

EMBODIED IDENTITIES AND POSITIONAL CHOICES: HOW TATTOOES CONSTRUCT IDENTITY AND NEGOTIATE A TATTOOED STATUS WITHIN SOCIETY

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Abstract.

This study was concerned with the ideological implications of taking on a tattooed status within a hegemonic order that proscribes the limits of bodily expression. A discourse analysis method was used to draw out the ways in which seventeen tattooees made meaning of, and justified, the adoption of a tattooed status, and negotiated everyday life as a visibly marked individual. Participants were interviewed by means of individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and internet correspondence. All represented their choice to become tattooed primarily in terms of an individualist discourse; however, several used their tattoos to augment subcultural identities, thus using their tattoos to express shared values and norms as well as to consolidate personal experience. Participants attempted to create positive social identities as tattooees by stigma management strategies such as dissociating themselves from negative stereotypes, constructing tattoos as a legitimate art form, and intensifying a rebellious stance towards the hegemonic order.

Key words: *bodies, identity, positioning, tattoos, negotiation*

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL OVERVIEW.

This study will examine how tattooees use the cultural resources at their disposal (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to create desired identities in our late modern age. The conceptual backdrop will be an understanding that tattoos are both a permanent commitment which “locks” the individual into a particular category and “space” in society, and a communication about the self to oneself which facilitates transformation in the sense of self-identity and subjective experience (Vale & Juno, 1989; Rosenblatt, 1997). We will not look for monolithic, final “explanations” for why tattoos are acquired, but instead will focus on the way in which the tattoo is *used* in terms of a broader consideration of identity and position within society.

Any consideration of permanent body modification raises two crucial issues: the use of the body, and the malleability versus stability of identity. We therefore examine two broad fields of theory in addition to a more specific focus on the tattoo literature: 1) approaches to the body within social theory, and 2) approaches to identity, with a particular emphasis on reputation management, stigma and the construction of deviance.

The body.

Recently, the phenomenon of the body has come under intense scrutiny from the social science disciplines. Giddens (1991) argues that in conditions of late modernity, the body has become increasingly central to a sense of self-identity. This is manifested in an unprecedented individualisation of the body, with a profound privatisation of meaning in the absence of a standard moral order. Furthermore, increased cultural homogeneity resulting from globalisation has led both to a separation of identity from place and nationality, and to the emergence of new identity positions (Woodward, 1997). Along with these changes comes an increased malleability of the body: never before have there been so many options as to how to present and mould the body. In an age of plastic surgery, body-building and reproductive technology, there is great uncertainty about what the body is, about the boundaries between body and society, and about what can be regarded as “natural” (Shilling, 1993). The body is no longer an extrinsic, natural “given”, but a site for the struggle for self-definition. Indeed, “body projects” (Shilling, 1993) are one of the key ways in which individuals today engage in the “reflexive project of the self” (Giddens, 1991:9). We are continually directing close, reflexive attention to our bodies, and are fundamentally considered to be responsible for them in terms of our lifestyle choices and bodily regimes (Synnott, 1993). Thus, in addition to constructing our identities in terms of bodily selves that we present to the gaze of others, we use a self-directed, inner gaze of surveillance.

Tattooing and other forms of body modification must be understood in light of the prescription of certain “ideal” body types within consumer culture (Featherstone, 1982); these ideal body types are essentially slim, attractive, and unmarked (Brain, 1979). We are constantly flooded with images of “what we are and might with effort yet become” (Featherstone, 1982:178). In a Foucauldian sense, we are subjected to disciplinary power through the operation of discourses that constitute the body in particular ways (Gordon, 1980) that are, to a certain extent, voluntarily taken up by the individual and self-imposed. However, as Frank (1991) points out, there are always oppositional spaces, and the body is capable of reacting back to, and actually changing, discourse (Shilling, 1993). In subcultural styles and body modification in particular, the body is deliberately used as a “message board” for countercultural impulses and beliefs (Hebdige, 1988; Radley, 1991; Atkinson & Young, 2001).

Goffman (1959, 1963a) regarded the way in which we manage our bodies and use them to act on the world, as essential to the construction and experience of social encounters. Body management and “the presentation of self in everyday life” (Goffman, 1959) are greatly influenced by socially generated classifications that allow us to “read” off the body. In essence, then, we are “on stage” all the time; our bodily actions in public are performances that are executed for the purpose of giving others a particular impression of ourselves.

Social reputation and impression management.

Emler (1990) argues that individuals come to define themselves as one kind of person rather than another, striving for a consistency in self-definition, and hence, self-presentation. We "make claims" to particular kinds of social identities, and as a result are continually engaged in a process of "managing" our reputations: "defining yourself in terms of a particular social identity is largely a manner of persuading others to so define you" (Emler, 1990:175). For some, deviance may indeed be a reputation project, and it is therefore necessary *to be seen* committing deviant acts in public in order to claim this identity. Reputations are "social representations" of the self (Moscovici, 2001) and therefore are *shared* definitions rather than autonomous, individual constructions.

Bromley (1993) maintains that reputation is both a social process and a social product. We present our reputations to audiences, and are particularly concerned with certain audiences, or "reference groups", those who "have the values and life-style to which we aspire" (Bromley, 1993:33). People have multiple reputations, as the image formed about a person in one group can be quite different from that formed in another group. We are continually engaged in a process of negotiating our social identities: that is, presenting ourselves in particular ways to each other in order to create certain impressions and achieve goals.

People interpret each other's actions in terms of attributional processes, meaning that we tend to impose a "pattern of meaning" on whatever we observe (Bromley, 1993:37). We make assumptions about a person's category membership and, therefore, character traits, on the basis of the image they put across. The unpleasant societal consequences of having a "deviant" reputation, in terms of the attributions others make about one's actions, can be dealt with by using the membership of a minority group of like-minded individuals to protect oneself against a hostile majority. Similarly, Moscovici (2001) argues that placing stress on one's difference from "the other" becomes an important strategy of identity assertion for the minority group member.

Deviance and stigma.

According to Paicheler (1988), deviance cannot be defined in terms of a definitive action or presentation of self, but can only be understood in terms of its relation to a uniform order. Defining something as deviant conceals and distorts the existence of an ideological order that is founded on the myth of a consensus on reality. Deviance, then, is not an intrinsic property of an act or actor, but a process of "becoming", and an active role. In this context, the meaning and interpretation the deviant gives to his/her acts is crucial (Cohen, 1972). When conflict between different groups in society occurs, difference in identity is brought to the fore. Individuals use specific behavioural and clothing styles to express the importance of their differing positions and the alternatives that are offered by their way of life (Hebdige, 1979). Difference, therefore, is "established by symbolic marking in relation to others" (Woodward, 1997:12), because "social order is maintained through binary oppositions in the creation of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'" (Woodward, 1997:33). The construction of different identities in opposition to the norm can be called "minority influence" because "all disagreement challenges the consensus, the definition of reality itself" (Paicheler, 1988:118).

Goffman (1963b) discusses extensively the stigma surrounding the possession of an identity that deviates from "the norm". He defines the original idea of stigma as "bodily

signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman, 1963b:1). When the person's stigma is visibly displayed on the body, as in the case of tattooing, the implications for social identity are profound, for it is one's first appearance that helps the "audience" to decide on the categorisation of this individual, and hence, make assumptions about what kind of person s/he should be. Goffman (1963b) argues that "normals" (non-stigmatised people) construct *stigma-theories* to explain why the stigmatised individual is inferior and/or represents a threat. Some stigmatised individuals to a certain extent reject the identity norms of their society and, protected by identity beliefs of their own, engage in a strategy that reverses this difference, hence regarding the "normals" as inferior. But usually, Goffman argues, the stigmatised person holds the same identity beliefs as others, and will therefore experience some shame, and a conviction that he/she falls short of what he/she "should" be. There is therefore a sense of competing definitions of identity, and each context expects different identities of us.

Tattooing, deviance, and identity.

Most of the psychological literature on tattoos has connected the choice to permanently modify one's body with anti-social tendencies and psychopathology (Loimer & Werner, 1992; Ceniceros, 1998; Forbes, 2001). To "mutilate" one's skin signified that one was either "mad, bad or perverted" (Brain, 1979:160). Fundamentally, tattoos were conceptualised in terms of individual personality, and divorced from their social context. Indeed, until fairly recently tattoos *were* primarily worn by marginalised members of society, such as bikers, sailors, convicts and people of lower socio-economic classes (Brain, 1979, Steward, 1990). Since the "tattoo renaissance" (Rubin, 1988) of recent years, however, tattoos have increasingly become the province of middle-class, well-educated people, including professionals. The result of this is the elevation of tattooing to the status of "art", which Blanchard (1994:291) argues is part of "the general glamorization of "trash" in popular culture". The range of tattoo designs available has changed dramatically from the traditional "American style" flash designs to mostly custom-made neo-tribal designs, which focus on using the body as a canvas rather than merely "sticking" pictures onto it in a random fashion (Rubin, 1988; Vale & Juno, 1989). Clearly, the tattoo world has changed substantially, and the meanings and functions attached to tattoos differ correspondingly.

In contrast to the psychological literature, the sociological literature has regarded tattoos in terms of the deliberate use of a "marker" to place the individual in a particular social category, and hence, to construct a particular kind of identity. Hebdige (1979, 1988) argues that there is an ideological dimension to every signification, and that style is the arena in which opposing definitions of reality are enacted. To acquire and wear a tattoo, therefore, should be understood as a fundamentally social act (Sanders, 1989) that symbolises difference, deviance and opposition to the mainstream culture. Hence, the body becomes a "field of ideological struggle" (Radley, 1991:111). This must be seen in light of the fact that the dominant culture has a restricted, proscriptive range of bodily expression. This use of tattoos as resistance is most clearly manifest in the recent "Neo - or Modern Primitive" movement (Rosenblatt, 1997; Atkinson & Young, 2001) which uses extreme body modification to "reclaim the body" and thereby challenge western cultural norms. Tattooing and other body art is a way of resisting the "cultural homogenisation" (Rubin, 1988) manifested in the tyranny of the Western fashion system (Craik, 1994) and the commodification of style (Polhemus, 1995). The "inverted

aesthetic norms", then, are not simply a challenge to existing artistic styles, but have the function of exposing, and commenting on, the values of the social order in general (Yinger, 1982:148). In particular, the body is used to resist the built-in obsolescence of our consumerist age: "Responding to a world where everything is in flux the permanently customised body offers stability, continuity and (when desired) an enduring demonstration of tribal commitment" (Polhemus & Randall, 1996:9). However, the assumption that a tattooed identity is undertaken in order to resist homogeneity, should be regarded with caution, as discussed by Sweetman (1999), who concedes that cultural practices cannot be labelled as *essentially* resistant. Along with Vale & Juno (1989) and Blanchard (1994), Sweetman (1999) points out that tattoos have become increasingly fashionable, and that a certain commodification of difference has occurred: "custom in the guise of departure from custom" (Craik, 1994:9). Nevertheless, tattooees are engaged in a "creative cultural practice" (Sweetman, 1999:73), creating a *space* in which normative practices can be questioned. It has also been argued that the very legacy of disrepute around the tattoo is responsible for its resistance to incorporation into the mainstream, and which therefore allows it to retain an air of antiauthority appeal despite its increased acceptability (Hebdige, 1979; Rosenblatt, 1997). The subjective experience of being a tattooee carries an element of "enjoyment of being separate from the despicable norm" (Genesis P'Orridge, quoted in Vale & Juno, 1989:178).

Sweetman (1999) found that few participants openly labelled their body modification as a political statement, instead framing their motivations in terms of strongly individualistic orientations, extremely common in the literature (Sanders, 1989, Vale & Juno, 1989). Essentially, the person uses external symbols to develop and represent a self-image (Brake, 1985). Therefore, while a social phenomenon, the tattoo is also, crucially, "of person: a signature on one's skin" (Blanchard, 1994:292) and the act of tattooing implies a search for identification and separation. The body is seen as the locus of a *presociety* self (Rosenblatt, 1997), and tattooing implies a longing for authenticity in an age where we are bombarded by "simulation and hype" (Polhemus, 1995:7). Similarly, the increased emphasis on custom-made designs is an extension of "a homology between inner self and outer corporeal envelope" (Blanchard, 1994:297); wearing a unique design is an attempt to create an outer appearance congruent with one's inner, self-identity. In this sense, the tattooist is seen as a priest or guru who assists one in "the search for a permanent talisman" (Jamie Summers, quoted in Rubin, 1988:7).

It seems clear that, since the "tattoo renaissance", the function of tattoos has changed significantly, from a symbol of deviance and group identity (Steward, 1990) to a symbol of self-actualisation. Yet, "tribal" aspects of the tattoo are still dominant in a qualitatively different sense: tattooees often conceive themselves as undertaking an act which "connects them to the rest of humanity" (Don Ed Hardy, quoted in Vale & Juno, 1989:53), an initiation ritual with specifically spiritual connotations. The tattoo is therefore constructed as an essentialist practice that is transcendent of cultural and national boundaries (Rosenblatt, 1997). The tattoo has become a "coveted form of visual communication" (Blanchard, 1994:294) and a means of controlling the gaze of others in order to produce the desired image of the self. The body, then, is both infinitely moulded by power regimes in the Foucauldian sense, and also works to construct resistances (Grosz, 1994).

Tattoos' constructions of their identity and negotiation of a tattooed status in society will, then, be examined in terms of two broad questions. Given, as we have seen, an increased fluidity of meanings surrounding tattoos, we ask first how the issue of tattooing, and by analogy the body itself, continues to be renegotiated in different contexts. Second, in terms of identity and deviance, should tattoos be regarded as an alternative or oppositional practice? This is articulated in the insight that while alternative culture seeks to *co-exist* with hegemony, oppositional culture works to *displace* and *replace* it (McGuigan, 1992). Or can tattooing be regarded as (at least in some cases) little more than artistic decoration?

DATA COLLECTION METHODS.

Three different data collection methods were used: individual interviews, a focus group interview, and internet correspondence. Participants for the individual and group interviews were recruited through a "snowballing" technique, whereby we gained access to participants through friends or acquaintances or directly approached them, and through the placement of an advertisement in three well-known tattoo and body piercing stores. The advertisement specified that we were particularly looking for heavily tattooed people and members of particular subcultures. This was done because we found it more difficult to gain access to heavily tattooed people through informal means, and because we wanted to ensure that at least some of our participants were considerably committed to a tattooed identity and would define themselves as separate from the mainstream.

Individual interviews formed the predominant method of data collection in this study. One-to-one interviews provide valuable in-depth data as they allow the researcher to follow up on what is meaningful for individual participants, and to constructively use one's own knowledge and experience to extract relevant content (Breakwell, 1990). They are useful to explore the way in which individuals construct the meaning behind their actions, and to access more specific and complex information. They also allow voices that may be silenced in group situations to emerge. We used a semi-structured approach, asking a few broad key questions, in order to allow for flexibility and open-ended responses.

Focus groups can be used flexibly to supplement other qualitative data collection methods (Morgan, 1997), and many people may be more comfortable disclosing in a group environment, where there is less individual pressure. Group interviews also allow one to observe the way in which people justify and defend their positions, as debate and even argument is much more likely to be generated than in an individual interview (Breakwell, 1990). Again, the structure was loose and the questions were specifically tailored to these participants, who were all body modification professionals.

The final method of data collection was internet/e-mail correspondence, directed through a popular "trance" sub-cultural website. We used this medium in order to access participants of a particular subculture in which tattoos are normative. We hypothesised that the spiritual, "New Age" discourse informing this subculture would bring about a different positioning of identities and use of tattoos to augment identity. An advertisement was posted on the website; we received responses from four frequenters of the site. Two answered questions and engaged in a brief e-mail correspondence,

another wrote a lengthy paragraph about his tattooed and sub-cultural identities, and another participated in a "chat-room" discussion at a pre-arranged time.

SAMPLE.

Qualitative sampling was used in order to select the most "relevant" participants, and we sampled to saturation point. In total, seventeen individuals participated in the study. Ten were male and seven were female. Ten participated in individual interviews, three in a focus group discussion, and four communicated with us through the aforementioned website. Participants represented a broad range of tattooees. They ranged in age from nineteen to mid-thirties and came from many different lines of work. Tattoo coverage varied from only one or two tattoos on easily concealed locations, to full "body suits". Because of our interest in the different functions that tattoos perform for individuals who position themselves differently in society, we tried to select participants who displayed differing levels of commitment to their tattoos and their identity as tattooees. We included five participants who worked in the body modification industry, as we felt that their experiences and constructions of a tattooed identity would offer qualitatively different information. However, the sample cannot be said to accurately represent South African tattooees as a whole, as all the participants were white and middle-class.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS.

Following a general social constructionist orientation, in which language is seen as constitutive of reality, we used a discourse analysis, following Ian Parker's approach (1992, 1994). This provides a useful way in which to access participants' construction of identities and reality, and the "sense that people construct in their everyday lives" (Parker, 1994:93). In terms of this approach, the interview is regarded not as a search for true, fixed meanings but an exploration of the "*social production* of meanings through linguistic interaction" (Kvale, 1996:226, emphasis added). Parker's approach has a particularly critical orientation, aiming to expose, disrupt and transform social constructions of meaning which, although often taken as "given", have important ideological implications. We used Parker's points of analysis (1992) as a rough guideline to drawing out the discourses, or coherent systems of meaning, used by participants to explain, represent, and justify their experience as tattooees, and, fundamentally, to *produce the act of getting tattooed as a particular kind of event* with particular functions and implications. Discourse analysis is particularly useful for looking at theories of the self, as people draw on the cultural resources available to them to convince their audiences that they can lay claim to particular kinds of self-identity (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This was useful as we wanted to look particularly at the function that tattoos fulfilled in terms of broader notions of the self and the body, as well as how participants positioned themselves in society.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.

BECOMING A TATTOOEE: A CHANGE IN STATUS.

Entering the tattooed world and taking on a tattooed identity is not as simple as walking into a tattoo parlour and undergoing a technical or artistic procedure. It involves the beginning of what Goffman (1959) calls a *moral career*, and entails the acquisition of both a new conceptualisation of self and, crucially, a new relationship to others in society, both non-tattooed and tattooed. The participants' discourse will be analysed in

terms of the understanding that achieving a legitimate identity and claim to tattooed status is a learned process (Vail, 1999) requiring certain knowledge and values.

Key to this discussion will be the contrast between people for whom tattoos have become a “master status”, that is, they have profound implications for their identity and interactions, and those who regard their tattoos in much the same way as a hairstyle (Vail, 1999). The more heavily tattooed participants often indicated that their tattoos had become “part” of them, to the point where: *"Most of the time I forget that they're there, I wouldn't actually be comfortable if it wasn't there"*. In contrast, a participant with three small tattoos on her stomach clearly regarded her tattoo as an external fashion statement: *"it's like changing your look, by putting on a red dress, or a black dress, or it's like dying your hair blue"*. As Vail (1999:270) put it: "to the collector, tattoos are not something one owns. Rather, they are a part of him or her, no more easily removed from his or her identity than his or her deepest beliefs".

A hierarchy of tattooees.

Most of the participants used a discourse that constructed the tattoo world in terms of a hierarchy of differing levels of initiation into tattooee status. A recurring question was: who has the right to call themselves a “real” tattooee? That is, who has a claim to this particular use of symbols and this kind of presentation of self? Most of the participants constructed a hierarchy of tattooees according to their legitimacy in terms of what constitutes a real tattooed identity. Particular *prototypes* of social identities are created that result in judgements as to what degree an individual exemplifies the social categories that they claim to occupy (Emler, 1990). These different category terms are enmeshed in, and exemplify, particular world views (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). A negative construction of “other” kinds of tattooees was a strong indication of where the individual placed him/herself in society. The distinction between “types” of tattooees often had a strongly moral flavour, as a dichotomy was set up between “right” and “wrong” reasons for being tattooed: *"do it for the right reason, and your own personal reasons, its got nothing to do with your friends or anybody else around you"*; *"it's sad to see a lot of people doing it for the wrong reasons"*; *"having a tattoo that you're gonna regret in another 2 years or 5 years or 10 years is a bad reason"*.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the “token tattooees”. A male participant with a full back tattoo described these as follows: *"these people who get a tiny little thing on the back of the shoulderblade , it doesn't mean anything to the person; they see it, they forget about it, it's very much a token 'I have a tattoo'."* The tattoo literature also constructs small tattoos as signs of a lesser commitment to the art of tattooing: "Little tattoos are for little kids" (Don Lussier, tattooist, cited in Nichols, 1995:12), and indeed, only extensive to full coverage is featured in tattoo magazines, implying that a major commitment to tattooing is necessary to fully enter the tattoo world. “Token” tattooees do not undergo a thoughtful, deliberative process when acquiring the tattoo: *"taking, whatever bow and arrow, whatever, off a wall in a tattoo parlour "*. In this way, the decision to become tattooed is portrayed as trivial and shallow, with “token tattooees” failing to take tattooing as seriously as these participants feel it should be. Two participants, both heavily tattooed, expressed particularly strong negative opinions about the artificiality of using tattoos as a fashion statement: *"these flipping jocks and these he-man little wankers that are out at Clifton with their little Japanese symbols really piss me off, because it's just like 'hey bro, it's cool'it's got nothing to do with*

tattooing, it's purely fashion, they don't appreciate the art, they really don't care, it's just a status symbol."; "very obvious, very fake, hidden away somewhere little token, 'look I've got a tattoo' tattoos, um, I've got even more contempt for those than I used to".

On the one hand, then, “token tattooees” are constructed as illegitimate because they do not wear their difference boldly and proudly, but acquire their markings in easily concealed locations. As one participant put it: *"You want a small tattoo so you can hide it. Why the fuck get tattooed if you wanna hide it. What's the point?"* On the other hand, these tattooees are constructed as deliberately using the tattoo to acquire the appearance of a deviant identity - *"I think people often do it because they want to be seen as deviant, or you know, a little bit other than normal, and sometimes it's the only way they can be a little abnormal. I find that quite sad."* Clearly, then, becoming tattooed because it is fashionable or to make a deliberate statement of rebelliousness *that is not a true reflection of one's identity*, is not only an inadequate reason, but a “bad” or “wrong” reason to do it: *"like I'm tattooed so I'm hardcore, which is absolute crap"*. Fashion and an attempt to appear “cool” or “hardcore”, then, are motivations that disqualify one from a legitimate tattooed status.

On the opposite end of the pole, are people who get tattoos for the “right” reasons: who undertake it consciously and deliberately and with respect for the art form of tattooing. The most important element here seems to be that the tattoo must be a self-generated, autonomous activity with meaning for one's self rather than to “prove” something to others: *"it's gotta mean something to you and what it means to you doesn't really matter to anybody."* Personal ownership of the body was emphasised: *"when it comes down to it it's your body, you can do what the hell you like"*, and the importance of unique designs, preferably conceived of by the tattooee herself, to express one's authentic, inner core self and decorate one's “temple” in a way that is pleasing *to one's self*. *"if you go get a tattoo like on a whim, because for that two months you think it's cool, then afterwards you're gonna be sick of it, but if you get a tattoo that sort of symbolises something for yourself, you won't get sick of it. It'll be sort of like yours, for - I suppose for the rest of your life"*. The crucial distinction seems to be between a recognition and reverence of the significance of the permanency of the tattoo, and an “identity experiment” that utilises the tattoo in a more superficial, ephemeral way. The taking on of a tattooed identity is a profound commitment, with the process of tattooing itself taking on significance: *"it's the excitement of seeing something that I've thought about for so long finally taking shape"; "it's almost like a rite of passage, in that I don't like pain, but I will walk out with sort of with a symbol that I've been through the initiation"; "having a masterpiece, created of myself - on myself, is an unexplainable feeling"*. The only valid use for tattoos, then, according to these participants, is as a tool to construct and express one's authentic identity; to use tattoos as a fashion statement renders them meaningless and nothing more than empty signifiers.

“Live and let live” discourse: Dealing with exceptions to the hierarchy.

Potter & Wetherell (1987) argue that speakers are flexible in their discourse in order to deal with information that threatens their generalisations. They can, for example, generate sub-categories of a group, or make exceptions to the rule. Another strategy that became apparent in this study was the use of a “live and let live” discourse, informed by a liberal humanist discourse that values the rights of individuals to express their own preferences. This discourse allowed participants to maintain the existence of a

particular category of tattooees, while avoiding the possibility of being labelled "prejudiced". The participants in this study expressed vociferous views on less valid types of tattooees, but then distanced themselves from a prejudiced position by their use of a "live and let live" discourse. For example, one participant who expressed strongly negative views about "token tattooees", admitted that some of his own friends had chosen their tattoos randomly, without much thought, and to accommodate this fact, he said: *"some people live that way, there's nothing wrong with that, for some people it works."* Another participant, immediately after launching a scathing attack on those who acquire tattoos to look "cool", also used this discourse: *"hey, everyone to himself, I mean, it's great, if they wanna get tattooed its lekker, and if it means they have one tiny little tattoo because they wanna be a little more hardcore, and they end up having a full bodysuit afterwards, that's great"*. In this latter statement, a qualification for his tolerant attitude is heavily implied: to be regarded as a "real" tattooee, one must go on to become a tattoo collector rather than merely a tattoo wearer.

A different kind of hierarchy: Strategies of reputation management among body art professionals.

However, an interesting difference was observed among those who worked in the body modification industry. All resisted constructing small tattoo-wearers as dramatically different from heavily tattooed people such as themselves. In the words of a male tattooist: *"a lot of clients who say to us, oh but you've got so many tattoos, and I say, but you're tattooed, what's the difference between us and you? The difference is, we've got it all over and you've only got one ... to have one this big or to have one this big is the same commitment. Makes no difference whether it's an inch or a mile."* Another male tattooist commented: *"The only thing that I can say is common about the people that come in here, is that they all appear to be from earth. Different strokes, it's kind of like -you can have the tiny little, you know, experimental tattoo is what I call it, beginner's tattoo"*. However, the words "experimental" and "beginner" suggested that to *"have a little one to test the waters"*, in the words of another male tattooist, means that the initiation of such individuals into the tattoo world is far from complete.

These more tolerant discourses appeared to fulfil the function of closing the gap between heavily tattooed people, who are subject to much prejudice, and the rest of society. By presenting themselves as not very different from other people, these "stigmatised" individuals could be using a strategy to minimise this prejudice and enhance their sense of social identity (Goffman, 1963b). While they did not differentiate themselves from other kinds of tattooees, they engaged in reputation management by distancing themselves from other kinds of *tattoo artists*, unprofessional *"scum trash"* who alienate customers with their *"real hardcore attitude"*. These "lesser" tattoo artists give tattooing a bad name: *"the whole stigma of tattoo shops are where you can buy drugs, don't do it in a tattoo shop, it doesn't do anything for tattooing."* All the body modification workers emphasised the importance of a professional demeanour in order to elevate the status of their work: *"I deal with a lot of plastic surgeons and things, on reconstruction, so you can't have this attitude, there is no attitude."* This is in accordance with the changes in the tattoo world that have occurred since the "tattoo renaissance" of the sixties onward, where tattooing has become a professional, sophisticated art form and technical procedure (Rubin, 1988) rather than a disreputable mark associated with "sailors, bikers, carnival freaks, and so on" (Rosenblatt, 1997:300).

Initiation into the tattoo world.

Like becoming a member of a particular subculture, taking on a tattooed identity can be regarded as something of a “moral career” (Becker, 1963). Achieving a “master” tattoo status, i.e. becoming a tattoo collector rather than merely a tattoo *wearer*, is a process requiring devotion and “initiation” into the tattoo world, involving the acquisition of certain knowledge and lingo (Vail, 1999). Becoming tattooed was constructed in terms of crossing a boundary from which there is no going back: *“I had barriers, still there was a barrier to cross. It was a case of claiming, you claim your body for yourself”*. Although the participants approached the initial decision to be tattooed with varying degrees of deliberation, with one only undertaking it after *“four and a half years that I've had this idea in my mind”*, and another on the *“spur of the moment”*, in most cases taking on a tattooed identity had important implications for the person's identity and subsequent life experience.

According to Sanders (1989), the acquisition of the tattoo as social symbol alters the person's self-definition, for example, seeing oneself as more beautiful, courageous, unique, etc. Many of the participants indicated that their tattoos heralded a change in self conception and identity. For example, one interviewee regarded his tattoos as *“a catalyst to - making me jump out of my own skin and finding out that I am happy with who I am ,myself, no matter what anybody else thinks,it has just helped me, to become who I am, more of who I am, all the time”*, and another remarked: *“Getting my tattoos has proved to me, that I can be at peace with myself”*. Again, crossing the boundary from non-tattooee to tattooee is constructed as having enormous significance, particularly in creating a more congruent and authentic sense of self.

Becoming a “real” tattooee involves the acquisition of particular knowledge about tattoos and the tattoo world, and a certain respect for the art form. In contrast, “token tattooees”, according to one heavily tattooed male *“don't look after their tattoos, they go into the sun, they burn them to shit, and they clearly don't give a crap about tattooing”*. Becoming a tattoo collector requires learning about “what makes a tattoo (and/or a tattooist) good” (Vail, 1999:264) - *“when I first went there (to the tattoo parlour) I had no idea. I had no clue, so I mean you just see a sign that says ‘tattoo’, and you think, ok”* - and getting past the initial “intimidating” nature of the tattoo world to become comfortable in it. One participant discussed the way in which her expectations about tattooists were changed once she became “initiated” into the tattoo community: *“(her brother and brother's friend) came back and said, how chilled these people were, and that's when I went and spoke to (tattoo artist) So, it wasn't quite as intimidating as I thought.”*

The initial step of becoming tattooed for the first time was, in many cases, followed by crossing the boundary into “heavily tattooed”, or tattoo collector status, which involved a different set of relations with society. “Becoming a collector involves not only changing the way that light reflects off one's skin, but also the way that others view that skin and the person inside it” (Vail, 1999:258). To become a tattoo collector requires that *“you are into it and you like the way they look, then you'll always have the need and the will to do another one”* (male tattooist). It therefore involves acquiring both new aesthetic values (which differ from the “norm”) and an enthusiasm for and commitment to tattooing. Most heavily tattooed participants mentioned the inconvenience and necessity

of having to “cover up” arm tattoos with long-sleeve shirts, making it clear that an awareness of one's status as a tattoo collector is ever-present in social interactions, with the potential to disrupt and discomfort. Vail (1999) calls this “working around public skin”, arguing that it is necessary to accommodate one's tattooed identity with an identity acceptable to “normals”, and, therefore, to be able to “pass” more easily (Goffman, 1963b). One participant brought these differences to the fore when he described an unpleasant incident with a woman who had known and liked him for some time but was horrified when she discovered his heavily tattooed status: *“she tells me, you know, small tattoos are acceptable, but I mean, that is disgusting. You know, what is the difference?”* This is a prime example of what Goffman described as being “discreditable”, the situation that occurs when one's stigma can be concealed, but as soon as it is discovered, the entire character of the stigmatised person is put into disrepute. Most stigmatised people try to “pass” at least some of the time, “because of the great rewards in being considered normal” (Goffman, 1963b:74), and indeed, all the participants, even those who expressed attitudes strongly critical of societal conformity, admitted to having to *“tread a careful line between being able to do what I want to do and being acceptable.”*

Although most of the heavily tattooed participants represented the growth of their tattoo collection as an inevitable, organic process arising from the initial tattoo experience -*“they just grew. They just spread out, and started working their way down to my toes”* there were moments of transition and definition: *“I think when I got my first tattoo on my arm, and it was quite hectic and I felt really - it was hardcore. Because I did it when I did it, I mean there were hardly any girls with big tattoos, that was a hectic step.”* (heavily tattooed female body piercer). Another female participant with forearm tattoos remarked: *“they were shocked at the fact that, because I'm a girl, and you know, girls shouldn't do this kind of thing.”* Gendered discourses are clearly operating here, as according to Sanders (1989) and Steward (1990), forearm tattoos are traditionally a “macho” domain and only undertaken by women clearly linked to men in a “biker” gang. This is now changing, and indeed four of the seven women interviewed had forearm tattoos (two of whom were not heavily tattooed). For these female participants, making the decision to become tattooed on the forearm could be seen as breaking away from traditional norms of femininity, carving out a new identity for themselves. In this sense, the tattoo transforms the body into a site of political struggle rather than merely an “ornamented surface” (Craik, 1994:65).

IDENTITY PROJECTS: THE ROLE OF THE TATTOO IN ESTABLISHING AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY POSITIONS.

Once the boundary has been crossed into various degrees of tattooee status, the tattoo(s) served particular functions in terms of the tattooee's self-construction of identity. Most of the interviewees utilised their tattooed status as part of a larger “identity project” of nonconformity and difference. Although only a few *explicitly* constructed their identities in terms of a deliberate non-conformist position, all but one expressed opinions that were critical of the homogeneity and “closed-mindedness” of society, particularly of non-tattooed members of society: *“My tattoos, my way of dressing, is the only thing that separates me from everyone else, and I love that feeling. I hate the fact that everyone looks the same.”* These participants constructed a picture of a world containing two broad categories of people: those who blindly conform and those who challenge the hegemonic order. Within this discourse, people are actors positioned

between different “worlds” with different requirements, or as agents caught between multiple symbolic orders (Irwin, 2001): *“the world that they’re in, they don’t expect to see someone dressed like this in their world”*. We discuss the discourse of two participants who defined themselves in non-conformist terms, and contrast this with the discourse of two other participants who try to negotiate their way between a non-conformist and conformist identity.

Non-conformist identities.

Hebdige (1979) discusses the “power in offending”, where individuals gain value and even a sense of triumph from engaging in a symbolic challenge to the hegemonic order. Most of the participants were clearly engaged in such a struggle, as they either consciously or, through their appearance in itself, exposed the “universal” and the “given” - conventions that are taken for granted and therefore appear natural and invisible. Style, and in particular tattoos, were used as an intentional communication to the world, as well as to one's self.

One participant, a male with a full back tattoo, used tattooing in addition to other forms of style, such as body piercing, long hair and androgynous “gothic” style dress, as a tool to construct and maintain an identity as an individual who goes against hegemonic rules, particularly norms of masculinity. In this sense he could be seen to be using the body as a “principal site of identity work” (Atkinson & Young, 2001:142), with his tattoo as merely another item in his personal identity kit (Sanders, 1989). The tattoo in particular was constructed as a way of *maintaining* his sense of himself as a non-conformist, as he now is *“forced to step back to society's idea of normal”*, due to working in the conventionalist corporate industry: *“maybe the tattoo's a way of - of getting some of that back, of that 'how you people would be shocked if you could see what's under my nice shirt!' ”*. This deviant identity was very deliberately constructed, and crucially, visibly “performed” so as to communicate to others his claim to that identity (Emler, 1990). For example: *“I used to go out occasionally wearing a dress, or a skirt, because I wanted to challenge the way other people took the world, the intention is to challenge the way people looked at things.”*

This participant therefore uses the strategy of emphasising rather than downplaying the difference between himself and other groups (whom he calls “*sheep*” or conformists), in order to assert his identity as a member of a counterculture (Paicheler, 1988). He “enters on his public course of non-conformity with full knowledge that he runs the risk, therefore, of severe punishment for his behaviour” (Paicheler, 1988:123). This participant could be described as engaging in “secondary deviance” (Lemert, 1967) in that, rather than changing his deviant behaviour in response to others' criticism, he utilises his deviant role in order to *attack* the societal reactions to deviance. He also constructs his deviant identity as positive, thus turning societal norms on their head: *“I consider that a compliment, I like being deviant or strange”*. He actively redefines the meaning of his actions and appearance, defining conformity rather than deviance as negative: *“what is normal? Boring, everybody's the same, I've never appreciated that, I've always liked people who've got something different to say”*.

Sanders (1989) points out that a negative response to one's tattooed identity can result in a strategy of negatively defining the *source* of the negative response rather than negatively defining the self. *“what I would say to that (judgmental attitudes) is people*

that don't (accept it) can go over there, and people that do can come party over here." In this way an opposition is set up between "us" and "them", defining people who don't accept tattoos as "*fucking robots, clones*". Similarly, another participant's experience of prejudice, rather than discouraging him from becoming a collector, reinforced his desire to be heavily tattooed: "*no-one has any issues with me until they find out that I have tattoos, that's another reason why I want to be heavily tattooed. Is to get a point across to people*". This participant, a prominent businessman, found that people's attitude towards him changed dramatically once his "stigma" was discovered: "*when people get to know you and they can't see your tattoos, they think you 're the bomb, find out you've got tattoos and you're flawed*". Instead of becoming ashamed and trying to hide his tattoos, he used them to actively change society in his own small way: "*(being tattooed) made me realise how shallow people are, to judge you, because you've got tattoos, there's no hope until people start changing, people are gonna accept people a lot more for who they are, not what pictures they've got on their body*". This participant's vision of an "ideal" society of tolerance and open-mindedness is something that he deliberately tries to work towards by contradicting people's expectations of a tattooed person: "*I'll sit here in a vest often, people will walk in and, I'll smile at them, and like 'hi, how you doing', but you've been tattooed, you're not supposed to be nice, so nine out of ten people I try to change.*"

Frequently, participants made use of psychological discourse to express their points of view about the inferiority of those who conform, and consequently, to consolidate a sense of identity driven by non-conformity: "*I don't think hiding is very healthy, if we're constantly trying to conform and stuff I don't think that's too good*"; "*people who don't know who they are, and are just dressing up to make sure that they go, lacking the self confidence to be themselves wherever they go, lacking that sort of strength of self, of who they are, that's sad.*" In this way "conformists" were constructed as psychologically unhealthy, being out of touch with their true, genuine core self, and as a result, their outward style is not expressive of an authentic essence. This discourse also serves to justify the expression of a negative attitude towards less "valid" types of tattooees, since a psychological explanation is more acceptable than a moralistic judgement in defending one's position.

Negotiating identity: Between two positions.

Bromley (1993) discusses the continual tension between the drive to conformity and the drive towards individuality, which profoundly influences our impression management. Some individuals may lean more towards one pole than the other, but some compromise or adaptation to societal norms is almost always necessary. The discourse of a recently matriculated male, who I will call M, with one, medium-sized tattoo on his chest indicated a negotiation between two identity positions: rebellious non-conformist, and a member of mainstream society. He resisted both being positioned as "extreme" - "*I wouldn't get a tattoo in a place that could compromise a job or anything*" - and as "ordinary" or typical - "*I don't wanna get one that everyone has*", dissociating himself from those who acquire tattoos "*because it's cool, and everyone's getting one*". While he clearly distances himself from people who use tattoos "*to show off*", he also does not affiliate himself with those who go "*for the whole tattoo thing*", saying "*I'm also not really the artistic type, you know, 'my body is my canvas', and all that, I wanna get some tattoos, and that's about it*". This was particularly interesting as the heavily tattooed participants did tend to construct their choice to become tattooed in terms of

transforming their bodies into works of art: *"it wasn't just gonna be a design or an arbitrary picture, it was about fitting it to my body"*. By contrast, M spoke about his tattoo in a way that suggested the acquisition of a commodity: *"it's more the - having a tattoo than getting it"*.

Another participant, S, also negotiated her identity between the opposing poles of conformity and nonconformity: *"when I'm out at work, or when I'm out at varsity or whatever, I'm this wild child who shows off their tattoo but when I get into the classroom I am so embarrassed if one of the kids sees that I'm pierced, or I'm tattooed"*. Her tattoos were constructed in terms of appearance enhancement: *"I find this part (stomach area) very very sexy, so that's why I got the tattoo there, it's definitely an accessory"*. At the same time, however, she also utilised her tattoos to make a certain identity claim to deviance: *"I still like shocking people, I like surprising people, I like being in a room with people that perhaps don't have tattoos and think that having tattoos is a bit outrageous"*. She clearly regarded heavily tattooed people as in a different category from herself. Indeed, her discourse was an attempt to dissociate herself from certain "other" kinds of tattooees: *"the people who perceive those who have back pieces as deviant are not going to take the time out to have a look at what I have on my stomach. I do see those people as deviant myself, even though I have a tattoo, I don't really identify with their tattoos"*.

Similarly, another participant distanced herself from the kind of people that the public typically associates with tattoos: *"a lot of people assume that I'm some kind of wild, promiscuous drug addict, I think they're all quite disappointed when they find that I'm boring. But that's fine with me."* However, by using a "live and let live" discourse, S resisted being positioned as judgmental towards these "other" kinds of tattooees. With regard to "hectic back pieces", large tattoos covering a substantial portion of the back area, she said: *"that's not my kind of tattoo"*, remarking that a friend who acquired one failed to *"think about what she's gonna look like when she's a granny"*, but tried to resolve the contradiction between her "rebellious" and "conformist" identity by saying: *"I'd say mine is quite large and obvious but I find my tattoos very pretty, and feminine, its (back pieces) not something I like, on me. I mean, I've seen ones that I like on other people, but I wouldn't want one done."*

Body art professionals: Differences in discourse.

In terms of the hierarchy of tattooees constructed by the more heavily tattooed participants, M and S could be regarded as "token tattooees", but according to the values attached to different kinds of tattoos, S occupies this position much more clearly, as her design was chosen *"for no specific reason"* other than decoration, while M emphasised the importance of getting *"a tattoo that symbolises something for yourself"*. However, an important contradiction became apparent. The three body modification professionals interviewed in the focus group, who could by no means be defined as "token tattooees", did not construct their tattoos as particularly meaningful. Their discourse negated the idea that a "deeper" meaning is required to legitimate their tattoos: *"There is no hidden meaning"*. Their tattoos were often acquired impulsively, with more consideration given to the skill of the tattoo artist than the actual design: *"I decide on the day, I say, well I'm bored, let's do one"; "each one's sort of done by a different tattooist around the world, and that reminds me of that"*. Within this construction of tattoos, tattooing is an artistic medium: *"most of my tattoos have no*

meaning, at the end of the day, cos it's an art form, there should not be a reason, a meaning behind it, if you have something with meaning then you land up going well, you know, when I was 20 I had this thought in my mind, by the time I was 22 that thought was gone."

Therefore, the use of tattoos to construct identities is clearly not simple. The boundaries are fluid, and the function of tattoos depends on where one is positioned and what can be gained and lost by using particular discourses. For example, while one participant commented that a tattoo must be self-designed - *"if it's somebody else's, I'm going to get bored, but all these mean something to me. So I'm not sick of them yet."* - the tattoo artist's comment above indicates that meanings can change and become irrelevant, but a tattoo that has artistic merit will always please the wearer and will age well. This suggests that perhaps part of becoming a tattoo collector is a relinquishment of the "tattoos as meaningful" discourse, replacing it with a discourse of "tattoos as art". One interviewee's comment indicated that the "meaning" discourse may function to justify tattoos to the non-initiated - *"but when they realise that it has a meaning to me, they kind of seem to be more accepting of it"* - but perhaps this discourse becomes increasingly untenable as: *"when you get heavily tattooed like us, you don't actually notice the individual tattoos."*

The positioning of these participants as body art professionals, and their resultant continual engagement with a variety of different motivations and functions for tattoos - *"there's so many different reasons, basically, your reasons are irrelevant"* - means that tattoos become less connected with static, timeless meanings and statements of one's internal core being, than with artistic expression: *"it's the look and the appeal of the look"; "it's just something I like, I appreciate the art"*. In this way, these participants resist being placed into a category apart from others, by emphasising that their tattoos do not represent stable internal characteristics of deviance or pathology: *"Don't judge people because they've got tattoos on them, judge them for what they actually are "; "they'll psychoanalyse you and say 'oh, you're tattooed because of what your father did when you were young' "*. Basically, for these interviewees, tattoos indicate little more than the fact that *"Your skin is stained"* (male tattoo artist). As Paicheler (1988:114) points out, "if it is to exercise influence, the minority must indeed *resist being identified with deviance*" (emphases added). This would certainly appear to be the case as these tattooists have to overcome the association of tattoos with deviance, in an effort to be seen as skilled artists: *"The people of our parents' age you can't just expect them to accept what we do, and go, oh well, our kids are thugs and sailors, they've gotta accept it on the behalf of, oh it's a different form of art."*

Individualist discourses.

Two key clusters of discourses were discerned: on the one hand, a construction of tattoos as highly individual expressions of one's unique essence, and on the other, as expressing one's affiliation with certain groups, such as subcultures. This appears to be a contradiction; however, as argued by Brewer & Miller (1996), people operate at different levels of identity, and require a sense of both an individual and collective identity. One participant, for instance, insisted that *"everyone's different, there's not one person that is the same, that does it for the same reason"* but also said: *"people from all over the world, all different types all come together, under a certain tribe (tattooing) could be society's way of forming its own tribe within its different cliques"*. Polhemus

(1994:14-15) argues that "styletribes" come about "to satisfy that need for a sense of community and common purpose which is so lacking in modern life styletribes' use of permanent body modification is symbolic of their desire to be timeless and unchanging - that their tribe will continue forever." In a sense, then, our chosen style functions both as an advertisement for our individual selves, and as a demonstration of our membership in a tribe (Polhemus & Randall, 1996).

An individualist discourse permeated all the interviews to a greater or lesser extent. This has been a central theme in the literature (e.g. Sanders, 1989; Vale & Juno, 1989; Polhemus & Randall, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1997; Sweetman, 1999), and we will therefore not repeat their arguments here, except to say that most of the participants in this study predominantly drew on an individualistic discourse in representing the function of their tattoos and related aspects of their identity. There was a tendency to distance the self from "others" who make decisions based on societal norms and peer pressure: *"I didn't get tattoos for other people, I got them for me"*. In particular, tattoos fulfilled the function of expressing an *authentic* core self, serving as a *"trademark kind of thing"*: *"it all verges on the freedom of expression, people are more willing to venture out and say, I am this person, rather than like, snaking away and trying to hide it from the world"*.

The tattoo also becomes an important way to represent, and immortalise, one's life experience: *"something significant's happened in my life and it's like a - almost a reminder of - a stepping stone, like a step forward."* In this way the tattoo is utilised as a narrative performance of identity (Langellier, 2001). One participant, who became wheelchair-bound as a result of a lengthy illness, exemplified this use of the tattoo. Several of his tattoos represented different aspects of the way in which he had overcome death: *"(tattooing) tells my life story, I wanted to document it, it was so important to me that I wanted to remember it, it was a life thing, basically I 'd been to hell"*.

The use of an individualist discourse, in conjunction with the "live and let live" discourse, appeared to fulfill the function of legitimating tattoos on a daily basis (Irwin, 2001), as it makes it difficult for people to justifiably criticise them - *"You don't have to like everything everyone else likes, if everyone liked the same thing we would be clones"*; *"If I am able to respect other people 's individuality, I expect them to do the same for me, but I am yet to see this happen"*; *"I'm entitled to my opinion. And then so are they. But don't tell me that tattoos are bad or they're evil, it's just something you don't like."* If tattoos are an individual choice and a matter of personal taste, then, to which everyone has the right (liberal humanist discourse), then to criticise *someone's* tattoo is impolite, because it implies criticising that person's supposed core identity and the way that they choose to express it. Steyn (2001:200) points out that "appeals to a transcendent self" are a common way in which white South Africans draw on a humanistic discourse to establish their innocence as whites. This essentialist discourse allows the speaker to "claim a certain moral high ground" by presenting each individual as "the author, or at least sole custodian of his or her own identity" (110). As one participant commented: *"If you don't like what you see -just deal with it. It is my body, and I'll decorate it in any way that pleases me and in any way that I am comfortable with."*

Tattoos and sub-cultural identity: The “trance” scene.

It has been noted that tattoos are often associated with sub-cultural phenomena (Craik, 1994, Polhemus, 1994), in terms of an articulation of a way of life "which by its very appearance disregards or attacks dominant values" (Brake, 1985:11). We therefore consider an examination of the role of sub-cultural affiliation in a tattooed identity to be essential. This study found that tattoos were often drawn on as a cultural resource for augmenting subcultural identity. We now focus briefly on the participants who were affiliated with the “trance” subculture to illustrate the role of the tattoo in representing subcultural values.

Trance is something of a hybrid of what Polhemus (1994) calls “new age travellers” and “ravers”; their dress style and values are very closely affiliated with the “peace and love” motif of the hippies of the 60s and 70s, but the music is electronic dance. "Spirit into matter" is the motto of "Ska", a popular trance clothing store (Various contributors, 2002: 14), implying that one's external style should correspond with one's internal spiritual self, and this discourse was frequently used by participants affiliated with trance. Most of the participants who identified with the “trance” sub-culture used their tattoos to fulfil spiritual functions, which are central to the “New Age” values of the trance scene.

Tattoos were constructed as a medium of expression for one's personal spiritual convictions: *"it's like, my spirit that came out onto paper, which I have now put onto my body. "; "It is like my spiritual link in another dimension, my Dragon would be the spiritual representation of myself"*. One internet correspondent used his tattoo as a symbol of his *"spiritual mission to help introduce the goddess" into "the male dominated system"* and another described his tattoo as representing his desire for *"something meaningful, I've always been steadily moving towards a deep change, growth, transformation"*. Crucially, the discourse of these participants emphasises the importance of one's embodiment, or “performances of self, being congruent with one's own sense of self (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1963a), which in this case is constructed in terms of a spiritual identity.

Tattoos take on a different meaning in the context of the trance subculture, as they are normative within this framework: *"pretty much every single person at a trance party will be open-minded, people so dig it that they'll just jump straight at you and say, wow, kiff tattoo!"* This interviewee exemplified the use of tattoos to create a congruent sense of identity in accordance with the spiritual values of the trance community: *"the image that you have of yourself and the image that other people have of you, can be very different, but the closer they are to the same thing, the more of a well-rounded, balanced person I think you can be, (tattoos) bridge the gap between, um, thinking conformistly and thinking open-mindedly"*. This participant, then, uses the body to mediate between self identity and social identity, in order to construct particular versions of the self (Shilling, 1993). In particular, he can be seen to be manipulating the image that others have of him, in order to manage discrepancies between his public and self-image (Bromley, 1993): *"people would not have the same impression of me if I was not tattooed. And I would also not dig the perception that they had of me if I was not tattooed. Because I would not be me, it wouldn't be the same."*

Negotiating a tattooed identity in everyday life.

It became clear that context was crucial in negotiating a tattooed identity, involving different “audiences” (Bromley, 1993) that were more or less accepting of tattoos. Only a small minority of participants had never experienced negative reactions to their “stigma”, but this was largely contingent on the values and norms of the particular environment in which they were situated. One participant lived and worked in Observatory, whose residents are notorious for being artistic and holistically minded: *"in Observatory where every Tom Dick and Harry has got like 6 tattoos, scattered all over his body cos that's who we are, Observatory is a community of like freaks"*. Clearly, tattoos are normative rather than deviant in this context, and as a result the discourse used by this participant does not construct tattoos as a symbol or a statement of non-conformity, but rather as a beautiful piece of art which, crucially, is acceptable to the mainstream: *"for other people it's more like you're creating like an aggressive attitude towards like society, it's (her tattoo) not harsh, and like in your face, and like you know, it's art, the straightest people will come up to me and like say, wow, that's really beautiful. It's not like a freak"*.

In contrast, participants who worked in corporate environments were very aware of the negative implications of their tattoos: *"anything corporate is - is impossible to be anything but normal, they very much force you to be socially acceptable, ja, and follow the rules"*; *"for business and stuff like that you can't have long sleeves (tattoos extending below the elbow), you know it just doesn't go down so well "*. Although most participants indicated that the general acceptability of tattoos was increasing - *"a lot of people are actually on good terms with it, people have begun to accept it as a modern day style of life-style"*; *"it's becoming more just like a way that the society is, people are just, o.k., well that is what they're doing "* - it was clear that a degree of stigma management was necessary in certain public spheres: *"there are situations which are not accepting of it, some people just don't dig, and they're so conformist and old-style beliefs that they will never dig."*

CONCLUSION.

The participants' discourse revealed many contradictions. One was between a construction of their tattoos as a statement purely to themselves, and a construction of their tattoos as a statement of “otherness” to the world. Another contradiction was between an insistence on the importance of not conforming and “covering up” one's true essence, and compromising this stand in order to “pass” and manage their stigma. However, this apparent “compromise” of ideals could be reformulated as participants exerting control over the social performances of their identity (Emler, 1990), and hence as an expression of power over the outcome of one's “body project” (Shilling, 1993): *"it's only been seen if I've chosen to show it, so I haven't had reactions from people I haven't wanted to have reactions from"*.

Fundamentally, these contradictions could also be seen as related to our late modern, Western attitude towards the body and the individual. On the one hand, the inner self is seen as the genuine article, and the body as a superficial shell, while on the other, the body is a material entity that has a structuring effect on our daily interactions, and therefore, in a sense, constructs our reality somewhat independently of our intentions. The participants' discourse could be regarded as an attempt to resolve this uneasy body-mind dichotomy, trying to create a one-to-one correspondence between the inner

and outer self. Their discourse could also be seen as creating a *deliberate, conscious* use of the body so that it “speaks for” the person and can be “read” as a reflection of their core selves: *"tattoos give people the chance to express themselves in a way that is unique. It reflects our personalities, and it is a small step into finding yourself"*. In this way, the tattoo fulfils the function of creating a sense of authenticity and positive difference, which has clearly become a "coveted form of visual communication" (Blanchard, 1994:294), as even those who were not critical of societal norms desired the symbol of the tattoo to signify an “otherness”.

If one thing emerges clearly from this study, it is that there are no universals in the world of tattooing. The function and significance of tattoos is clearly linked to the differential positions of the tattooees themselves, as they negotiate their social identity in their everyday lives. As Blanchard (1994:290) puts it: "it is part of the power of tattooing that it fulfils more than one function at once in a complex signifying system". However, most of the tattooees used the body as a vehicle for identity projects aimed at creating a sense of both an inner-outer continuity, and, crucially, a sense of continuity of identity across different situations: (Interviewer: “do you think there's any way tattooing has changed your life ...) *I think in that I can't hide who I am anymore. I've always sort of been inclined to make myself smaller so that I can fit in. But now it's like, I am who I am and people can see that I'm not just a sheep. And I have to live up to that now"*.

Returning to the distinction between oppositional and alternative practices, the participants' discourse attempted to legitimate tattoos as an acceptable, normal practice *within* the space provided by hegemonic society. There did not seem to be an attempt to replace the existing norms, but rather tattooees drew on discourses that reframed tattooing as an innocent practice: *"it doesn't make me a bad person, it's just something I like, I appreciate the art, and it tells my life story and it's something I wanna do"*. (emphasis added). This is in marked contrast to the emphasis on transforming bodily norms that is evident in the Neo-Primitive movement amongst American and Canadian tattooees (Atkinson & Young, 2001), revealing the contextual location of tattoos as a statement of non-conformity. Perhaps, in the more conservative climate of (white, middle class) South Africa, to simply "bravely stretch and push forward the definition of acceptable appearance" (Polhemus & Randall, 1996:7) is enough to make a statement without the conscious articulation of a challenge to society. As Radley (1991:111) puts it, the body styles of dissenters are "responses within a culture, to that culture". In this regard we note the limitations of the present study restricted as it is to the perspectives of white and broadly middle-class participants.

While their individual tattoos may have had complex personal symbolism, being the owner of a tattooed body is a definite social fact, whether this was deliberately used as a statement or not. The body, then, is clearly in the foreground rather than the background of any consideration of identity. In a culture that gives priority to the verbal, tattooees affirm the body as a legitimate way of knowing the world (Radley, 1991). This study therefore contributes towards the reframing of the body as an essential aspect of our reflexivity. Through their conscious use of the body as part of their identity projects, tattooees perhaps make visible what the rest of society unproblematically engages in on a daily basis - the presentation of self through making the body “speak” for one. In this way tattooees can be seen to be problematising what is taken for granted, and therefore engaging in a practice of questioning “the given”. Whether tattooing represents a

conscious use of the body to articulate values about the ills of our society or simply "*just another form of adornment*", albeit with serious artistic merit, depends on what kind of identity project the tattooee is currently engaged in, and consequently, what kind of significance his or her body project will have.

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