2. What nationality are you?
3. What is your marital status?
4. Do you have any children?
5. If so, how many, and how old are they?
6. Who do they reside with?
7. Are you trained in any particular profession or trade?
8. If so, did you, or do you currently work in the field you are skilled in?
9. Parents' profession?
10. How many years have you served of your life sentence?
11. If the life bit is not the first term you have served in prison, how many terms have you previously served in prison?
12. How many tattoos do you have?
13. How old were you when you got your first tattoo?
14. How many were done: a) before prison?
b) during your life sentence?
c) other, i.e. during another bit?