You think it, they ink it: Interactive service encounters in the tattoo industry

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To Bumpa and Dad,
the only two people who wanted me to finish this more than I did.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Tattooing - The Banal Bacchanal

I decided to get a tattoo not long after my 18th birthday. Being a stereotypical rebellious 18 year old, I did not tell anyone when I went to get my first tattoo and went to a shop that I knew nothing about and had never researched. I don't remember much about getting the actual process of getting the tattoo, but I do remember that a woman who worked in the shop had a baby with her who spit up all over my bag. While I was waiting to pay, another tattoo artist commented on my clothes – I had come from work and was still wearing my uniform of navy blue Dickies brand workpants and steel-toed Dr. Martins boots. He pulled up my pants leg to see the color of my shoelaces, telling me that he was checking to see if I was a skinhead. Skinheads in the area would wear similar boots with white laces, while SHARPS, or SkinHeads Against Racial Prejudice wore purple. My laces were black. Upon noting this he remarked how glad he was that they weren't purple. When I made an uncomfortable joke about how this was just my uniform and my hair was too long to be mistaken for a skinhead, he replied very seriously that he knew lots of skinhead women with longer hair that mine. I never went back to that shop again.

Shortly thereafter I decided I was ready for another tattoo, this time choosing to work with an artist named Chris who came highly recommended by my older sister and several of her coworkers. The tattoo was on my back, which required me to remove my shirt. As a result I found myself sitting in an open floor-planned room in the middle of a strip mall facing a wall of windows, in nothing but jeans and a bra. My first two sessions were later in the evening when no one else was in the shop, and Chris went out of his way to make me feel comfortable – making small talk, telling stories about his wife and children, and joking around to put me at ease and

distract me from the pain of having the skin over my spine tattooed. It wasn't until our last session that the dynamic changed. It was the middle of the afternoon, and the shop's other tattoo artist, Jerry, was also there. Jerry did not have a client booked for the time I was being tattooed, so he took the opportunity to sit with us and tell a long and explicit story about the erotic dream he'd had the night before about the nurse who had recently helped to deliver his infant son. He then rolled his chair directly in front of where I was sitting in order to inspect and then comment on my breasts. I made a joke to change the subject, and continued to sit there trying to hide both my physical and emotional discomfort while Chris finished my tattoo. I never returned to that shop either.

I tell these stories not because they are reflective of most tattoo experiences – indeed these first two interactions of mine were the worst I have ever had. And while I am only one person, over the past 15 years I have been tattooed by more than a dozen different artists in nearly 20 different tattoo parlors. My personal N of one is not meant to stand in for all people's experiences, but it was these early interactions that made me first come to realize that the process of getting tattooed matters just as much as the tattoo itself. In both instances I was happy with the aesthetics of the tattoos I received, yet in both cases I chose not to return to these shops when I decided I was ready for another tattoo. In neither case did I feel physically unsafe or threatened, although perhaps in hindsight I should have. Rather, I simply felt that I did not belong in these particular environments or with these particular people. Not because I thought I didn't belong in a tattoo shop, but because I didn't belong in *those* tattoo shops. I loved the tattoos that I ended up with, but I hated the interactions I had while getting them. So I kept shopping around, skipping from artist to artist until I found tattooists who I felt were more like me, or at least more like the way I wanted to think of myself in relationship to tattooing.

Over time I began to suspect that perhaps I was not the only person who felt this way. Maybe other consumers had specific personal needs from their tattoo interactions. But what might those look like for people other than myself? And what about the tattoo artists? My later experiences showed me that not all tattoo artists were like the first few I met – some were funny, some were weird, some seemed deeply uncomfortable making conversation and some couldn't be made to stop talking. In short, they were just as diverse and varied in their personalities as members of any other occupational group. How did they understand their clients and the work they were doing, and what did the interactions mean to them?

In this dissertation I use interview data with tattoo artists and tattoo consumers in order to build upon my early personal experiences and better theorize how service interactions between tattooists and their clients are enacted and understood by both parties. I understand the interactive service interaction that takes place between a tattoo artist and client as a source of meaning-making for both the client, who is engaging in consumptive identity formation, and the artist, who is enacting his or her own occupational identity and reputation through work. I argue that clients have distinct typology of narrative needs that they bring into these interactions and expect to enact though the service interaction. Tattoo artists recognize and understand these expectations, and categorize their clients into a typology of needs from their vantage point.

Tattooists understand that in order to have a successful career they must meet the needs of their clients, but they also experience tensions in navigating and negotiating the spectrum of power and control between themselves and their clients. I find that when artists feel their understandings of themselves as workers and occupational reputations are threatened by client desires or behaviors they will exert their autonomy and authority in order to control the service interaction. While these service interactions can range from jovial to violent, a communal

process takes place wherein both actors are able to co-construct and communicate their social understandings of themselves as consumers, workers, and individuals.

Tattooing as a Sociological Construct

Tattooing is a topic that is ripe for study from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Tattooing is simultaneously exciting and mind-numbingly tedious, complicated and basic, deeply unique and utterly unremarkable. It is nearly impossible to get tattooed without experiencing an adrenaline rush as the body reacts to the mild trauma of repeatedly having the epidermis punctured by needles while ink is permanently deposited in the underlying dermis. But in the midst of a lengthy session the initial autonomic response wears off, and the body becomes wearied by the monotony of the movement and achy as the inflammatory response kicks in. Tattoos have the potential to be extraordinarily intricate, with accomplished artists specializing in everything from photorealism to forced perspective. But the mechanics of tattooing are ancient, and even modern electronic tattoo machines have not been updated dramatically since their predecessor, the electric pen, was invented by Thomas Edison in 1876 (U.S. Patent 196,747). And while every tattoo is one-of-a-kind, their ever-increasing popularity means that they no longer set the wearer apart from society or carry the same cultural significance that they used to. In 1999, one-in-five households (21 percent) reported at least one household member with a tattoo. By 2014 this figure had nearly doubled to 40 percent (Polidaro 2014). Yet the same time that tattoos have become more common, they still retain references to their old meanings of rebelliousness and outsider status (Frenske 2007), hence the relative frequency with which people tell me that they are surprised to learn that a nice, smart girl like me has so many tattoos.

Tattooing as a method for permanently marking bodies stretches back further than recorded history, with the oldest currently known example being Ötzi the Iceman, the well-

preserved mummy of a European man thought to have died in 3501 BC with tattoos still preserved in his skin (Bonani et al 1994; Dorfer et al 1999). The practice of tattooing has persisted across cultures and throughout history and evidence of it exists in almost all parts of the world (Caplan 2000). Tattoos are uniquely interior and exterior, as they exist both on and under the surface of the skin, both highly visible and out of reach, and thus can "carry the culturally specific meanings assigned to the fundamental distinction between interior and exterior" (Caplan 2000: xiii). Each tattoo has a boundary status, which is mirrored by their cultural use as an unnatural but intentional mark of difference.

The history of tattooing deserves its own dissertation, but what is most relevant in the case of this research project is not tattooing's source or many manifestations across time and space, but rather the art form's ever-changing social meanings. Pre-16th century the Greeks, Romans, and Celts used tattooing to mark the bodies of criminals and slaves while early Christians used tattoos as a way to show their religious servitude to Christ (Gustafson 2000; Jones 2000; MacQuarrie 2000). During the Napoleonic Wars French and Prussian soldiers voluntarily marked themselves with tattoos, while at the same time English authorities were forcibly tattooing inmates (Caplan 2000). By the Victorian Era, tattooing was no longer associated primarily with criminals and became surprisingly popular among wealthy social circles after the Prince of Wales was tattooed during a trip to Jerusalem, but the art form would eventually fall out of favor with elites once again (Bradley 2000).

In the American context, tattoos gained widespread popularity in the mid 19th century among sailors and merchant seaman as a way to show devotion and loyalty to the nation, although by WWI the military was discouraging the practice among its members due to concerns around morality and hygiene. The first recorded professional tattooist, Martin Hildebrandt,

opened up shop in 1846 and Samuel D. O'Reilly invented the electric tattoo machine around 1890 (Govenar 2000). This allowed tattooing to be faster, less painful, and to involve greater detail and shading. The development of the electric tattoo machine meant that tattoos became more aesthetically pleasing and it was around this time that informal training apprenticeships for budding tattoo artists began. Tattoo artists 'Lew the Jew' Albert and Charlie Western also changed the industry in the early 1900s by being among the first artists to sell their "flash," pre-drawn designs that are transmitted to the skin using transfer paper and then permanently traced with the tattoo machine (Ibid; Sanders 1986). This shift meant that individual tattooists did not need to be great artists, just competent technicians, to be able to give their clients exactly the designs they wanted. In the 1920s and 30s tattooed men and women could make a living showing their bodies in circuses, carnivals, and dime museums – there were 300 people thus employed in 1932 (Sanders 1986). But by the 1940s tattooing had become so common it no longer has the same appeal and this practice started to die out. The culture of the 1950s, one of conformity, early marriage, and suburban living, eschewed tattooing, which by this time has become associated with juvenile delinquents, the working class, drunks, hot-rodders, motorcycle clubs and street gangs. Stereotypes of tattooing as deviant and perverse persisted until the 1960's when contemporary artists with formal training started practicing the art form. By the 1970s tattoo shops had branched out to serving a broader, more diverse clientele, and in 1976 the first World Convention of Tattoo Artists and Fans was held in Houston, Texas. By this time modern tattooing as we now know it was firmly in place. (St. Clair and Govenar 1981; Sanders 1986; Rubin 1988; Govenar 2000).

The particulars of tattooing, how it takes place, among whom, and with what socio-cultural meanings have changed over time, yet interestingly, sociology has tended to ignore this

form of bodily expression (DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003). Sociological research on tattooing has generally focused on the 'deviant' aspects of modern body modification and/or the meanings individuals attach to their tattoos (Grief, Hewitt and Armstrong 1999; Carrol and Anderson 2002; Deschenes, Fines and Demers 2006; MacCormack 2006) or as a theoretical tool to better conceptualize the social construction of the body and subjectivity (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 1992; Sullivan 2001). While these are all interesting and rich studies, they do not address the aspects of tattooing that I am most interested in: tattooing as a form of interactive service work.

Tattoo artists themselves have rarely been the focus of investigation, and when they are it is often in relation to their dual identities as both producers and consumers (Irwin 2003). The unit of analysis is almost always the content and display of tattooed bodies, rather than the delivery of the tattoo(s). When tattoos or tattooing have been studied, the focus has usually been placed on the consumers of tattoos, rather than on artists who create the work (Greif, Hewitt and Armstrong 1999; Carroll and Anderson 2002; Irwin 2003; Deschesnes, Fines and Demers 2006; MacCormack 2006). As a result, we are left with very little academic literature pertaining to how tattooists think about, define, and describe their work.

There are two notable exceptions to this: work by Michelle Lee Maroto (2011) and D. Angus Vail (2000). Maroto uses tattoo artists and body piercers as a case study through which to better understand how independent contract workers use formal and informal professionalizing strategies to manage and address changes to their occupation. The growing popularity of tattooing can mean increased business for some tattoo artists, but it also results in increasing competition and the potential for greater outside intervention, such as governmental regulation, into the occupation. Maroto found that when control was threatened, tattoo artists and piercers attempted to exert jurisdiction over their occupation, informally through social networks and

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formally through standardization and regulation. Notably she found that these efforts did not fall into the typical process of professionalization, or into the development of a partial profession because tattooists do not exhibit the same characteristics found in many other occupations such as a clear line of demarcation between "qualified" tattooists and amateurs, or an organization intended and able to oversee members of the occupation.

Maroto's work highlights one of the appealing aspects of studying tattooing as an occupation. Many artists are entrepreneurial in their artistic endeavors, often due to the highly competitive and unstable nature of their fields. However in many other artistic fields, such as the music industry, there is a history of production being organized around business interests with key players who are not themselves artists calling many of the shots (Cornfield 2015). American tattooing has never taken this organizational form.

Virtually all tattoo artists are independent contractors working relatively autonomously alongside each other in tattoo shops. In most cases, tattooists who are not owners pay to rent a space in a shop and contribute either a flat rate or a percentage of their earnings back to the owner. These percentages vary, as do the amenities provided by shop owners. Tattooists, in the majority of cases, are at minimum responsible for their own tattoo machines, needles, ink, and basic supplies, and are expected to build and maintain their own clientele. Tattooing is a highly autonomous occupation, and thus it is not surprising to find that the process of professionalization would play out in different ways than the prevailing theory would suggest.

Vail's earlier work deals with many of the same themes as Maroto's, although his research is framed within the history of tattooing rather than the sociology of work. Although published 11 years before Maroto's research, Vail found that even then tattoo artists were concerned with changes to their occupation as a result of a broadening clientele and increased

competition. While his research focus was solely on artists, Vail conceptualized tattooing as service work, even if he did not use those terms. Recognizing the importance of clients to occupational dynamics, his research concentrated on how clients "act individually and collectively to shape and redefine the iconographies and motifs commonly employed in the tattoo world" (2000:58) continuing to focus on the content and aesthetics of tattooing. Vail was the first researcher to study tattooists as service providers, and his findings primarily elucidated how they differentiated themselves from competitors through training, pedigree, and aesthetics.

Tattooists do not conduct their work in isolation the way some creative workers can, as it is an art form that uses live bodies as its canvas. Building off the work of Maroto and Vail, I am primarily interested in understanding tattoo artists not as artists, or deviants, or embodied subject-makers, but as service providers. Tattooing provides a compelling case study through which to analyze the larger service economy. While tattooing is an outlier in some respects – it is an unusually entrepreneurial industry that creates richly meaning-full products in an emotionally and physically heightened environment – useful themes can be gleaned that apply to other creative service work as well. And because tattoos are directly related to individuals' creation and presentation of self-identity (Kosut 2000), the study of tattooing provides insights into the sociology of work by enabling the fruitful study of both producers and consumers.

Service Work and Consumption

Although tattooing is in many ways an exotic case study, it is very clearly a form of service work. Broadly speaking, service work is understood to differ from other forms of work due to the immediate presence of the consumer (Leidner 1993). While a restaurant chef, a factory line worker, and an author may all be involved to some extent in the creation of a product that will eventually be consumed by someone (a meal, a widget, a book), in only one of these

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instances does the worker's labor involve coming into direct contact with the individual who will ultimately consume the fruits of their efforts. Service provision is theoretically distinct from other forms of labor for this reason – in no other types of jobs does the customer co-create the labor interaction in the same way.

Tattooists interact directly with their clients, and there is quite literally no way to automate, offshore, or outsource the process. But the embodiedness of tattooing is not the focus of my research, fascinating though it may be. Tattoo artist/client interactions are deeply laden with meaning for both parties. Modern consumption and consumptive identity formation are seen as involving active engagement on the part of the consumer (Dewey 1980; Hebdige 1981; de Certeau 1984). In short, people buy things and display them to others in order to communicate a message about who they believe themselves to be and how they want to be seen by others. The notion that individuals consume to construct an identity is hardly groundbreaking; Veblen published on the topic of conspicuous consumption in the late 19th century ([1899] 2005). Sociologists recognize that consumption is a social behavior that can serve to socially construct and reproduce differences in class, sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity (Bourdieu 1984; Schor 1999).

While people certainly purchase consumer goods in order to meet the material necessities of life, the proliferation of options in our highly globalized economy made possible in large part through economic shifts towards offshoring, exploitive labor, environmentally unsound transport, the easily availability of international online shopping, and abundant credit, result in a marketplace where identity is formed not only though what category of product one consumes, but also what brand and purchased from where. In an environment where virtually

indistinguishable consumer goods can easily be acquired from numerous sources, the method of acquisition can, at least in some instances, take on heightened importance.

For example, in many metropolitan areas it is de rigeur for middle class professionals to eat healthy, organic foods. But while most of the grocery stores in the area sell organic produce, people proudly display their reusable Whole Foods grocery bags even when they are not grocery shopping. Identities are not created solely for the self, although the self is one intended audience. They are also meant to be communicated to the everyday audience around us. What use is eating all that kale if others don't know about it, and why pay the higher prices for the same or very similar products at Whole Foods unless people will know that you have the means and resources to do so? As I argue in more depth in Chapter 2, the method and location through which consumer goods are acquired can be every bit as meaningful to consumptive identity formation as the products being consumed.

But physical objects are not the only products being consumed. Part of this consumptive identity formation process involves the consumption of interactive services in addition to material goods. Consumption does not have to be a passive process wherein consumers simply accept the good presented to them to purchase or use. Consumption itself can be a form of production, involving creative resistance and the reclamation of autonomy through tactics of consumption such as reappropriation and poaching, which can result in the re-production of a distinct product or experience (de Certeau 1984). These can range from "life hacks" in which everyday products are used in novel ways to save money or time, to the creation of wholly new consumable products such as fan fiction, where consumers create new works of fiction using characters or settings imported from original works by others (Jenkins 1988). In my research I

argue that consumption can also involve the production of interactive service interactions, which are used to help create and bolster consumptive identity.

Tattoos are a consumer good with clear and obvious links to identity. While their social meanings have shifted and changed over time, they continue to mark their wearers in particular ways that always tell a story – even if that story is contested. The study of the interactions that take place in tattooing can help shed light on how consumers understand service provision as a part of their consumptive identity formation process, while also expanding the study of work to explore the meanings these interactions have for service providers as well.

While consumer identity formation has not been an explicit focus in the sociology of work, there has been previous research indicating the potential usefulness of such an approach. Gutek et al. (2000) conducted an empirical study analyzing the differences in customer experiences of 'service relationships' (instances where specific service providers work with the same customer repeatedly) and 'service encounters' (instances where the service provider and customer are unknown to one another and are unlikely to interact again in the future). They found that service relationships, which were built on trust and mutual communication, were more likely to be formed by clients with their hair-stylists than with automotive-care providers or health-care providers. This finding, when combined with cultural theories of consumptive identity formation, begins to suggest that interactive services that focus on presentation of the self may be theoretically distinct from other types of services.

While there are data indicating the diversity of service interactions between workers and clients, the organization of service work has been primarily understood using the triangular model, which recognizes service work as distinct from other types of labor due to the immediate presence of the customer who acts as co-producer of the service interaction (Leidner 1999). This

theoretical framework understands service workers as caught between the competing demands of customers who co-create the work, and managers who have their own agendas. Customers desire to fulfill their own needs through the interaction while management strives for the most cost-effective, rational, and routinized processes possible.

Imagine the typical high-end retail worker, a job I held at a variety of both chain and independent stores throughout my early 20s. Despite working in a low-wage job with unpredictable scheduling and no benefits, high-end retail workers are expected to meet the desires of their supervisors by keeping the merchandise neatly organized on the floor in addition to quickly and efficiently ringing up purchases. Customers on the other hand, often expect to have additional stock pulled for them if they cannot immediately find what they are looking for and want reviews of products and suggestions on what to purchase, all while expecting the worker's undivided attention and friendly chitchat. These competing demands are understandable under the circumstances. Management, under late Capitalism, wants to cut labor costs by employing minimal staff engaging in rationalized and routinized efficient labor. Consumers, on the other hand, are in this case shopping not just for a product but also for additional support for their socially constructed sense of self. In order to fulfill that need, the worker must play her/his part in the interaction lest it come across as unsatisfying for the customer. Workers must therefore develop skills to manage the competing points on the triangular model of power, oftentimes while earning little more than minimum wage.

While the triangular model of power relations in service work has been hugely influential contribution to the sociology of work, it has been refined and challenged by other scholars. Through his research on hospitality workers in South Africa, Jeffrey Sallaz uses Pierre Bourdieu's work as a theoretical framework through which he identifies three problematic

assumptions about service work: that service work is a self-evident concept, that service work involves demands imposed on workers by management, and that competition leads to an increased emphasis on the importance of customer service (2010). These assumptions were made clear through his observations of the symbolic struggles playing out between management and workers at the "Rainbow City" resort, where managers did not understand the labor of workers as "service" while workers wanted their labor classified as such in order to gain access greater occupational prestige and honor.

Other scholars have similarly identified some of these underlying assumptions about power relations in service work, and the extent to which they are alienating or empowering for workers (Lopez 2010). While some of the emotional labor expected of service providers can have a negative impact on workers (Hochschild 1983), a continuum exists between coercion and what Lopez refers to as "organized emotional care," through which workplace rules and procedures are intended to support relationships rather than to impose and enforce emotional feelings and displays (Lopez 2006). Sallaz and Lopez are correct to point out that service work and the power relations within it are highly contested and variable, but both continue to build upon the work of Leidner by assuming that even in situations where there is little coherence within each point on the triangle, the triangle – consisting of workers, management, and customers – still exists.

Tattooing does not fit this model. Most tattoo artists are effectively self-employed contract workers; there simply is no meaningful management structure within the vast majority of tattoo parlors and none of the artists I interviewed described managerial oversight. However, the lack of a bureaucratic organizational structure and oversight through management within

tattoo shops does not mean that tattoo artists are free to operate in whatever fashion they choose. As in other types of independent contracting, workers have control but also face constraints.

Entrepreneurial service work includes tattooing but also covers a variety of other fields, and is increasingly common in what some have called the "freelance economy" (Eha 2013). As manufacturing has declined, the number of quality jobs paying a living wage with benefits such as health insurance and pensions has declined for workers without a college degree (Smith 2012). The Great Recession of 2008 only exacerbated this trend. While workers across the income spectrum lost their jobs, the majority of losses were concentrated among the middle class. High-income jobs lost during the Recession have rebounded, but job growth in the middle has not. Instead, jobs paying middle-class wages have largely been replaced with ones offering low pay (National Employment Law Project 2012), a trend which has been accompanied by a rise in contingent labor as workers struggle to make ends meet. Jobs are increasingly precarious by design, even for workers with more technical skills or formal education. Entrepreneurial work is particularly common among artists, who are more likely to be self-employed with multiple income streams compared to other types of workers (Markusen 2013; Cornfield 2015).

Some scholars argue that the types of entrepreneurial, contract labor that tattoo artists engage in can be experienced positively by workers, who see the potential to operate outside bureaucratic constraint and expand their career opportunities and workplace autonomy at the same time that they must navigate risk (Neff 2012). Others argue that rather than presenting greater freedom, these work arrangements curtail economic freedom by undermining the protections, both organizational and legal, that have historically protected workers against economic uncertainty (Bernhardt et al 2008). Regardless of whether the freelance economy helps or hurts workers, it seems clear that it does subject workers to what Steven Vallas has dubbed

"responsibilization", the process through which workers are expected to assume total responsibility for turning themselves into the ideal employee – maximizing their skills and human capital in order to be able to take full advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities (Vallas and Preneer 2012). Because contract workers have clients rather than employers, they are exempt from the structural authority of workplaces and perform their skills in order to instill confidence in their abilities (Osnowitz 2010).

How can these theoretical models be understood simultaneously? If service workers are understood to operate under the triangular model of power relations where they are caught between the needs to management and customers, does that power dynamic shift when they are not formal employees? How do entrepreneurial, independent contractors manage power relations within service interactions in the absence of a meaningful bureaucratic structure? And to what extent does the consumptive identity formation and meaning making that serve a backdrop for service interactions affect the actions of both participants?

Although I believe that service interactions can be meaningful in relation to a broad array of consumable products and experiences, my dissertation focuses specifically on the case study of tattooing in order to answer these questions. In my research I use the study of tattooing to modify the triangular model of the service industry, and utilize cultural notions of identity formation to further analyze the importance of the service interaction. Through interviews with tattoo artists and individuals with tattoos, I explore the meanings that clients bring into the service interaction, and the ways tattooists manage these expectations. I examine how and when artists cede power to their clients, and alternatively, how and when the stakes become too high and artists feel compelled to exert power over the service interaction. Through my research I argue that tattooing is a form of entrepreneurial interactive service work, and that tattooists

engage in communal, albeit highly contested, meaning making through the service interaction. The power relationship between tattooists and their clients does not fit neatly into prevailing theoretical models, but rather emerges as a contested landscape for the construction and communication of consumptive identity and occupational reputation.

Methods and Data: Interviews with Tattoo Artists and Clients

The data for this project were collected through in-person, semi-structured, anonymous interviews with tattoo artists (N=25) and people with tattoos (N=25). I chose interviews as my preferred method for this project in order to produce highly detailed descriptions of processes and respondents' interpretations (Weiss 1994). The use of interviews allowed the participants in my study to frame their actions and understandings in their own words, which was valuable since I was dealing with largely understudied populations (Reinharz 1994).

In part due to logistical necessity, I limited my sample to artists and tattooed individuals within a large metropolitan area of a Southern state. This provided a benefit by allowing me to draw from the same occupational community. While I did not disclose the identity of any of my participants, at several points during my data collection process, tattooists mentioned or told stories about other artists whom I had already interviewed or who later became part of my sample. Although all my interview subjects resided in the same geographic area, the nature of the tattoo industry provided variation, as tattoo artists are often relatively mobile. I included within my sample both people who had learned to tattoo and had worked in other parts of the United States, as well as those who had built their entire career in the area.

In order to identify potential interview subjects, I created a master list of all the tattoo parlors in the area, and began visiting them in order to introduce myself and attempt to solicit interviews when possible. There were a number of tattooists who were extremely skeptical and

who either refused my request or were too busy to meet with me, which was not unexpected. Once initial interviews with artists had been conducted, I utilized a snowballing procedure wherein participants were asked to refer other artists they knew who might be interested in speaking with me. I continued this procedure until I had reached my desired N of 25 interviews. These interviews ranged in length from 1 hour to over 3 hours. Because I limited my sample to one metropolitan area, I cannot ensure that my findings will necessarily be generalizable to the larger tattoo industry. While it is possible that there is something unique to the occupational community I drew my sample from, the diversity of backgrounds and experience of the artists I interviewed leads me to suspect that is not the case.

Interviews with tattooed individuals were more straightforward to collect. Advertisements were placed online through Craigslist, which yielded the majority of my sample. I also used my own interactions with strangers across the geographic area of my sample to recruit potential subjects, although only 2 of the 25 client interviews were identified in this manner. These interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour. Participants in the client interview were compensated with a $10 iTunes gift card; tattoo artists were offered a $20 gift card due to the more onerous nature of the longer interviews. All honoraria were paid out of my own personal funds.

While I attempted to develop as diverse a sample as possible, I was met with some constraints. Tattooing is a male-dominated industry, and as a result I was only able to identify and interview five women tattoo artists. My interviews with clients were somewhat more balanced, as I was able to interview nine women with tattoos in addition to 16 men. My sample was not racially diverse, although I did make attempts to interview artists of color. All 25 of the

tattooists who consented to be interviewed identified as White. Twenty of my client interviews were with White subjects, while the remaining five identified as African American.

I recorded my interviews digitally, most of which took place in coffee shops or tattoo parlors. I began submitting my recordings to a transcriptionist as I conducted the interviews, and coded the interview transcripts using the Atlas TI software throughout the data collection process. As relevant codes emerged out of the data I utilized theoretical sampling, by recruiting interviewees who could explicitly address the emerging theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). For example, near the end of my data collection it became clear that because the majority of my sample of tattoo artists were men, this may have been skewing my results. At this point I made a concerted effort to interview the few women artists working in the area. While ultimately their responses did not differ drastically from the men I interviewed, every attempt was made to make my sample as diverse and theoretically sound as possible. Once I identified overarching themes in at least 75 percent of my interviews ($N>=19$), I undertook additional rounds of coding to further uncover subthemes as well as points of overlap and discordance. These themes and subthemes eventually became the basis for the development of the theories and typologies presented here.

Throughout my dissertation I have chosen to quote extensively from my interview transcripts, in order to richly describe and bring to life the real-life examples of the themes that emerged from my data collection, but also to give voice to the clients and artists who generously agreed to let me interview them. Every tattooist that I interviewed expressed either surprise or disbelief that academics would be interested in their work or their opinions – and it is with that in mind that I chose to heavily feature their own words whenever possible.

Please see Appendices A, B, and C for a reproduction of the full interview guides used in the interview process and interviewee demographics.

Findings

Chapter 2 explores the narratives that clients carry with them when they enter into the tattoo interaction. These narratives are related both to what tattooing 'means' to the individual, as well as how being tattooed contributes to the construction of self identity, and how narratives influence both the expectations and the actions of the tattoo customer. I identify a typology of narratives, and find that most clients are attempting to construct an interaction that will bolster a commemorative, rebellious, or artistic narrative. These three narratives influence customer behavior, and create expectations for what the service provision should be like. In order to have a successful interaction, the tattoo artist must meet a client's narrative expectations.

Chapter 3 pivots to addressing the interactive needs of the tattoo artist. In this chapter I argue that the nature and structure of tattooing results in a type of labor that resists the routinization and rationalization found in many other forms of service provision. My research demonstrates that interactions between tattoo artists and their clients cannot be understood in terms of the triangular service model, and I present a new framework through which to better understand this type of artistic: entrepreneurial service provision. I argue that there are five ideal types of clients that tattooists interaction in their work, some of which tend to be appreciated more than others, but all of who have needs that must be met in order for a successful service interaction to take place.

In Chapter 4 I explore how artists address their least favorite types of clients, and the ways that tattooists have to cede power in order to engage in service provision. While tattoo artists may complain about certain types of clients or wax poetic about the joys of pure artistic

freedom, in reality they are very customer oriented. The tattoo industry is inherently contradictory; it represents self-determination and independence from the constraints of traditional employment while it also requires adhering to the sometimes unfortunate demands of clientele. This chapter details the ways that tattoo artists occupy a middle ground between exerting total authority and being subjected to total control, and the circumstances under which they are willing to relinquish power to their clients.

Chapter 5 details what happens when tattoo artists are not willing to surrender their ability to control the service interaction, and instead exercise job authority and autonomy over their clients. The tattoo industry is one where an artist's occupational reputation is key to economic success, and past clients communicate that information through their tattooed bodies and the stories they tell about their service interactions. As is addressed in chapter 4, most artists are interested in meeting the needs of their clients, but when their occupational reputations are challenged, they must either convince the client to yield to their authority or else exercise their autonomy by terminating the interaction.

The findings outlined here are specific to the case study of tattooing, but as I will show there is ample reason to believe that similar processes occur in other occupations that involve direct interactions with clients, such as other forms of body work (including barbers, hair stylists and nail technicians) and other forms of artistic service provision (including some forms of photography and web design, among others.) This dissertation contributes new understandings to the sociological literature on service work by exploring how the needs of customers influence service provision and how service work is preformed in an entrepreneurial and non-bureaucratic setting.

Chapter 2

Stewed, Screwed, and Tattooed: Client Meanings in Tattooing Interactions

"I've got a blue tattoo, brand spankin' new.
It's a pretty, little, bitty work of art.
I got this blue tattoo when I lost you, and it's burning right over my heart.
Let me thank you dear, for my souvenir of a crazy night I got drunk on love and I woke up with a blue
tattoo…"
        – lyrics to "Blue Tattoo" by Marti Brom

"I am tattooed therefore I am…You know, no one can call into question my commitment, to whatever
it is, because I've got it right here. Maybe if I run across someone with the same tattoos that I've
got… Even then we wouldn't look down on each other, more than likely we'd be like, "Damn! He did
it too. I'm not the only crazy person" That's what it means."
        - Jason, 34 year-old, White CPA with 2 tattoos

"Stewed, Screwed, and Tattooed" first emerged as a popular tattoo image for early American sailors. It was originally intended to memorialize shore leave experiences when enlisted men, having spent months at sea, would descend on port cities to drink, meet women, and sometimes get tattoos. The traditional representation symbolizes this experience by juxtaposing images of an anchor, a liquor bottle, a young woman and a broken heart. Rockabilly singer Marti Brom narrates a somewhat similar experience, albeit from the female perspective. In her song, she sings of getting a "blue tattoo" over her heart after a drunken, and ultimately failed, romantic adventure. Both fictional and non-fictional accounts of tattooing are filled with narratives of individuals using tattoos as a way to symbolize people, places, and experiences that are important to them. As one of my respondents explained to me, tattoos are a way to permanently embody commitment to something: a lifestyle, a love interest, an ideology, an aesthetic, a favorite band, or anything else that one holds near and dear to their heart. Numerous scholars have explored the meanings that tattoos hold for people (Mascia-

Lees and Sharpe 1992; Grief, Hewitt and Armstrong 1999; Sullivan 2001; Carrol and Anderson 2002; Deschenes, Fines and Demers 2006; MacCormack 2006); however, what actually happens during the process of being tattooed has been left relatively unexamined.

In this dissertation I argue that the *how* of tattooing is every bit as sociologically interesting as the who, what, why, when, and where. Increasingly diverse groups of people are now acquiring tattoos, and as a result the images themselves and the meanings behind them are broadly varied as well. In contemporary society the significance behind both specific tattoos, and tattooing in general, is as wide-ranging as the clientele. In this chapter I argue that individuals use tattoos as a way to communicate something about their sense of self to others, and as personal reminders to themselves. The meanings that tattoos hold for individuals, combined with how they think about tattooing more generally, influence the types of interactions that they hope to have with tattoo artists. The types of customer service desired by clients are thus determined both by what aspects of the self they are hoping to communicate through their tattooed bodies, and the broader cultural meanings they ascribe to tattooing. This chapter focuses exclusively on tattoo consumers, while future chapters explore the perspectives of tattoo artists.

Consumptive Self Expression

In the second decade of the 21st century, the claim that consumption matters should come as no surprise. In an industrialized, urbanized, and increasingly globalized society, lineage and social class no longer hold the determinative power they once did (Arnould and Price 2000). While at one time individuals could be easily known throughout the community by their surnames, occupation (or lack thereof), and reputation, the same is no longer true due to greater geographic mobility, the development of large urban centers, and an ever-expanding population. In certain ways, to be "known" requires more work than it did in the past. In conjunction with these social and spatial

changes, self-identity has become more malleable, and consumer choices have emerged as one avenue for the construction and communication of identity (Warde 1994; Dant 1999; Crane 2012; van der Laan and Velthuis 2016). Consumption is not simply about acquiring the material goods necessary for the continuation of life, though this is certainly a need that must be met, but also centers around creating a cohesive narrative about the type of person the particular consumer sees him- or herself to be. For example, all people need to eat to live, but the types of food chosen help to tell a story about the diner – race, class, gender, education level, 'worldliness', political leanings, and so on (Bailey 2007; Copelton 2007; Gough 2007).

Individual consumers make choices about what to purchase, and are more likely to consume objects and services that will allow them to develop a self-narrative that reflects the way they see themselves and wish others to see them. This is a continual process that must be monitored and tested over time, which allows for tinkering and modifications in order to achieve the desired result. As Anthony Giddens notes, "Each of the small decisions a person makes every day - what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself [sic] at work, whom to meet with later in the evening - contributes to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be. The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking" (1991:81).

While Giddens emphasizes choice, his assessment is not overly concerned with what would happen if one were to make the 'wrong' choices. In fact, in this formulation there is no such thing as a right or wrong decision. Different consumptive decisions would simply lead to a differently constructed identity. Other theorists, such as Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman, highlight the anxiety consumers feel in making these choices, and the responsibility that individuals face in crafting a biography (Beck 1992; Bauman 1998). My data suggest that both camps are partially

correct. Individuals do have a wide array of potential material products and non-material services they could utilize while crafting a self-identity. This is a weighty responsibility, and concerns seem to be less about making the 'wrong' selections, and more about the possibility that the audience reading them will misinterpret their choices.

In the age of mass production, abundant credit and relative comfort about acquiring debt, mass media, and the global reach of the Internet and social media, companies have been able to develop ever-wider customer bases. For example, Manolo Blahnik shoes, originally restricted to only the most wealthy and fashionable female consumers, were popularized to a broader audience in the late 1990s and early 2000s through HBO's "Sex in the City." As more and more women saw the shoes featured on the show and heard the characters talking about how desirable they were, this brand was made 'legible' to a wider audience. While they still remained prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of the population, new avenues opened to make them more widely available. As they became featured more prominently on shopping websites, more opportunities arose for them to be purchased at discounted prices, and previously worn pairs appeared more frequently on resale websites like EBay. New business ventures have popped up in the internet age that even allow individuals to "Rent the Runway," paying a fee to consume designer goods like Manolo Blahniks for a short period of time at rates that are far below the full purchase price. That the fashion tastes of the rich and famous would trickle down to the masses, or that lower-income consumers would want to present the illusion of being able to afford high-end luxury goods, is neither surprising nor new (Veblen [1899] 2005; Bourdieu 1984; Trigg 2001). However, what is new is the ability of more 'average' consumers to purchase the exact objects that were previously out of reach, rather than less expensive imitations.

Fashion choices and their related identifying characteristics do not always have to "trickle-down" from the haute couture runway to the discount bin at mass retailers – although that is a common trend that continues to persist (Crane 2012). At the same time that consumer products can make their way, in one form or another, from the homes and bodies of wealthy elites to the middle- and working-class consumers, the reverse is also true. Increasingly since the 1950's stylistic trends from subcultures and working class communities have also "bubbled-up" through ever changing consumer markets that require near constant change (Frank 1998; Polhelmus 2010).

Whether the item in question is the result of trickling-down or bubbling-up, the end result is that specific products such as designer shoes or, in this case study, tattoos, are both intelligible to a larger audience and also more widely available for consumption. This has both positive and negative results for the consumer. On the one hand, broader understanding of a specific cultural object reduces the chance that the audience will "misread" the intentions of the individual consumer. If a larger portion of the population knows what Manolo Blahnik shoes represent, then they carry more "bang for their buck"; individuals can worry less about whether the intended message will be communicated through wearing them. At the same time, as they become more available they simultaneously signify less; if both the CEO and the administrative assistant are wearing the same brand of shoes it becomes difficult to argue that they are communicating a message of rarified taste and access to resources.

I argue in this chapter that when the message contained in a particular object becomes muddled through its increasing popularity, the means through which it was acquired takes on heightened importance. The object continues to hold symbolic value, but the service interaction that was involved in the purchase of said object becomes part of the identity construction process. While the receptionist may have purchased last season's shoes online at a steep discount, the CEO bought

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the most recent design while sipping champagne in a designer boutique. That people will pay a premium to purchase very similar products under very different conditions indicates that the customer experience matters, even if the narrative of how an object was acquired will remain hidden to most of the audience. Remember, we do not simply create an identity for others to see, we are also constructing a biography for the self. Service interactions are an important part of the construction of a consumptive self-identity, because the way that an object is acquired can tell as much about the person as the object itself. Because of this, a distinct typology of consumer preferences exists among tattoo clientele. This typology demonstrates the difference and similarities across consumers of the same product, and reflects the individual desire to construct a personal narrative about one's identity through consumption of the service. These typologies are enacted through the expectations placed on tattoo artists, the way that individuals understand their own tattooed bodies, and the assumptions and expectations they project onto other tattoo consumers.

Service Interactions and the Self

Service work is centered on the needs (real or socially constructed) of the customer. Like manufacturing, service work has historically often been presumed to be exclusively concerned with cost cutting, profitability, and competition from other firms; thus the emphasis placed on customer service is thought to be the result of these issues. Many service providing organizations offer products that are nearly identical in nature, and as a result customer service has emerged as one of the ways that firms can differentiate themselves from one another (Sallaz 2002; Seymour and Sandiford 2005; Kang 2010; Sallaz 2010; Sherman 2010; Sureshchandar et al. 2010; Williams and Connell 2010; Korczynski 2013).

We can see evidence of this in our everyday lives. Advertisements remind consumers that "Nationwide is on your side", American Airlines invites one to "Come fly the friendly skies", and

Burger King assures potential customers that you can "Have it your way". These slogans make intuitive sense. It is difficult to imagine a consumer who wants to have an antagonistic relationship with their insurance agent, to fly with rude pilots and flight attendants, or to have their dietary preferences ignored by a fast food worker. While it is true that most people probably do not want to be mocked, harassed, or otherwise abused by service providers, customer needs are multi-faceted, and the options for the types of customer service being provided are far more nuanced and complex. Oftentimes, sociological literature has tended to assume that what is meant by "good" customer service is self-evident, when in fact it is not. The sociology of work writ large tends not to focus on why appeals to the quality of service speak to potential customers at present, and ignores many of the ways that service interactions may be socially important to the construction of a self-narrative or communicable identity. A notable growing body of literature examines the importance of social class to the provision and consumption of service interactions (Williams 2006; Sherman 2007; Sherman 2011; Hanser 2012). But class difference is only one of the identities that can be constructed and displayed through service interactions. Gender, race, ethnicity, and age also shape the experience of service interactions for both consumers and providers (Kulik and Robert 2000; Barker and Härtel 2004; Forseth 2005, Wägar and Lindqvist 2010).

While ample evidence exists to suggest that consumers use products as a way of building and expressing their identity and sense of self, sociologists have yet to fully explore the relationship between the 'sellers' and the 'buyers' (Giddens 1991; Featherstone 2007). In service work the 'merchandise' being sold is at least partially composed of the interaction between the worker and the customer. In some instances there is an additional material component (for example, in food service a meal is delivered) but in others the interaction is the only product (e.g. purchasing a massage). Because the connection between the service provider and client is often the focal point of the work

process, the line between the worker and the product can become blurred. The employee and his/her emotions, character, and personal characteristics become a part of what is being sold (Leidner 1999).

Service work involves elements of negotiation between the desires of customers and the needs of workers and management (Bolton and Houlihan 2010; Lopez 2010; Belanger and Edwards 2013). These mediations are most successful when the cultural expectations of clients are being met, although providers enter into interactions with their own set of expectations. In this way, service work, much like other forms of work, involves reinforcing and reproducing the dominant social structure through the enactment of conventional roles and stereotypes (Forseth 2005; Dyer, McDowell, and Batnitzky 2010; Brewster 2012). Neither workers or customer enter into service interactions as blank slates; ideologies are brought with them and shape their definitions of what 'good' customer service is and who they should presume to receive it from (Hanser 2005). Customers then expect, if not demand, service interactions that conform to their preexisting notions about both worker-client relations and the specifics of the product being consumed. Similarly, workers' labor serves as an extension of the self and reflects workers' own internalized understandings of their identities, those of their clients, and the cultural specificities regarding their line of work.

Simply put, 'good' customer service is not defined identically across employers, individuals, or interactions (Brady and Cronin 2001; Karl and Peluchetter 2006; Blair-Loy 2009). Different people expect different types of service depending on their own positions in society, that of the provider, and the type of service being purchased. For example, what would be read as 'good', or even merely 'satisfactory', customer service in a fast food establishment is very different than in a 4-star restaurant. In this chapter I use data taken from interviews with tattoo clients to explore how they differently frame their needs during the tattoo service interaction. Because tattoos are highly

individualized, embodied and often intensely personal, clients' needs from the interaction are different and may be more strongly felt in this case than in other types of service provision.

Tattoo Narratives

Tattoos are incredibly personal, far more so than many other aesthetic choices one can make (Bengtsson et al, 2005; Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson 2005). Needles are used to deposit ink beneath the skin, resulting in a permanent design that can range from excruciatingly crude to extraordinarily ornate. Once applied tattoos cannot be removed, at least not without an exponentially greater investment of time, money, and pain. Clothing and makeup can be taken off, hairstyles can be grown out or cut off, piercings can be removed, but tattoos are always on the body, which is either a benefit or a drawback depending on one's perspective. They are unnatural, in that no one is born with them, but they become a part of the body in a highly individualized way. Like a birthmark or a scar, tattoos are permanently embodied in the flesh, but unlike the aforementioned bodily differences, tattoos tend to be intentional and voluntarily chosen. While someone may come to regret their decision, in contemporary America, people get tattoos because (at least in the moment) they want to.

All of this is obvious. Everyone knows that tattoos are permanent, and this is one of the reasons why some people choose not to get them, or at least not to get many. And yet, one in five adults in the United States has a tattoo, including nearly half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29, with only a small minority claiming to regret their decision (Harris Interactive 2003; 2008; 2012). Gone are the days when having tattoos indicated that one was a biker, a criminal, or a circus freak. Both Barbie and tween heartthrob Justin Bieber have gotten tattoos; tattoos are clearly no longer markers of outsider status in the same way they may have been in earlier time periods.

The fact that tattoos continue to become more and more popular within the 'mainstream' culture results in challenges to their meaning. Fifty years ago in the United States there was a certain

type of person who got tattooed; today people from many walks of life have them (Jones 2000; Bengtsson et al. 2005). How do we, as the audience consuming the spectacle of others' tattoos, know what to make of them? Clearly the Hell's Angels member sporting his 1% tattoo is not attempting to cultivate the same image as the college student with a butterfly on her lower back, nor do we interpret the business man with his tribal armband in the same way as the young woman who has "Mama Tried" emblazoned across her neck. These examples are meant to be extreme, but the truth is that when the mere existence, or the content, of a tattoo fails to provide us with meaning, we are often left with competing interpretations of what they convey about the identity of the person wearing them. As more and more groups get tattooed, their ability to communicate certain things about the identity of the wearer is diminished.

Thus, the growing popularity of tattooing with both conventional members of society such as professional white collar workers and sorority/fraternity members, as well as with members of deviant groups such as bikers, gang members, and convicts suggests that the meanings brought into the interaction, and the desired tone of the interaction, will vary significantly. People tell all sorts of stories about their tattoos: what the imagery symbolizes to them, why they chose to get their first tattoo, why it is located on a certain part of the body, and so on. One variation of the tattoo story is the narrative of the service interaction through which it was produced. Since tattoos can be used to tell the stories of individuals or communities, to symbolize rites of passage, commemorate a particular event, or express defiance against authority (Beeler 2006), I argue that the meaning a tattoo holds for an individual, or more simply the meaning they attach to being a tattooed person, will influence the expectations that are brought into the service interaction.

There is reason to believe that tattoos, because of their durability and relative rarity, provide an example where the significance of the service interaction is heightened. Tattoos cannot be

changed as readily as other aesthetic choices relating to the presentation of self, and usually they are

relatively expensive. In most instances the decision to be tattooed is undertaken with serious

consideration and often involves a great deal of forethought and planning (Grief, Hewitt and

Armstrong 1999). The experience of getting a tattoo is often more time consuming than many other

service interactions, often lasting for hours, in addition to requiring intimate bodily contact. If tattoos

are treated more seriously than many other aesthetic choices, then at least for some individuals it

follows that the service interaction and the act of being tattooed is taken more seriously as well. If I

have a bad interaction with the stylist cutting my hair that results in a personally distressing result,

my hair will eventually grow out and I can decide to see someone else in the future. If I have a bad

interaction with a tattoo artist that results in an unsatisfactory tattoo, I am left with the decision to

either deal with the tattoo for the rest of my life, endure the added pain and expense of laser removal,

or have another even larger tattoo applied to cover it up. It will not simply go away on its own.

While the tattoo itself is the only tangible product at the end of the service interaction, there is

additional evidence that suggests the service experience itself may be an important part of the

consumption of tattoos. People tell stories about when, where, and how (in additional to with what

imagery) they were tattooed, and it is not uncommon for people to travel long distances to be

tattooed by particular artists and/or in specific settings (Beeler 2006). Recent years have seen an

increase in reality television programing overall, including the development of multiple programs

following the work lives of celebrity tattoo artists. There are more than a dozen different tattoo

programs that air or previously aired in the United States, and several more are allegedly in the works.

While these programs depict the process of tattooing, watching someone be tattooed is fairly boring

and the emphasis of the shows is the interactions between the artists and the clients, as well as the

artists with each other, the artists with their significant others, etc. Tattoo reality shows highlight and position the service interaction as meaningful, which likely has a recursive effect.

For example, the husband of a woman I know made the decision to get his first tattoo, a red and black "nautical" star on his back. Although they live in the South, he decided to be tattooed when he was in Los Angeles working. The design itself is a relatively simple tattoo staple, and were he to have had it done back home he likely would have paid somewhere around $60-75. Instead, he chose go to the tattoo parlor where the reality television show "L.A. Ink" is filmed. The artist who tattooed him is not featured on the show, nor did the physical layout of the shop allow him to come into contact with any of the cast members. The nature and simplicity of the design resulted in a tattoo that could have been done by any competent tattooist, and even the most knowledgeable tattoo aficionado would not be able to identify the artist just by looking at the work. He paid $250, plus tip, not so much for the design, which could have been done almost identically nearly anywhere, but for the *story* that he now has to tell about his tattoo. While this man's decision may be an extreme example, for some people, the experience of being tattooed is a part of their constructed identity as 'tattooed person'.

No two tattoos are ever the same. Even when the same artist uses the same stencil to do the same tattoo there are always differences. The individuality of all tattoos, coupled with the fact that the designs themselves may be custom pieces of art, leads to a highly personalized interaction with the tattooist. This effect is heightened by the fact that tattooing, like other forms of body work, often takes place in secluded rooms or locations, is unsupervised, requires intimate physical contact between the practitioner and the client, and involves a client body that is often prone and/or partially unclothed (Oerton 2004). Acquiring a tattoo then, means voluntarily subjecting one's vulnerable body to an artist in order to be permanently, and painfully, marked with a one-of-a-kind image.

Drunk spring-breakers aside, this is an interaction that is usually undertaken with at least some

forethought and consideration (Grief et al. 1999; Irwin 2001).

These interactions are often emotionally fraught, as my respondents almost universally

reported being nervous when they went to get their first tattoo. And they are not scenarios where

anything goes; most people take tattooing at least somewhat seriously due to tattoos' durability and

possible social stigma (Jones 2000; Martin and Dula 2010). As tattoos have become more widely

adopted and socially accepted, new demographics of clients have emerged (Almog 2003; Kosut

2006). Their motivations for getting tattooed are varied (Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler 2007), which

in turn influences the ways that they think about tattooing: what their tattoos will reflect about them

personally, what it means to be a tattooed person generally, and how they expect to be treated by the

artist working on them. As my data show, customers then come into the interaction with the tattooist

armed with narratives based on their expectations. In short, a person's reasoning for getting a tattoo is

reflected in the narrative they are hoping to enact with the tattoo artist. This in turn influences their

behavior, and more importantly, the ways they expect the tattooist to act; narratives determine how

customer service is interpreted and evaluated within the service interaction.

My data indicate that there is a distinct typology of narratives people bring with them to the

tattoo parlor. (See Appendix A for more details on the interview guide used in data collection on

tattoo customers, and Appendix C for demographic details.) These narratives contain the

expectations that a person holds regarding what is 'supposed' to happen when interacting with a

tattoo artist and obtaining a tattoo. They may be influenced by media depictions, past experience, or

information that has been gleaned from friends and acquaintances. These narratives are related to

what tattooing 'means' to the individual and they influence both the expectations and the actions of

the tattoo customer. In this section I will focus specifically on the three identified narratives

(commemorative, rebellious, and artistic) and how they relate back to the individuals' needs and expectations within the tattoo service interaction. In each instance I have chosen to focus on depth rather than breadth and include multiple, longer quotations from two interview subjects whose responses best typify the category. Narratives were not mutually exclusive, and each interview transcript included passages that were coded under more than one narrative. Each interview was assigned a dominant narrative based on the distribution of codes, based on both the number and length of coded passages. However, individual clients did express statements that reflected more than one narrative. However, they were assigned to a particular category based on whichever narrative was most frequently expressed in their interviews.

Commemorative Narratives

Some clients attach a commemorative narrative to the act of being tattooed. For these people, the desired interaction is viewed as ceremonial or as a memorial service, a relatively solemn and serious experience. This narrative is particularly common among people who are getting tattoos in remembrance of friends or family members who have died, or in instances where the tattoo has deep spiritual or emotional significance. Some examples from my interviews include a newlywed who chose an image symbolizing him and his new wife, a young woman with a large cross on her wrist reflecting her Christian beliefs, and a man who went with his then girlfriend to get their birth-years tattooed on their ankles. These interactions are often dominated by conversations about whatever is being memorialized, and tears or other emotional exchanges are not uncommon. While both the interviewees quoted in this section are women, this is a reflection of their eloquence rather than the gendered composition of this category. Of the six interviewees classified as belonging primarily to the commemorative category, two were women and four were men.

Jessica[1] is a White, 26 year-old, middle class mental health professional. She is a bubbly blonde who showed up to our interview at a coffee shop wearing trendy black-framed glasses and an otherwise non-descript outfit of jeans and a black V-neck top. In our email exchanges prior to meeting for the first time she came across as warm, accommodating, and excited to talk about her tattoos. As illustrated in the excerpts from our conversation, I found her honesty and candor to be both surprising and welcome. Very early on in the interview she told me the following about her experiences being tattooed:

> … (M)*y other (tattoos) are related to my struggle with bulimia. I've been bulimic since I was twelve, and I'm 26 now, so I've been in therapy for about 4 years and it's going really well, but it seems like every six months I decide to get a new tattoo that's like the next step in therapy so… yeah I guess it's just my way of like, kinda documenting and remembering, you know? It's permanent…and I think it's beautiful. I used to think that you should only get tattoos if you think that something's really important to you, but now I see a few people getting them and they have something silly or fun and I don't see anything wrong with that, so, I guess to each his own. But it's definitely a walking documentation of my life and I have three or four in progress.*

Several of my interviewees told me that part of their motivation for getting a tattoo was to permanently brand themselves with something that would help them to remember an important event or theme in their life. Faith is 22, African American, and a full time student and single mother. She is strikingly beautiful and poised in a way that reflects her years of training as a dancer. She brought her 1 year-old son to our interview, which presented some challenges but also allowed me to see a side of her personality that might otherwise have been hidden. She has two tattoos, and explained her decision to get the second one:

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[1] All interviewees are referred to throughout the dissertation using pseudonyms. Individuals were asked during the interview if they wanted to choose the name that would be attached to their quotes. Those with a preference are referred to using the name they chose, all others had names assigned to them.

I was in this situation with (the father of her son), just drama and I was like, 'I need to put myself first, I need to love myself first', so that was why I got this. It has a heart with my name in it, and it symbolizes that I will always love myself first and, well, being that he (gestures to her one year-old son) is here and I got that tattoo almost two years ago…(laughs)

Faith implied that in some ways the tattoo didn't "work" as a reminder to put herself first, as she got it during a rocky period in the failed romantic relationship with the man who later fathered her son. The point here is not that getting a tattoo will fix whatever problems it represents – Jessica still struggles with disordered eating and Faith continues to negotiate putting the needs of others before her own. What is interesting is that in these cases, attaching a commemorative narrative to tattooing influences both the types of service interactions these individuals desire, as well as what they think having a tattoo conveys both about themselves and other people.

While all of the people I interviewed about their tattoos said that they wanted to feel "comfortable" with the artist they were working with, what that actually meant differed depending on the narrative. When clients were enacting a commemorative narrative, it indicated wanting to work with an artist who would put them at ease by creating a serene environment where they could feel calm and relaxed. This may also involve spending significant amounts of time with the client, seemingly in part to justify the gravity of what they are undertaking together. People operating under this narrative take their tattoos seriously in a particular way, given what they represent, and they need to feel like the artists they are working with reflect that back to them. They go into their interactions with tattoo artists hoping to have whatever it is they are commemorating validated in some way. Jessica has been working with the same tattoo artist, 'Liz', for several years now.

Liz will spend two or three hours with something that I just kind of think, but don't have the perfect idea of, and just spend all day with me…Yeah, as far as how they tattoo, Liz counts to four and then picks up the needle for me because she knows that it really hurts. The

other guy I went to, he just kinda went and went and went, didn't really pay attention to me. He was talking to other people in the shop, it was much less personal. Just kind of a job…She was like that (attentive) from the very beginning, and every time I see her when I see her interacting with other people, she's the exact same way, and that may just be good customer service too, but yeah, I always felt really comfortable with her and she always seems to know her clientele, and she remembers everybody's names…

Jessica's tattoos represent something intensely personal about her life, and she keeps going back to Liz because she knows that there she will be treated like an individual, not just another random, faceless client.

Faith's tattoo represents something very different to her, but her needs from the artist she worked with were not entirely dissimilar.

I want to see your work, because I don't want it to have "Faith" and then it says, "Grace". I'm like, "NO, dude, this is what I want" and I want someone who's going to listen to what I want to do and understand me as a person. Like look, I know I'm going to give you a hard time with this tattoo, it's going to be an adventure, it's not going to be easy, but I want it, and I'm paying you, so we're gonna get through this together. (Laughs) That's the best way I can explain it. Just that overall atmosphere, I want to feel comfortable…Very much so. Like, that's very important to me, because if I don't feel comfortable I'm gonna tense up, that's gonna make it even more difficult for the both of us. This is a really bad example, but getting a tattoo is like going to the OBGYN you know, I want to feel comfortable. It's not gonna work if I don't feel comfortable with you. So that's very important to me.

Here Faith talks about feeling comfortable, but in the context of being understood as a person. Her joke about having the wrong name tattooed on her could be taken as concerns about the quality of the tattoo, but in the larger context of her interview it appears that part of that concern is related back to what it represents to her. What could possibly indicate being understood and recognized *less* as an individual than being called the wrong name? She was happy with her second tattoo not only because it looked the way she wanted it to, and because she strongly identified with the sentiment behind it,

but also because she had an interaction with the tattooist that validated her narrative in the first place. Her comparison to going to the OBGYN is interesting, particularly given the fact that she is a mother. In the same way that pregnant women seek out doctors, midwives, or doulas who will allow them to have the birthing experience they desire, Faith found a tattoo artist who would help her in having the type of tattoo experience that both made her feel comfortable, and validated the sentiment she was attempting to have commemorated.

Both women talked about their identities as tattooed people as important because it allowed them to publicly display something that would otherwise remain hidden. Tattoos allowed them to wear their personal struggles on their skin in and embodied and ultimately empowering way. Faith, whose second tattoo was on the forearm in a position that would be visible any time she was not wearing long-sleeves, told me:

> *I go for it for self-expression, like for things that have happened in your life, "Okay, well, this is something that I got past" and instead of getting a plaque or something, I want to commemorate this…It is an interesting topic of discussion when someone asks me why I got it…*

Jessica's response was also very similar:

> *…(I)t's awkward telling people that I struggled with bulimia... But that's part of my treatment, being honest about it, you know? Kind of like the shock value for them is good for them, in a way it's kind of my job to be honest about them and not hide them so people become more used to it and it becomes more normal to them…Yeah, I think they are a huge part of me because it's a walking, talking, no way around it, I can't have something tattooed on me and then go against. Tell you that I believe something else when it's on me that I do believe a certain thing. For me it's just a no fear kind of thing. I'm not afraid to tell you how I feel or what I think. What I believe in and what I don't believe in… Everybody…they change as they get older, but those core beliefs, of equal rights for everybody is so important for me that, I don't know, that's pretty much what I'm stamped with…Yeah, it's more of an advertisement to other people. It's like, especially now that I'm not as artistic looking, I don't*

have that little bit edge or alternative look anymore I think a lot of people see blonde hair
and not a lot of makeup, just kind of like the little… girl next door kind of look and when
they're like, "oh, tattoos, she has something to say." It is definitely a personal statement.

The narrative that these women are enacting through their tattoos both impacts the ways that they think about their own identities and reasons for choosing to be tattooed, but also how they "read" tattoos on other people. They understand other people to have similar narratives, even as they recognize that not everyone gets tattooed for the same reasons that they did. Jessica had a very different understanding of tattooed people than most of the population.

I definitely think that certain people who have tattoos, it gives them like, a look. More
of like a, they're more intellectual, they have more to say, they stand for more, and I tend to
hang out with those people.

While research shows that the majority of Americans think that tattoos make people look less intelligent, Jessica understands others through her own lens (Harris 2012). Because her tattoos represent her self-reflexive journey through life, she expects that others do as well.

Faith, in talking about why people may choose to be tattooed or not, had the following to say:

I just think it's like some people feel like they don't have to, well, not that they don't
have to but they can express themselves another way. Of course it's a personal choice, I
guess that for some people they don't have to do it, they can do it some other way, other
people are like, "well this is my body and this is the way I can express myself" Some people
have certain complexes so they do it to cars and you know, their outward appearance."

Again, instead of thinking that people may get tattoos for other reasons (pure aesthetics for example, or drunken thoughtlessness), Faith assumes that people are expressing something meaningful about who they are through their tattoos, embodying the same narrative that resonates with her.

Rebellious Narratives

At face value not everyone takes tattooing quite as seriously as those with a commemorative narrative do. Other people that I interviewed talked about getting tattoos as a joke, a dare, or simply

on a whim with little forethought. This is not to say that these individuals are not intentionally communicating something about themselves, but rather that they are enacting a different narrative. These individuals use tattooing as a way to mark themselves as rebellious outsiders in some way. Interestingly enough, interviewees taking this approach ranged from being heavily tattooed to having only one. It was not necessarily the number of tattoos, or their visibility, that indicated rebelliousness, but rather the narrative they attached to them. Nine of my client interviews were categorized as fitting primarily into the rebellious narrative, including three women and six men.

Jason is a 34 year-old White IT professional. I was studying at a coffee shop when he struck up a conversation with me about my tattoos, during which he enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed. He has a middle class job working for a large corporation, and he repeatedly talked about the tensions he felt between his "normal" life and the inner outlaw he understood himself to be. He met me for his interview one evening after work, and he arrived wearing slacks and a button down dress shirt, with the sleeves rolled up. It became clear over the course of our interview that he had intentionally cuffed his sleeves after leaving the office, since he makes a point of hiding his tattoos while at work. Jason has two tattoos, both of which are related to marijuana. The most visible is a tattoo on his forearm in a foreign language, which translates to "cultivator of cannabis".

> *I felt like I had trouble adjusting socially (after moving here), coming from (previous town) with a real liberal sort of scene and going through a divorce here and I felt kind of angry socially that I couldn't find people similar to me socially and so I felt like, " well, I'll just kind of brand myself out there" kind of like a social rebellion so to speak. Also the fact that I'm 34 and I grew up in this… my family was real strict, so you didn't have long hair or ear rings or tattoos, and now that I'm grown and my parents are older, I can do what I want. (Laughs)…Immediately they want to know what the writing on my arm says. Depending on who it is, it can change with the weather or the moment. Generally I'll tell them something like, "it means I make my own rules in life", because it does really. You know, I can assign, even though it may translate that to English, in my mind it's synonymous with lots of different*

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things, because it means lots of different things to me. And everything that I've told them, whether it's I make my own rules in life or I joke and tell "bad boy" or whatever, it's essentially been true. Because I my mind I do live a double life. I drive nice cars and I wear dress shirts and I do this, but I've got that inner freak in that I'm always going to be that chronic dissenter… It's tough, socially (here), like I've said, it's been an odd fit for me, and I've had a lot of trouble finding people I would say are professionals who want to live I guess kind of like that party lifestyle and not be screw ups. It's been very difficult here. Whereas from, where I was from, my college town, or even, say, (previous town), that's everywhere. It was par for the course.

For Jason, his tattoos mark him, both to himself and to potential friends and partners, as rebel who may appear to be straight-laced in his professional life, but who is actually a "bad boy"/"freak"/"dissenter".

Michael, in contrast, is a 27-year-old barista who is heavily tattooed, with his arms, hands, and chest nearly covered. He comes from a middle class family, but struggles to make ends meet in his day-to-day life. From the outside he appears to be the exact opposite of Jason, yet his approach to tattooing is very similar. Michael is a college dropout working in food service, has spent time in rehab due to a methamphetamine addiction, has a criminal record that he served jail time for, wears his hair in an elaborate and well-greased pompadour, and chain smoked Marlboro Reds throughout the course of our interview. (Interestingly, Michael was the most heavily tattooed respondent in my sample, and was also the most difficult of all of my interviews. Getting him to talk about his tattoos was extremely difficult, and he did mention that since he gets asked about them so often he doesn't really like discussing the topic.)

I don't know, I'm kinda random about my tattoos. I've got stuff just like… "well done" (tattooed across his knuckles) *was a dare… and I did it (laughs) a buddy I used to cook with dared me to do it, so… I'm really not that picky, I just like to get them, if it's quality… I mean, it's my body, I'm only going to be here for who knows how long. Might as well have fun with it while I can… when I was a little kid I always thought they were cool, and I don't know,*

ever since I was little I always told my mom I was gonna be covered in tattoos one day.

At first glance Jason and Michael do not necessarily appear to be talking about the same thing. Jason is very concerned with branding himself as a rebel, while Michael talks about his tattoos as "random", albeit permanent, markings on his body. However, at the root they are communicating a similar message. Jason might be more explicit in articulating it, but Michael is someone I know socially, and he is well aware that his looks make him stand out, and not always in a way that makes other people comfortable. His embodiment allows him to portray himself as nonchalant, but both men are using their tattoos to say the same thing – "I know the world expects this other thing of me, and I don't care."

If someone is interested in a rebellious narrative for their tattoo experience, they expect the artist they are working with to treat them in a way that reflects how they see themselves. This can potentially create conflicts, since not everyone thinks about tattooing in the same way. This was particularly an issue for Jason, since his work attire does not project the image of someone who views himself as operating outside of polite society.

> *I didn't want to feel like the tattoo artist was summing me up. Like "oh, here's another straight lace looking dude who's gonna come in and get his tattoo and whatever." I needed them to… I needed to feel like they were looking at me like… I needed to make sure that I made them understand that this isn't some whim decision that I'm having, I expect them to be as serious as I am about it, and to be professional about it. I was looking for a good vibe. Some of the places that I went, I went to another place around here, but I don't remember where it was. They're in a hurry or you'll have to come back in three hours. They're just so busy. For me this isn't no quick thing. I'm nervous as it is anyway. Really I was. I just, I knew I would know it when I found it kind of thing…*

Jason shopped around before getting his first tattoo, and he knew he had found the right place when he met an artist that he didn't feel was judging him for not already being heavily tattooed, and whom

he felt understood what he was trying to achieve with his tattoos. Michael had a slightly different take on what kind of experience he was looking for:

> …(N)ow that I've got two friends that tattoo…they don't charge me, so that's a lot different. You know, go hang out with your friends and listen to whatever music you want and shoot the shit, have a good time… It depends on the shop too I guess, where you're going… 'cause my buddy Bill has been in several different shops in town and it's a different vibe every other place he goes…Well he used to be at (particular tattoo shop), which was you know, kind of upscale. They're not as laid back and cool with everybody as… then now he's got his own shop so we pretty much do whatever the hell we want…at his shop we can smoke, you know, cigarettes upstairs, and stuff like that, and he's got a TV in the lounge, and we just hang out, drink beer, whatever. And, you know (at the previous shop), you couldn't do anything like that.

Michael doesn't have to worry about being read as a tattoo 'insider', both because he already has many visible tattoos and because he is going to his friends to have his work done. Since he already knows that he is understood as belonging in a tattoo shop, he can go about doing extra work to prove he is a rebel, by smoking indoors, getting drunk with the artist doing his tattoos (something many other people mentioned they would NOT want to have happen) and "hanging out", all of which may communicate to people like Jason that Michael is someone who belongs and they are not.

As was the case with the commemorative narrative, individuals who come into tattooing with a rebellious narrative use these expectations to understand both their own identity and the intentions of others with tattoos. Interestingly enough, people enacting the rebellious narrative were the only ones who claimed that their tattoos were not a significant part of their identity. Michael, who is very heavily tattooed, and has clearly spent a significant amount of time, effort, and money embodying a punk/rockabilly aesthetic, denied that his tattoos were important to his sense of self.

No, not really. Maybe a little bit, because they all mean something to me, but I'm really not the type of person to tell anybody what they mean, because, you know, it's my business. Yeah, I guess it kinda goes along with my style...

Jason's response was somewhat similar.

Well, for right now I would say they're… Now with the (marijuana) leaf thing, in the back of my mind I know that it's really extreme, hell I have a hard enough time finding a date anyway, there goes the rest of them. As soon as they see that… I think it's just kind of an underlying thing. I'm so multi-dimensional that they're not necessarily that important. They're the most interesting thing that I could think of to put on me. More so than tattooing, like, a Charles Dickens novel on me or whatever I'm into at that time. Whatever movie I'm into. (Marijuana)'s been the most long-term thing in my life, so I guess in some ways you could say that they are very… part of my identity. Because like I say they don't mean just one thing to me.

In both instances they are claiming that their tattoos are not that important, and I believe they are partially right. In contrast to the commemorative narrative, where the content of the tattoo is highly linked to the individual's sense of self, here the importance is being tattooed or not, rather than with what imagery. In this sense, the individual tattoos themselves matter far less than the fact that these men have them in the first place.

When asked about what it meant when other people have tattoos, again these men seemed to understand others' choices to be tattooed in relation to their own. Michael told me that when he sees other people with tattoos:

I guess it would make me think I could probably be their friend, you know, I'd like to hang out with them…I don't know, I feel like people who have tattoos, they kinda interact well together.

Again, Jason had a slightly different take, though there were similarities.

You know I don't really talk to guys about their tattoos and I do have a few friends that have them all over their back. And my friend Ryan he has them just because he thinks they're just badass. He'll choose these badass… say a dragon image and he got that all over

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his back because he just thought it was badass, but a lot of guys… My impression of a lot of guys is either that they're trying to give this impression that they're all hard, like to be superficial or to give a quick image without having to think. It's like the biker, that tells other guys, 'hey, I'm a bad ass, don't mess with me, I love my mama,' you know?

Jason's response is interesting; he both commends his friend for having "bad ass" tattoos, and then mocks other men for getting tattoos with the intention of communicating their 'badass-ery'. This highlights both the importance of a personal narrative, including the service interaction, in developing and communicating the desired identity. Jason knows his friend's motivations and the intention behind his tattoos, leading to his approval. Simply seeing a tattooed image on a stranger, devoid of context within an increasingly diversified pool of tattooed people, does not necessarily lead him to the same conclusion. Taken in the context of their other responses, both Michael and Jason seem to be saying that people get tattoos to give the perception that they are "tough" and that tough people are who they want to associate themselves with as friends.

Artistic Narratives

The final narrative I have identified through my interviews is artistic in nature. There are many people who get tattoos not necessarily because they represent something meaningful, or because they are want to communicate a rebellious nature, but simply because tattoos can be beautiful. While this seems to be a common narrative for people who are heavily tattooed (in no small part because this may serve as part of the impetus for continuing to acquire more and more tattoos) there were also people with only one that fit into this narrative. Ten of my 25 client interviews were classified under the artistic narrative, including six men and four women.

Warren is a 20 year-old African American college student who plans on going to medical school. He is quiet but friendly, and dresses in a trendy hipster-esque way. He was one of the first people that I interviewed, and surprised me with the length and depth of his responses. He currently

only has two tattoos, but plans on getting more in the future. When asked why he started getting tattoos, he answered:

> *Just besides the fact that I really enjoy the art, I'm a big graphic art person, over the years I've developed a liking to it, just from looking at graphic art books, especially like, t-shirt design and then I'm a big street art person so I really enjoy people that do graffiti or do like pen stuff in their books and everything. I just really like how they look on people's skin; I really like yours, which are really cool. I wish I could get more color. My skin's a little dark so I have to get like darker jewel tones from what I heard, but I like the way they look on me just now which is really cool, and like I said I want to get my sleeve done and it would look really nice, I like that... especially, it's how creative you can be because you can have, like, a painting up in a room or something like that, but if you can carry it with you, I think it's really cool, so how does that work besides like, carrying a photo in your wallet? But you have it and also it creates stories and the community vibe about it too is really cool so that other people have tattoos and it's really awesome."*

Warren's tattoos do have personal meaning to him, but during the course of our conversation he continually stressed the importance of aesthetics, and that there was a reason why he chose to be tattooed instead of representing himself in other ways.

Ace also fits into the artistic narrative. He is a White, 32 year-old CPA, and was by far one of the most talkative people that I interviewed. He is an extremely outgoing and expressive person, with a heavy southern drawl and a grey pompadour. He is an acquaintance of mine, and the second time I ran into him was at a bar on his birthday. He was extremely inebriated, and proceeded to grope at the neckline of my shirt in order to see my chest tattoo, then almost was thrown out by the bouncer after whipping his shirt off to display the tattoo on his back. In short, he is a bit of a character, and someone who loves the attention being heavily tattooed gives him. At present he has a full back tattoo, a large tattoo spanning his chest, and is working on covering both of his arms entirely from shoulder to wrist.

Most, a lot of tattoo artists are fabulous artists out of other mediums that they do, so you could find a talented artist that can put something on you permanently… That's one thing when people hear the prices of them, they're like, 'oh my god, it cost you 700 dollars for that piece?' But go buy a painting you know? This lasts me forever.

Many of the people I interviewed who fit into this narrative compared tattooing to other forms of art, and it was not uncommon for them to make the connection between buying a painting or sculpture and getting a tattoo. For them, tattoos are first and foremost works of art, albeit works of art that you wear on your skin instead of hanging on a wall.

If someone is thinking about tattooing within an artistic narrative, then the artistic ability of the tattooist is of utmost importance. These are the clients who tended to do the most research before choosing to work with a particular tattoo artist, as the quality of their work means more to these individuals than the meaning behind it. Ace told me a story about going with a friend of his who wanted to get an old tattoo covered up.

Well I've gone in like, this one girl that I work with wanted to get a cover-up piece, and they were like" no, no, you've got to go way bigger". It seemed like they wanted to give her, like this humungous 8-hour piece that was all, just to cover it up. It seemed like they were just trying to rip you off. Almost like a car mechanic would do to somebody who doesn't know how to work on cars. Use their knowledge against you, you know what I mean. Then when we went to (upscale shop), they were like, "yeah, yeah what do you want" You know, they kinda told her, because she wanted a butterfly and a flower kind of combo and the only thing they were pulling out was flash (stock, pre-drawn designs). You know stuff like that, just big pieces to cover up, and it was big pieces to cover up. Then we went to (upscale shop), (the artist), he was like ok, kinda looked at it, went over and was like, yeah, come back, I'll draw you something up. And he drew something we never would have thought of, it was amazing, and it covered it up, it was beautiful, and he rocked it out. It was a butterfly and a flower, I'm sure they're not like, dying to do a butterfly and a flower, but he made it amazing, and he made it his own, and he made it different than a typical butterfly and a flower, and the butterfly was to the side too, so instead of the spread out wings, the wings were behind it. It

was really a nice tattoo, so it was cool that….they try to comfort you whereas at another place they're like, "you're in, you're out, go"… And (upscale shop), they seem, as talented as they are they always seem very accommodating, and make you feel very at ease with what you're doing. They don't try to seem snobby, but they have the talent and they're very skilled to be snobby, but they're not.

What made his friend's experience appear positive to Ace was that even though it was not necessarily the most interesting or exciting tattoo for the tattooist, he went through the effort of drawing up a custom piece that was unique and aesthetically pleasing both for the artist and the client. The importance is on having something that is both beautiful and one of a kind.

Because these people are entering into tattooing with an artistic narrative, they tend to assume that they are communicating something artistic about themselves to the world through their embodiment. Warren told me that his tattoos are a part of his physical presentation of self.

What I was saying before, I'm a real friendly guy. I want to be social, not so much like a conversation piece but it's something to have, if you have a common interest, it's something great to talk about…I'm just a visual person too, and an audible person I just like looking at them all the time and checking them out all the time in the mirror. Like, has anything changed with them, like, I didn't notice this little curve before, like this little irregularity that makes it yours you know? I think it's just another, have another aspect of you besides hair color, eye color, facial hair, long hair, short hair, curly hair. It's just another personal characteristic, like if someone had to call me out of a lineup, "What did he look like?" African American, short hair, tall, heavy set, and he had tattoos, it's like nothing negative like that, it's just another thing, 'Hey, I'm Warren, I'm six-one, 200 pounds, tattoos, I have my ears pierced…' It's more to define me I guess, personally, someone could see me as that person that I see myself as on a daily basis. Not just what's on the outside with having clothes and Black college student, but like a student that wears this type of clothes does his own thing, has his own tattoos, this is me more defined instead of a cookie cutter person. This more me more defined, boiled down, because I have these specific things about me, if that makes any sense."

For Warren, his tattoos were not necessarily meant to express something deeply personal about him,

nor indicate that he is an outsider (as a physically large African American man he has to deal with enough of that already), but simply to convey something about his personal style and aesthetics, similarly to his clothing. Ace's response was very similar.

> *I don't know. There's so many different people, and everyone looks at you differently. I just think it means that I kinda don't really care about those things. I represent myself how I want, and I appreciate art.*

Again, the message Ace is sending to his audience is that he is an art lover, not that he is tough (he isn't, something he readily admits) or to commemorate his life's journey.

These same messages are projected onto other people with tattoos, but people with an artistic narrative are more likely to make distinctions between different types of tattoos, at least on a purely aesthetic basis. Time and time again I heard about "trashy", "ugly" or "trendy" tattoos from people with an artistic narrative. This distinction was not made in the other cases, in part because with other narratives the actual appearance of the tattoo seemed to be slightly less important to them.

> *I use this term too much, but you have the douche bag who has like the barbed wire or whatever is hip at the moment and they do it to kind of fit in or try to be a bad ass, you know what I mean? And then you have people who get more work that think they're bad ass but their work is really shitty, and they want to talk to you forever, and you're stuck at a bar, and you're like, 'Oh my god…' I think for a lot of people it's just self-expression. Some people really like them, I love them. I love girls in them, so when I see a girl with tattoos that are good tattoos, they're not your typical tramp stamp or silly little… It's like a little bit hotter, you know? It's different… It depends on what you have. and then there's people in the middle, who just like tattoos, you know, 'nice tattoo!'*

In telling me this, Ace was indicating that there are different classes of people with tattoos. There are the "douche bags" that get tattoos that are not his personal taste, and then there are people like him who have "artistic" tattoos. People with artistic tattoos, like him, are attractive, interesting, et cetera, while those ugly tattoos are, well, douche bags.

In modern society, people are confronted with daily decisions to make about what kind of person they want to be, and how to communicate that self-identity through others. The consumption of material goods and services has emerged as one of the main ways this identity can be created and expressed. However, there is always the danger that other people will read these choices the 'wrong' way thus drawing conclusions that are different than those intended by the individual, and as a result a great deal of effort goes into not only acquiring the appropriate products and services, but also obtaining them in the way that will most accurately reflect the desired identity. Service interactions thus matter for the consumer not only because they result in ownership of a desired product, but also because they are part of the consumptive identity process.

Tattoos are an interesting and unique consumer good, given the fact that they are highly individualized, embodied, and permanent. As the popularity of tattooing continues to increase and heavily tattooed bodies become more common in the media, their ability to communicate a singular identity has disappeared. Tattoos no longer mean one thing about an individual, and as a result individual consumers have to put effort into ensuring that their tattoo tells the story they intended. This is achieved not only though the content of the artwork, but also the interaction through which it was acquired. The fact that tattoos are so difficult to read as cultural texts is precisely what heightens the importance of the service interaction through which they are acquired. By enacting a preferred narrative the client can, at minimum, ensure that their internal biography is constructed in the intended way even if they cannot control the way their body is read by its audience.

In this chapter I have argued that tattoos are one way of understanding both the importance of the service interaction to the individual, but also the types of customer service they come to expect from the workers they interact with. Different clients come into a tattoo shop armed with different narratives, and these narratives influence both how they act, as well as how they expect to be treated.

Those invested in a commemorative narrative for the interaction are attempting to communicate something intensely personal about themselves through their tattoo (even if only to themselves) and thus seek out tattooists and environments that will reflect the seriousness of the work they are undertaking. While all clients need to have their sense of self reaffirmed through the interaction, the commemorative narrative necessitates solemnity and a personal connection. These clients tend to assume that other people's tattoos reflect a similarly personal backstory, and thus their identities are less challenged simply because they assume other people with tattoos are like them, and that a singular (or at least popular) narrative exists.

Clients hoping to enact a rebellious narrative, in contrast, are able to celebrate frivolity over seriousness. Because their tattoos are intended to communicate a wild, outsider status, the service interaction should reflect that as well. These individuals know that their identities can easily be challenged and that the mere presence of tattoos does not necessarily indicate a particular lifestyle or societal standing, which is why they delineate themselves from "others" with less interesting or less desirable tattoos. As a result, they are needier clients than those with a commemorative narrative, namely because they perceive their intended message as more likely to be misread. These clients are more likely to read tattooists as fellow outsiders, and thus must do additional work to prove that they as clients occupy the same social space. This is easier said than done for some, but can be attempted through demonstrating how deviant one is, either through actions or the content of their tattoos.

Alternatively, those interested in an artistic narrative are more interested in ensuring that the interaction reflects their commitment to aesthetics. In these interactions the tattooist should appreciate and reflect back what the individual is attempting to communicate to others around him or her – namely "good" taste. A talented artist is important, but so is the feeling that the client is being taken seriously as a discerning tattoo connoisseur. These clients also differentiate themselves from

other tattoo enthusiasts who they deem as having "bad" taste, although the distinctions are more easily drawn through purely visual representations than through presumed intentions or actions.

Similar dynamics also influence the ways that tattoo artists think about and define their work. Because service work is an interactive process, it is necessary to take into account both the expectations and experience of customers as well as workers. The narrative expectations of the clientele thus serve as the backdrop and context for the following chapters, which explore the ways that tattoo artists think about, define, and experience their work.

Chapter 3.

"Only God Can Judge Me": Collapsing the Service Triangle

I kind of feel like people these days don't take my job as seriously as I do. They probably think that a tattoo shop is like a Wal-Mart or a Verizon or something. You go in, you pick out something on the wall that you like best, you get it packaged up and you go home with it in no time at all. Not a lot of people take time with it. They don't realize the time that goes in to it. For some people it takes a lot to realize that there's a relationship there. You don't just come to me, and I stick something on you and you leave. There's going to be an amount of time where we're very close each other, and we're going to have to get to know one another.

        - Gwen, 22, Female Tattoo Artist

They're all independent contractors. They, um, they just kind of, they don't really work for me. They just, um, they just work there, is kind of how I see it. You know we're all, I don't make them punch a timecard. Everybody's their own boss, their own manager. I just kind of make sure that it runs, runs smooth so that we can all do our own art.

        - Justin, 30, Male Tattoo Artist and Shop Owner

In Chapter 2, I show how clients seeking to be tattooed come into the service interaction with differing needs that must be met by the artist in order for the client to feel that all their desires have been met. Obtaining pleasing artwork is only half of the story, as clients are engaging in identity work that goes beyond simple aesthetics. In order for tattoo artists to meet these needs, they must possess sophisticated interpersonal skills and be flexible enough to meet the demands of their different clients. In this chapter I argue that the nature and structure of their work results in labor that resists the routinization and rationalization found in other forms of service provision. Interactions between artists and their clients cannot be understood in terms of

the prevailing triangular model, and I offer a new theoretical framework through which to better understand artistic, entrepreneurial service provision of identity-laden products.

Theories of service work were developed with an emphasis on the distinctiveness of work that includes the immediate presence of the customer in the labor process. Clients become a part of the work process because they are co-producers of the service interaction (Leidner 1993; 1999). While recent scholarship on occupations such as software developers emphasizes that the customer need not be physically present in all service occupations (Ó'Riain 2010), the majority of research on the service industry focuses on workers engaged in front-line service provision where they directly interact with customers. At the same time that service work is understood as distinct from manufacturing work, in many ways sociological theory has continued to reference old models of bureaucratic workplace organization.

Service work is generally understood to operate out of customer-oriented bureaucracies (Forseth 2005; Brook 2007; Korczynski 2013). This bureaucratic organization, which is viewed as a dominant and inevitable process in industrialized society, results in a triangular power relationship between the employer, worker, and customer. The problem contained within this theoretical assessment is that there is little accounting for the various forms of entrepreneurialism that can emerge out of the service economy, each of which has the ability to shift power relationships. This is certainly not to imply that entrepreneurs always opt out of bureaucratically organized structures, or that entrepreneurialism is a pathway to total autonomy for service workers (Jurik 1998; Hesmonhalgh and Baker 2009; Kornrich 2009). The creative labor market, which includes service occupations like tattooing, is largely composed of irregular, insecure, and unprotected work (Menger 2006; Markusen 2013); these factors manifest themselves differently in different industries.

The tattoo industry is composed almost entirely of self-employed entrepreneurs, offering an interesting and theoretically compelling counterpoint to the triangular model of customer-oriented bureaucracies. In contrast to contingent workers who make up a large portion of creative service workers, tattoo artists are self-employed in far more stable employment arrangements compared to other creative workers who often are employed in more precarious temporary positions (Menger 1999; 2006). Tattooists differ from many other interactive service workers because they belong to a sector of the service economy that is focused on the production of artistic goods and services that are used by the customer as a way to construct a self-identity, and they operate within non-bureaucratically organized workplaces. While there are a number of other interactive service workers with similar aesthetic and occupational dynamics – such as hairstylists, makeup artists, and aestheticians – the permanence of tattooing helps to set a unique dynamic that sets these interactions apart.

This combination of factors – highly invested customers with diverse narrative needs for the service interaction (as discussed in Chapter 2) alongside the non-bureaucratic, entrepreneurial organization of work – requires an alternative understanding of how tattooing is organized as a service occupation. Instead of being caught between the needs of management and clients, tattoo artists must negotiate directly between their own needs and desires, and those of the customer. While each interaction is different, a balance must be struck between routinization and variability, and between rationalization and personalization, depending on the desires of the client. Clients, in their most basic ideal types (Weber [1922] 1978), range from the "Model Client", who desire variable and personalized service interactions, to the "McClient" who requires a less desirable (from the perspective of the artist) routine and rational interaction.

Triangular Service Model

Work in the service economy represented a distinct break from the manufacturing era because the customer is often directly involved in the production of labor. Interactive service work is defined by the immediate presence of the customer, who is a co-producer of the service interaction (Leidner 1993; 1999; Bolton and Houlihan 2005; Lopez 2010). The introduction of the customer into the sphere of work created a new system of power relations that did not previously exist. Throughout most of the twentieth century, labor occurred in a dyadic relationship between the employer and the worker; over the last several decades a tripartite relationship has emerged involving the employer (or management), the worker, and the customer (Seymour 2000; Forseth 2005; Wolkowitz 2006; Brook 2007; Lopez 2010; Bélanger and Edwards 2013).

The triangular model of power relations creates a new series of conflicts and contradictions not previously seen in manufacturing. All three points in the triangle are dependent upon one another: owners/managers and workers would not have jobs without clients; clients would have no services to purchase if not for the workers and would have no redress against poor service without management, and so on. Yet while all three sides may need one another, their interests do not always operate in concert with one another. Workers often find themselves forced to maneuver between the demands of management to quickly service as many customers as possible and customers' desire to be treated as individuals deserving of their time and emotional attention (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1999; Kang 2003; Bolton and Houlihan 2005; George 2008; Kang 2010; Dunkel and Weirich 2013).

This divergence between the needs of management and the desires of customers is the result of the service industry's organization as a 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' (Forseth 2005).

Service providing firms operate under the opposing logic of Weberian rationalization and Taylorist routinization, and the myth of customer sovereignty in which the needs of the customer come first (Weber [1954] 1967; Taylor [1911] 2003; Korczynski and Ott 2004; Brook 2007). Workers have to find ways to manage the underlying conflicting configuration of their work in the face of marketing schemes that continually raise customers' expectations (Forseth 2005; Groth, Hennig-Thurau, and Walsh 2009; Wharton 2009). "Therefore, customer service is experienced as 'a clash between the discipline, rationality and asceticism required in production and the indiscipline, irrationality and hedonism of consumption" (Korczynski, 2001: 82). The job of the service worker is thus not only to provide service to clients, but to do so in a manner that is rational and routinized (in order to meet the expectations of management) while also appearing sincere and personalized (to satisfy the desires of customers).

The triangular model has been important in helping to map out the distinctiveness of service occupations, but it is not able to tell the full story. The majority of studies of the service industry have tended to focus on low- to mid-level service providers who most often engage in routinized and lower-skilled service work (Leidner 1999; Gutek, Bennett, Bhappu, Schneider and Woolf 2000; Sallaz 2009; Hanser 2012). Low- to mid-level workers' labor can be well explained using the triangular model because occupations in food service, flight attending, retail, leisure and hospitality, and the like are apt to exhibit the characteristics of a customer-oriented bureaucracy. These occupations tend to be bureaucratically organized with clearly defined hierarchies and strong emphases on customer service and emotional labor. While there is a theoretical recognition that the service triangle is not equilateral (Taylor and Bain 2005; Bélanger and Edwards 2013), there is still little theory to explain how service occupations are

organized when one point on the triangle does not exist, or perhaps more accurately when two points are merged into one.

The service economy presents many opportunities for entrepreneurialism, often for groups that have historically been underrepresented as business owners (Wolkowitz 2006; Kornrich 2009; Gohmann et al 2013). For example, immigrant and minority women have been particularly likely to work as entrepreneurs in the beauty industry, often opening their own salons or operating as independent contractors (Sharma and Black 2001; Kang 2003, 2010). While service providers in customer-oriented bureaucracies labor under the direct surveillance of supervisors and managers, service entrepreneurs often are able to work autonomously with little to no supervision. Entrepreneurial workers are better able to dictate the nature of their interactions with clients and exhibit a wide range of relationship styles ranging from authoritative and 'bossy' to extremely friendly and personal (Corrado 2002; George 2008; Kang 2010).

Entrepreneurial service work does not exhibit the employer-worker-customer relationship triangle that is found in customer-oriented bureaucracies, and as a result the prevailing theory does little to guide us in our understanding of these work arrangements. While the modern entrepreneur is not the "lone wolf" going it alone without partnerships or guidance, and tensions exist between individualism and associations with business partners, entrepreneurs still enjoy greater autonomy than traditional employees at the bottom of a bureaucratic hierarchy (Ruef 2010). There is little evidence to suggest that entrepreneurial workers are immune to the contradictions between routinized and rationalized business models and customer sovereignty, yet the forms that this takes and the ways it is resolved are different – particularly for those

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employed in service providing occupations. Further empirical study into entrepreneurial service occupations is needed to better understand how these issues unfold.

Tattoo artists offer one avenue towards a better understanding of entrepreneurial service work. Unlike some other service organizations, artists own the majority of tattoo parlors, and thus the owner is also a coworker rather than an off-site employer. Most tattoo shops have more than one artist on site, yet the owner cannot be meaningfully conceptualized as the 'boss' since the other tattooists do not technically work for them in the traditional sense. Like hair stylists, massage therapists, and other beauty workers, tattoo artists are primarily independent contractors working within a station in a shop. Artists are responsible for developing their own customer base and keep a portion of their clients' payments as opposed to earning a salary. While truly egregious or illegal behavior could result in an artist being evicted from a tattoo parlor, in most cases their day-to-day behavior is not subjected to an employer's scrutiny. While artists that I interviewed gave examples of colleagues who had moved from one shop to another or left the industry altogether, none had experienced someone being "fired" in the traditional sense. In fact, it was far more likely that a fellow tattooist would "disappear" by simply removing all of their belongings from their station and leaving without explanation or notice than that they would be asked to leave. As a result, even artists who do not own tattoo shops show more similarities to workers who are self-employed than to low- or mid-level service providers working under the direct supervision and control of management.

The only exceptions to this rule would be in cases where an individual is hired to work front-desk reception and would earn a salary paid by the owner, although this is not a common practice. Usually the artists in a shop share reception and cleaning responsibilities, with each responsible for the necessary work related to their own clients. Tattooists are responsible for

sanitizing and setting up their "stations" and often communicate with clients directly using their personal telephones rather than the shop phone line. Tattooing is learned through apprenticeship, and this non-artistic work is often relegated to the apprentice(s) if any are present. Apprentices train under one artist, who may or may not be the owner of the shop, so while they may do favors for other artists in residence, their roles are often nebulous. The content of apprenticeship training is completely unregulated and as a result their duties, including the extent of their interactions with clients and whom they must answer too, are left to the discretion of the artist they are apprenticing under. Apprentices thus would appear to potentially be the most likely to work within the triangular model. However, the fact that the rest of the industry is not organized in this way makes it less likely that the artists would structure apprenticeships in a format that does not correspond to the industry as a whole.

The oversight that tattoo artists are regularly subjected to comes from the state, not an employer or supervisor, although these oversights tend from the minimal to nonexistent and oversight ceases once a license is granted. The level of legal oversight varies from state to state. Most states prohibit tattooing of minors, and many also regulate safety standards (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015). In states that regulate tattooing licensure, local laws often regulate the length of apprenticeships and who is qualified to offer them, but not the content of the training.

For example, in the state of Tennessee tattoo apprenticeships must last for one year under the supervision of an artist who has been licensed for at least three years (Tenn. Code Ann. § 62-38-201 2014). Licensing requires passing a written exam on health codes and sterilization techniques as well as paying the appropriate fees. Tattoo artists are not immune to surveillance and control, but in their case it is directed from a different source and is in relation to different

aspects of their work, such as who they can legally accept as customers, compared to other interactive service workers. And once a tattooist has passed the necessary blood borne pathogen exams and paid their licensing fees (if required in their state), any oversight from the state that may have been in place ceases.

Tattoo artists also challenge the notion that service provision is structured around an underlying tension between the quantity of customers served and the quality of service provided. Because the majority of tattoo artists are independent contractors who are responsible for attracting their own customers, most are concerned with their reputations as artists. Many tattooists prefer doing custom work, where they collaborate with the client on the design, rather than tattooing 'flash' designs that are pre-drawn and widely distributed (Irwin 2003). Some elite shops do not even display flash art and exclusively instead offer individualized tattoos. Based on the data collected through my interviews, artists tend to charge more for personalized custom tattoos, which they argued display the artistic talent of the tattooist better than flash tattoos which are often simply traced onto the skin without making any modifications to the design. From their perspective, making a name for oneself as an entrepreneur and thus enhancing one's ability to charge more for one's labor is dependent upon offering individualized, time-consuming service (further discussion of the importance of reputation follows in Chapter 5). Some artists reported that they would intentionally limit the number of customers that they will see per day in order to prevent "burn-out" and create greater demand for their services.

Like other forms of bodywork, tattooing is often experienced as highly personalized because it takes place in secluded rooms or locations, is unsupervised, requires intimate physical contact between the practitioner and the client, and involves a vulnerable client body (Oerton and Phoenix 2004). The fact that no two tattoos are ever exactly the same, and that often the designs

themselves are one of a kind, only heightens this effect. When combined with the importance of clients' narrative preferences that they bring into the service interaction, these factors lead to tensions between clients and workers, yet in different ways that the current theorizing on service work would suggest.

Tattooing and Service Interactions

In understanding how tattoo artists experience and understand their interactions with customers, it is useful to consider the type of product that they are offering. Unlike many other types of service jobs where a static material product is purchased, tattooing offers at minimum the opportunity for a high level of customization. When a customer goes to Starbucks, there is a menu that they must order from. They can ask for modifications, but going 'off-script' is discouraged, if not impossible. (I may want goat's milk in my latte, but since it is neither on the menu nor in stock, this is not really an option). Starbucks workers are also taught to train their customers to follow the rules of ordering (Frei and Morriss 2012). If I tell the barista taking my order that I want "a large mocha, with skim milk and no whipped cream, please", s/he will repeat back to me "venti, non-fat mocha, no whip". Employees are explicitly told to 'train' their customers in the appropriate language of the establishment (Ibid.), which helps to establish both a standard product that will be made the same way every time (routinization), and customer service norms that produce efficient but de-personalized and de-humanized interactions between staff and customer (rationalization).

Tattooing, like much entrepreneurial artistic service work, operates outside of this model. The nature of the product being offered resists routinization, because each tattoo is at least somewhat distinctive. As discussed in the previous chapter, different clients come into the interaction expecting to enact different narratives about tattooing. The varying needs of

customers result in an inability to rationalize interactions, as artists cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to their clients. In order for a client to have a 'successful' interaction from their perspective, the artist must first acknowledge them as an individual, and address their personal needs, both artistic and interpersonal.

As already explained, tattooing does not operate within this model, because there is no meaningful direct oversight from management, and because the nature of their work resists routinization and rationalization (at least in its ideal form). How then should we conceptualize the framework within which these interactions take place?

It is tempting to simply knock one point off the triangle, and envision tattooing as a dyadic relationship between the artist and the client that is free from the constraints of management. In this scenario, artists and clients would be able to collaborate together on custom tattoo designs, and develop meaningful social connections with each other through their interactions. At least in some cases, this is what happens.

Gwen is a 22 year-old tattooist who has been working for 2 years. As you will see from her quotes, she is funny, sincere, and extremely friendly. When asked about her most meaningful interaction with a client, she told me the following story:

> *I had a husband and wife come in and they were getting a memorial tattoo for their nine month old daughter who had recently died and it was a really heart breaking story but just as a couple they were really warm, real sweet and loving and I felt like they kind of welcomed me in to their circle. They told me all about their daughter, I did a tattoo of a small angel on the mom, and a portrait of the daughter on the dad, so they were there for awhile, and I really got to know them personally, and through them, their daughter. It was really cool, it felt like it was One of those fulfilling (experiences)… I felt like I really did something for those people, it's something they'll always appreciate, and it gives you not a huge ego boost, but, "Yeah, I accomplished something today!" After they left they called*

back later to say, "Thank you so much, you've done an incredible job, we feel like
our daughter's been brought back to life through this tattoo." Just got you deep
down. Obviously I moved these people…You do a tattoo where you feel like you've
really touched someone's life…(T)his wasn't an experience that they're going to
forget easily.

This type of interaction is the holy grail of tattooing; I was told similar stories in roughly

75 percent of my interviews (N=19) when I asked artists to tell me about their favorite clients,

and the times when their work felt the most fulfilling. The story that Gwen told was meaningful

to her because she had a non-routine, non-rational interaction with the clients. She developed

custom artwork for their tattoos, and they connected with each other on a deep, individual level.

This appears to be the exact opposite of what the theory of the triangular model would suggest

because the entire interaction was highly customized and unconstrained by the needs or business

desires of anyone other than Gwen and her client. Because Gwen is an independent contractor

who is not subjected to the desires of upper-management, she is free to make the decision

whether or not invest a lot of time and genuine emotion in her interactions with clients.

The theoretical needs and desires of all involved members in traditional service work are

in conflict with one another, which are highlighted by the triangular model. The different actors'

theorized preferences are summarized in Table 1.

Figure 1. Theorized preferences in tattooing interactions

Actor in interaction	*Desired product*	*Desired interaction*
Management	Routine	Rational
Worker	Routine/Variable	Rational/Personalized
Customer	Variable	Personalized

Managers want employees to offer routine, rational service to customers, as they are mainly concerned with profitability. Routinization and rationalization are efficient, and result in the ability of workers to quickly serve as many people as possible (Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Anand, Pac, and Veeraraghavan 2011; Price 2015). This both increases net income, and reduces the number of employees who must be working at any given time. Customers, on the other hand, are thought to desire a more meaningful interaction with the service provider. They resist being treated as if all customers are the same, and desire emotional labor and personalized interactions (Korczynski and Ott 2004). Workers are caught in the middle, needing to appease both management and customers in order to be viewed by both parties as performing their job duties in a satisfactory manner (Leidner 1993; Ruyter, Wetzels and Feinberg 2001; Good and Cooper 2016).

In Gwen's scenario with the couple she tattooed, their needs (those of the couple and of Gwen) were much more in sync with one another. This interaction was meaningful to both Gwen and the couple, because they were both allowed to have the type of interaction that they wanted and that reflected the needs and desires they brought into the interaction. This was made possible, at least in part, due to both the absence of management and the nature of the service being provided. Rather than promoting "enchanting myth of customer sovereignty" wherein management promotes the illusion of sovereignty to consumers while simultaneously directing them to rationalized interactions (Korczynski and Ott 2004), Gwen was able to sidestep rationalization in her interaction with her clients.

However, not all interactions take this form. Clients are varied, and their needs and expectations differ widely. Some come in wanting elaborate custom artwork, others pick a flash design off the wall. Some are wild and gregarious, others shy and withdrawn. Because they are

engaging in consumptive identity work, customers need the interaction that they have with the artist to match their own desires. A failure to see their preferred identity reflected back to them means that they will leave the interaction unsatisfied. This is particularly detrimental for the tattoo artist, since developing a successful career is dependent upon a repeat clientele and positive referrals. The needs and desires of the tattoo artist have to be negotiated against the needs and desires of the client.

All of the artists that I interviewed told me that they pursued a career in tattooing because they loved the artistry involved and the freedom it afforded them. Several of the tattooists I spoke (N=5) with had previously worked in far more structured environments such as manufacturing and the armed services before pursuing tattooing as a career, and mentioned the contrast in working conditions as one of the factors that drew them towards making a change. Justin is a 30 year-old tattoo artist who has been working for three years. He bought his own shop a year before I interviewed him. When asked about why he left his previous place of employment, he told me:

> *The artists there, they're um, they're not really pushed to do their own artwork…Because it's more of a high volume, they get more people so it's just kind of a pick (design) and you know, they put it on you…It doesn't have that artistic freedom feel…Definitely as I started to do more, and starting seeing other artists, it just feels more free...it feels better to be able to do your own artwork I guess….At (previous shop where he was employed) they don't have other artist friends, they don't network. Like I was saying, it's more driven on money, and making more money, and not really pushing your own art out there….(In leaving) I saw a chance at artistic freedom.*

Justin left a high volume shop where he was making a good living in order to gain more artistic freedom. He has since seen a drop in his income, but having the ability to do more custom work compensates this for.

Even though all of the artists I interviewed expressed a preference for custom designs, virtually every artist had, at least at some point in their career, worked in a shop where the majority of their work was flash, or working with other artists' designs. Apprentices and tattooists who are early in their careers often are given more flash work as a form of practice, as flash tattoos are often smaller and less technically complex than custom artwork. Artists still attempt to find meaning, even within these less than challenging assignments.

> *Find people who really understand and appreciate your particular aesthetic, because you'll get sick of going in to work everyday and having to do about 50 stars and 100 kanji or whatever, but it's really this cool, I don't want to make it sound too sacred or religious, but it kind of is, when you find someone who you can both come to terms on a mutual level that they appreciate and you love doing. It's really cool. I had one friend who I was working on, and he described it as almost shamanistic. Here's someone coming to you and sacrificing themselves, a part of their body, and letting you do god knows what to it, and hopefully it's a way of expressing a deep meaning or deep spirituality with each other and with the world, since tattooing's meant to be permanent, but if you can find clients that you can share that relationship, that's what makes it worthwhile, because the daily hum-drum tattoo clients aren't going to give you that fulfilled feeling. – Gwen*

The types of clients that a tattoo artist works will can change over the course of a career, but they can also change day-to-day and even hour-to-hour. While all of that artists I interviewed reported that they preferred to do custom tattoos (variable product/artwork) and have personalized interactions with the people they were tattooing, clients did not always come into the interaction with the same needs. Based on the data collected in my interviews, clients exhibit a typology of desires that range from being completely in line with the desires of their tattoo artist to being the complete opposite.

Figure 2. Typologies of preferred service interaction styles

Individual	*Desired Product/Artwork*	*Desired Interaction*
Artist	Variable	Personalized
The "Model" Client	Variable	Personalized
The "Quiet" Client	Variable	Rational
The "Flashy" Client	Routine	Personalized
The "McClient"	Routine	Rational

The "Model" Client

All of the artists I interviewed spoke about the best clients being those who wanted custom artwork that was aesthetically appealing to the tattooist, and who were willing to collaborate on the final product. These clients wanted a truly custom experience – both in terms of the tattoo itself as well as the interaction involved in acquiring it. The interaction that Gwen described with the couple commemorating their daughter fits into this category.

While an emotionally intense experience is not necessary for this type of interaction, artists all spoke of wanting to have respectful collaboration with their clients, where both parties walked away from the experience feeling satisfied. For tattooists, this meant being recognized as artistic authorities, and for clients it meant leaving with a beautiful piece of artwork that reflected their desires.

Ben was a 34-year-old tattoo artist who had been tattooing for 10 years. At the time of our interview he was employed at one of the most elite and expensive shops in town. He has won

multiple awards for his tattoos, and has since left the shop to open his own, appointment only studio. He told me the following story:

> *I had a woman, was doing a big piece on her back. And she's so flamboyant and a lot to handle that you kind of get to know each other pretty fast. So when it got to a point in the tattoo where she was being super nitpicky, I just had to write her this email and be like, at some point, you're going to just have to trust me. And it actually helped. Not every client I would feel comfortable enough to be like, you need to just shut up and trust me. I can't do that with everybody. But with her, she wrote me back and was like, you're right. You've done amazing so far; I'm just a control freak. I feel like there are a lot of times...like the guy I tattooed yesterday. He was super nervous because I didn't have any design ready for him. Until the day of. And he even told me as we were tattooing him, he was like, 'I was freaked out. I almost canceled my appointment. Then I realized I've seen your work and I trust you.' I can't blame him for being freaked out. He'd never been tattooed on.*

As this quote shows, sometimes artists have to cajole their clients into behaving correctly, a point which will be explored further in later chapters. But in the best-case scenarios, tattoo artists and their clients are able to create a trusting relationship where both parties are ultimately satisfied with the end result.

The "Quiet" Client

The "Quiet Client" also wants custom work, but is looking for a less personal interaction. While all of the tattooists I interviewed said that they preferred being able to converse with their clients and get to know them in order to do their best work, they were also understanding that not all clients are as outwardly invested in the interaction as others. It may not be their preferred way of doing business, but it is not something that any of them had a problem accommodating if it was what the client preferred.

I mean, I'm not going to treat the 18 year old tattoo virgin who's getting a butterfly on her foot the same way that I would some guy who's getting this huge monstrous back piece done. Usually the amount of experience they have determines how I treat them, the pace that I move at. Every once in a while I will get a client that's very quiet, and they won't want that bubbly effervescent personality, they want someone who's there to do business. I think that your client affects how you behave.

I think if you want a tip you do (have to tailor your behavior). It's just like any other business. Part of what I do is the show; part of what I do is the experience. Whatever vibe they're giving me, I try to give them that experience. Naturally I try to make it as good and as positive as positive, but some people aren't paying for that. That's not what some people want. – Gwen

I usually ask if they're all right every 10 to 20 minutes, just to check on them. Because some people won't tell you, you know, and they might need a break. Other than that, I'll usually just ask them, you know, general stuff. And some of them talk to me, you know, and I can't get a word in. It's either/or. Some people don't like to talk, I know when I get tattooed I don't talk much. I usually let it go either way, just kind of feel it out….I just let it flow, how it goes. – Justin

As long as clients were willing to be respectful of the tattooist's artistic expertise, and especially in cases where the design was something that the artist was personally interested in, the interaction itself could take a backseat. Tattooists recognize that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to their clients. While they all expressed a preference for someone who was both creative and personable, the artistic integrity of the interaction was always more important than the interaction itself, provided that the client was not rude or disrespectful.

The "Flashy" Client

The "Flashy" Client wants a routine product (flash), but a non-rational interaction. They are looking for an experience with the artist, but a tattoo that is less appealing to the artist than

more individualized art.

Many of the artists I spoke with complained about being asked to repeatedly do the same types of flash tattoos for different clients (kanji and stars were the most frequently mentioned flash), but all tried to be nice about it and give their clients what they were looking for. Years ago I was joking with a tattooist about people who get flash tattoos of the Tasmanian Devil from the Looney Toons cartoons. He politely, but firmly, put me in my place by reminding me the needs of the client are not always obvious through the design that they choose. His perspective was that while it may not be aesthetically pleasing to everyone, to a certain demographic the "Taz" character represents power and authority that they may not feel they have in their own life. Choosing a design that he did not personally care for was not enough for him to be dismissive of a client's needs, a sentiment that was echoed in the interviews for my study as well.

Ben complained about how he has to do the same tattoos over and over and over again, but how he always tries to make it interesting for the person getting it, and tries to personalize the experience as much as he can. He recognizes that he is selling a service, and he wants the client to be happy with what is happening, even if he himself isn't really enjoying it. And not insignificantly, he wants them to refer their friends to him so that he can get more business.

> *I had some guy drive from (out of state) to get an armband from me. No joke…. Of all things...Old school biker armband. He just liked that I did good tattoos. Nothing to do with style or anything. He was just like; 'you're the guy for me.' I'm like, why? Please, why?...I thought I was done doing those. And this guy was cool about it. He was like; 'I know they're not very cool, man. But I just think they are. I really like your style.' And the tattoo had nothing to do with my style. And he just thought I did good work. And he was like; 'I want an armband from you.' I don't know why I go into that NASCAR accent every time I talk about armbands! Yeah, I did that on him…and the dude was pumped when it was all over. I was like man, I'm glad you're stoked on it. He even said; 'I'm sure you*

don't even like this but I love it.' That's what's important. But with an armband,
how can I be like, this isn't aesthetically pleasing to me but it was to him.

The "McClient"

In all of my interviews, every tattoo artist mentioned the current reality shows about tattooing, and the negative effect they have had on their clients. These clients are interested in the equivalent of the McDonalds of tattooing – it should be cheap and fast. I was initially surprised to hear virtually the same statement repeated nearly verbatim in every interview that I conducted - that people who don't know anything about tattoos watch reality shows like *Miami Ink* and *L.A. Ink*, which made them think that they could get an entire back-piece or full arm sleeve designed and tattooed in 15 minutes. Respondents also often mentioned that this type of client wanted to get tattoos that they had seen on other people, rather than something that was necessarily interesting or new.

> *For my generation of tattoo artists, and the time I've been tattooing it*
> *seems like people are coming in to the shop to have an 'L.A. Ink' experience which*
> *I say because they want to come in, have an artist draw up an amazing, beautiful*
> *piece of artwork, put it on them, tattoo a little bit, cut to commercial, and then all*
> *of a sudden they have an amazing tattoo that they're walking out with, which, I*
> *mean, isn't necessarily reality…The time aspect, a lot of people don't realize it*
> *takes quite a bit of work to get a good chunk of your arm or leg done, so what*
> *people are coming to me for is almost like lick and stick tattoos. They want me to*
> *draw them up something really cool, put it on them, then they can walk out the*
> *door and be done.* – Gwen

> *Thankfully I'm pretty upfront with people when it comes to a lot of that*
> *stuff. There's a website that has-. It's a website you can type in a dialogue and*
> *they've created this computer animation that will act out and speak the dialogue*
> *you put in. And they did a tattoo shop scenario. Customer client scenario. Where*

they were like, I want this tattoo. I saw Kat Von D can draw it in two minutes and
tattoo it in fifteen. Stars tattooed on my face….It's actually hilarious. But yeah,
that aspect of it. I think maybe in other shops, that's probably a problem. In ours,
most people that come to us, they did their research…Every once in a while
there's exceptions to that. Yeah, we get the guy that's like; 'can't you just draw it
right now?' No. We can't. We've got other things to do. Even having it ahead of
time. People are like; 'can you email me this and jump through this hoop for me?'
No, I can't. I'm going to treat you the way I've treated all my customers.

   -Ben

Ben has the ability to tell his clients "no" in a way that Gwen does not, in no small part because he has been tattooing for significantly longer than she and has built up a stronger artistic reputation. Ben books his clients months in advance, and has people traveling from across the country to be tattooed by him, while Gwen relies largely on people who walk in the shop wanting a tattoo without necessarily being committed to working with her specifically. However, even Ben, with all of his prestige, is not immune to the occasional client who is looking for a routine and rational interaction.

I argued earlier that clients did not want routinized, rationalized interactions with tattoo artists, and the vast majority do not. While the "McClients" seem to have internalized the expectations seen in the service triangle – that good service is fast, efficient, and that the customer is always right – tattooing breaks that framework because the absence of managers allows artists like Ben, and to a lesser extent Gwen, to simply say "no" with fewer fears of repercussions. Tattooists are able to tailor their behavior to fit both the needs of the client and their personal preferences with little feedback from anyone else.

The artists that I spoke with all discussed starting a career in tattooing because they wanted to have artistic freedom in their work, and because they did not want to have a "real" job. But at times they are faced with ugly reality: the job cannot always be fun and games, because in

the end they have to get paid. As a result, they have to learn to deal with the clients they do not like, and rejoice in the good ones. However, the ways that they have to do this, and the pressures that they are facing are not well explained using the prevailing triangular service model.

Rather than fitting into the prevailing theory, where workers are caught between the needs of management and customers, tattoo artists must only meet the needs of their clients. However, these needs vary in terms of how routine and rational they are. Thus, tattoo artists' entrepreneurial job status does not render them immune to the demands of routinization and rationalization – it simply means that these forces are being directed at them from a different source (the client rather than management), and that they vary from interaction to interaction.

Tattooists recognize the importance of meeting not only the artistic but also interactional needs of their clients. These differ both in terms of the preferred narrative being enacted, but also in the way it is performed. The typology developed in this chapter of interactional styles does not necessarily map neatly onto the typology of narrative needs delineated in Chapter 2. A client with an artistic narrative may desire a variable product, though it is also possible to attach the same narrative to a routine flash design. Similarly, someone who attaches a commemorative narrative to tattooing may prefer a quietly introspective interaction that involves little interaction with the artist, resulting in a rationalized interaction.

The service interaction between a client and a tattoo artist involves multiple layers of needs that must be anticipated and adequately enacted in order for the experience to be successful. This requires a level of skill on the part of the tattooist that, like other forms of service work, is rendered invisible when done correctly. However, in spite of the fact that artists express a desire to meet the needs of their clients and provide them with both the tattoo and the experience they desire, this does not mean that power relationships between the two are tipped in favor of the customer. Artists have

their own preferred interactional styles which are variable and personalized, and strive to meet this

ideal whenever possible. Chapter 4 further explores the client-tattooist relationship from the artists'

perspective.

Chapter 4

Man's [sic] Ruin: Ceding Power in Service Interactions

In this chapter, I focus on the ways that tattoo artists have to cede power to their clients in order to negotiate a successful interaction. All of the tattooists I interviewed referred to themselves as artists, but their ability to dictate the artistic direction of their work continuum varies. All spoke of the freedom of tattooing as an occupation, while simultaneously telling story after story of how they had to yield power to their clients in order to meet clients' specific needs. One can imagine tattoo artists' power relationships to their clients existing on a continuum, with the two poles being extremes that do not really exist. On one end is the artist as master – (s)he does whatever (s)he wants, choosing the design, size, placement, determining everything about the tattoo. The other end is the robotic tracing machine – it offers no input, and just does exactly what the client wants without offering any feedback or advice. Their work can thus be conceptualized as ranging from purely self-serving, where their work exists only to please themselves and the needs of the customer are irrelevant, to purely mechanical, where they have no control over their own labor and must sublimate their own needs to those of the client,.

Tattooists have to manage an existence somewhere in the middle of this continuum, in a cooperative state where the needs of the client are negotiated with their personal and artistic preferences, though some lean more in one direction than another. For example, some artists do only custom work, while others work primarily in flash. Some people are willing to give in and do what the customer wants even if it does not align with their own personal preferences; others will refuse to do work that fails to meet their standards.

Tattoo artists' understandings of themselves as workers are complicated and constantly renegotiated, because they have to engage in this balancing act between their own desires and those of the client. This is something that has to constantly be conferred through each interaction. How does a tattooist give their clients what they want, while still maintaining their own integrity as an artist? Sometimes it means giving advice, sometimes it means giving in, and sometimes it means walking away. The ability to choose a power position depends on how much capital one has built up in a career so far. An artist with a strong reputation as artistically skilled and those who have made a name for themselves within the local, national, or international tattoo industry are in greater demand, which in turn affords more control.

More established artists have the luxury of refusing work, or only doing custom pieces, and tend to command a higher price for their work. Younger or less established artists are more likely to have to give in to customers because they do not have the reputation that would allow them not to. Those who have not been tattooing as long, who are not viewed as artistically talented, who are relatively unknown with less name recognition, or who work in "street shops" where the majority of clients walk in and are tattooed if not the same day then within a relatively short window of time, are less able to fully determine their working conditions.[2] These tattooists are generally not able to charge as much for their work, and the combination of less demand and lower prices means that they are often not as free to turn work away even when they might want to.

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[2] The artists I interviewed ranged from those who were just starting their careers and had only worked in their current location, to having worked at seven different shops in multiple states. Nine of my interviewees were either early in their career and/or worked in street shops and reported that tattooing flash was a substantial portion of their work. The other 16 artists worked in more upscale tattoo shops specializing in custom work or were more established in their careers and tattooed mostly, if not exclusively, custom designs.

Unlike in some other forms of service provision, tattooists are sought out by their clients because of their ability to provide an inexorably linked service and product that the client cannot provide for themselves. While this is technically true in many other forms of service work, as the division of labor has resulted in a society where the vast majority of citizens are unable to maintain even the illusion of total self-sufficiency, the highly individualized nature of tattooing sets it apart from many other types of service provision. While other forms of luxury goods are also relatively rarified, customers have a variety of options in how they may obtain them. Clothing, for example, can be purchased in a boutique or online, rendering the direct service interaction obsolete in the latter example. Other types of consumption are also significantly more likely to be offered through bureaucratic organizations, as the aforementioned salesperson is far more likely to be laboring within the traditional service triangle than is a tattooist. Thus, while workers who provide non-essential luxury services may find themselves structurally denied the power that is available to their customers (Sallaz 2010; Williams and Connell 2010), tattooists have a greater position of strength relative to the clients they work with, both because they have the option of refusing service without repercussions and because their ability to be recognized as authority figures provides them with a greater ability to negotiate.

Power in the Tattoo Interaction

In the triangular service model, the traditional worker lacks power because they are caught between the demands of the customer and management. Service providers in low- to mid-skilled occupations tend to have little job autonomy or authority because the nature of their work requires them to negotiate between these competing needs. Entrepreneurial service workers like tattoo artists do not operate within these same constraints, though they still must cater (to a certain extent) to the needs of their clientele.

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Every artist that I interviewed spoke of the "freedom" of tattooing as one of the factors which drew them to the occupation – yet in describing their daily work they gave examples of how they subjugated their own needs and desires in order to meet those of their clients. While many artistic workers claim to value the independence their work provides them, this alleged sovereignty is in reality highly contested. The illusion of artistic freedom may become another source of exploitation, where the pleasurable or status-laden qualities of artistic labor become tools to incentivize and justify low pay, long work hours, the uncertainty of contingent work, pressure to network, and social isolation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2009). The adage that if you "choose a job you love, you will never have to work a day in your life" rings false for many artistic workers. A more apt description may be that if you choose a job you love, you will quickly find your affections abused.

In the previous chapters I have referred to worker/customer power relations without fully explaining what I mean by 'power'. In designing this project I have understood power to operate in a Foucauldian sense, with the exercise of power referring to the "way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions" (Foucault 1982: p. 791). Power is relational and is something that is expressed, rather than possessed. In essence then, power is the ability to control a situation, and to get others to do what you want them to do, ideally with little to no adverse consequences for the individual exercising said power.

Within the world of work, power is expressed through the ability to control the conditions under which and through which one's labor takes place without experiencing negative employment consequences. Relations of power/powerlessness are structured by the organizational context, as well as formal job characteristics and informal alliances within the workplace (Kanter 1977; Hodson, Roscigno and Lopez 2006). Power relations are dependent

upon the complex interactions among class, age, gender, status, and occupation. In many workplaces, workers' power over the technical aspects of work has disappeared due to routinization and rationalization and thus the exercise of power over people has been elaborated (Mills [1959] 1977).

As previously mentioned, service work is characterized by unique power relations due to the presence of the customer. While workers may have a certain degree of power, customers do as well. However, the nature of service work results in ambiguous power relationships between the two; the customer cannot be defined as an ally or enemy of the worker because service organizations do not have determinative power over the behavior of customers. Workers are able to influence customer behavior, and customers are able to exercise power by stepping out of their economic roles and interacting socially with service providers (Korczynski 2005).

The fact that tattooists are entrepreneurial service workers leads to power relations that differ from those of bureaucratic service workers. In bureaucratic workplaces, it is those at the top of the hierarchy that have the most power and managerial power is the source of worker powerlessness, regardless of the type of organization (Kanter 1977; Damarin 2006). While technologies of managerial control can lead to disempowered workers (Bahnisch 2000; Taylor [1911] 2003) with managers viewing worker autonomy as threats to productivity (Braverman 1974), bureaucracies can also empower workers (Adler and Borys 1996). It is important to note, however, that managers, particularly those in "middle management" whose jobs involve both direct supervision and elements of service provision, are not omnipotent. Managers may be denied access to power and may not be able to address structural issues or customer complaints when they too must appeal to authorities higher up the bureaucratic chain (Bolton and Houlihan 2010).

Most obviously, bureaucratic service workers can be seen as having less power than their entrepreneurial counterparts because they are under the supervision and surveillance of management, and in some instances, coworkers (Osnowitz 2006). The participatory language of new forms of work organization often obscures these hierarchical modes of worker control, but does nothing to actually change them (Smith 1997). Limited forms of worker autonomy can also be used as managerial control devices, whereby workers become invested in their own exploitation (Sallaz 2002; Damarin 2006).

At the same time, bureaucratic service workers have the ability to call upon the power and authority of the organization when dealing with potentially problematic clients. For example, bartering and haggling is much less common in bureaucratically organized workplaces (where service providers are recognized by customers as having relatively little control over the prices of services) than it is in entrepreneurial settings where the worker is also the 'boss'. While from one vantage point it may appear that the bureaucratic worker has less power in this setting vis-à-vis management/corporate, they simultaneously have more power over the client through the ability to sidestep potential problems by appealing to a higher authority. Entrepreneurial workers may be forced to (re)negotiate boundaries with their clients more often than bureaucratic service providers because they lack the ability to appeal to or reference an unyielding bureaucratic structure.

Emotional labor, the job requirement that workers enact and display 'appropriate' emotions towards customers while performing their work, has often been theorized as detrimental and disempowering to workers, in part because the unpredictable nature of service work results in organizations' attempting deep transformations of workers' selves so that they will automatically make the kinds of choices that the organization would want them to make

(Hochschild 1983, Steinberg and Figart 1999, Grandey et al. 2005). Notably, emotional labor is not confined to positive emotional expression such as happiness, patience, and helpfulness that are commonly associated with service provision (Hochschild 1983). Certain occupations, including police officers, bill collectors, and bouncers, are also expected to perform emotional labor, albeit through more negative expressions such as anger, irritation, or indifference. (Sutton 1991, Grandey 2000, van Gelderen et al. 2007).

Regardless of the type of emotional labor expected to be performed, some of these organizationally imposed routines can empower workers by giving them power over service interactions and can protect them from customer mistreatment (Leidner 1999). While entrepreneurial workers are likely to engage in emotional labor as well, it would not be guided by organizational goals and managerial supervision, meaning that it is likely to take a different shape with different consequences. Because this is a relatively new way of conceptualizing distinctions between service workers, more research is needed to determine how these different forms of work influence workers' ability to exert control over their work and working conditions.

Control in Tattooing

The backgrounds of the tattoo artists I interviewed varied. Some were high-school dropouts, while others had completed college degrees. Some had established careers in other fields before they began tattooing, while some had simply drifted from job to job before they began their apprenticeships. One thing that they all had in common, however, was the desire to have an artistic career that would afford them the ability to exert control over their labor in a way that they believed would be unavailable to them in other lines of work. While artistic work presents opportunities for overt expressions of creativity that are lacking in many other

occupations, any artistic endeavor with a specific client in mind is unlikely to involve complete

artistic control. Instead, my interview data indicates tattooing exists on a continuum between rote

replication of a preexisting image on the skin, and total creativity without thought for the client.

But most artists, both due to client demands and personal preferences, exist somewhere in the

middle.

Figure 3. Continuum of creativity in tattooing
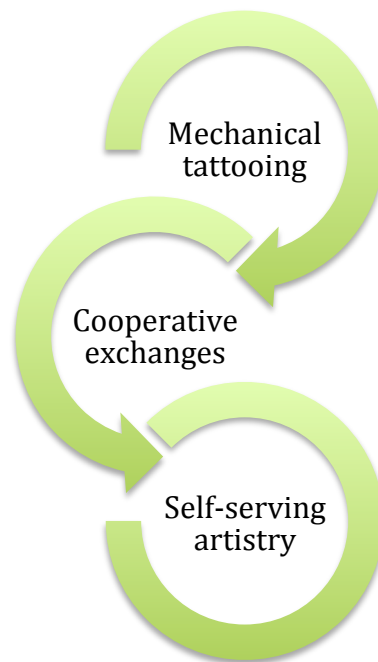
As the following interview data will show, the precise location a tattoo artist occupies

depends on a mixture of personality and the realities of the industry. But a tattooist's position on

the continuum is not static, and will vary across client interactions.

"Big Daddy" is the owner of a tattoo shop, and had been tattooing for 4 years at the time

of our interview. He had opened his shop after finishing his apprenticeship, and it was the only

tattoo shop where he had ever officially worked. Big Daddy was a large and imposing man, with

multiple facial piercings and tattoos on his hands, neck, and the sides of his shaved head. In spite

of his intimidating appearance, he was extremely friendly and open in his interview, and had

brought his girlfriend and cousin along when he met with me, as he claimed to never travel anywhere without some sort of "crew".

Big Daddy was in his late 30's, and had previously worked in auto manufacturing, eventually working his way up from the floor to a management position. He lost his job due to downsizing, and explained his decision to become a tattoo artist in the following way:

> *I don't like answering to anybody. I've quit jobs because I don't like answering to people. It's my shop. I don't have to answer to anybody. I don't come in for a week, yeah, I'm going to get calls, why ain't you here? Why ain't you here? And I'm going to be like, well, that's not your business. Just go to work, make your money, don't worry about me. Might be a dick thing to say but I just don't like answering to people. And to tell you the truth, I try to make it like we're a family in there. I don't make people answer to me either. You're gone for a couple days, that's fine. Unless you're gone for like a month, I'm not going to try to replace you. If you just disappear-. If all your stuff's there, obviously you're coming back. Obviously you're handling something that you have to handle. You'll be back. Unless you're gone for a month, I'm not going to try to replace you. So I try not to make people answer to me and I don't answer to anybody. That's part of the freedom of becoming a tattoo artist. People become tattoo artists for the same reason I did. For freedom. So I feel like they shouldn't have to answer to me either, even though I own the shop. If I see things that people should answer for, I will make them answer for it. I'm not afraid to tell people, why the hell do you do that? But in a general way, I try not to ask those questions.*

For Big Daddy, the appeal of tattooing as a career was not simply due to his love of art – he held two degrees in art and business – but also because it afforded him a level of control over his work schedule and labor power that he had not experienced in his previous career. Part of this is due to his status as a shop owner, but as he explains here, one does not have to own a shop to enjoy a great amount of leeway in setting one's own schedule and making decisions about their work life.

Danny was a 31-year-old tattooist who had been working in the tattoo industry for 5 years. He had dropped out of high school at 16, and worked in a variety of service jobs and done manual labor before he became a tattoo artist. Danny was among the more sedate-appearing individuals that I interviewed – while his arms and legs were heavily tattooed, his hands, neck, and face were clear. Unlike many of the other artists I interviewed, were he to wear pants and a long-sleeved shirt, one would never know that he was tattooed at all. At the time that I met Danny, he was technically homeless and was sleeping at friends' houses or on the couch in the tattoo shop where he was employed. Throughout our interview he repeatedly referred to himself as a "gypsy", and explained to me that he had often lived out of his car while traveling from place to place. While Danny was capable of appearing to be among the most conventional of the tattooists I interviewed, his personality and lifestyle were among the least traditional.

Danny said throughout his interview that he had often thought of leaving tattooing, because the work could be artistically frustrating at times. When I asked him why he stuck with it, in spite of his frustrations, he started telling me about the times when he enjoyed his work the most, but then quickly transitioned into comparing tattooing to his other side-job.

> *And I've (done tattoos), especially on friends and stuff, even something really goofy, kind of small and goofy. Something I know is not going to stick, that I'm going to probably have to touch up three times, like on their fingers or something like that, we'll have a great time. That kind of keeps you coming back. Plus, I've never felt that I was built for an office. I've tried it. I've done a lot of things for work. A lot of labor. I'm a painter by trade. I go do faux painting at big houses in (a wealthy suburb) tomorrow. My boss wants me to come to work with him but he knows I do this (tattooing). I can always go do (house painting). You kill yourself. Great money. You kill yourself doing it though. My back hurts either way, so whatever.*

For Danny, as with all of my interview subjects, tattooing was an artistic passion. He came from a family of artists – his father was a musician and his grandfather had been an illustrator. His lack of formal education would have prevented him from pursuing many careers, but he felt that he wasn't "built for" more conventional work anyway. Tattooing allowed him to travel, tattoo in other cities and states, and take time off whenever he wanted to, while affording him an income that enabled him to do so. For someone with his interests and inclinations, it was the perfect career.

Lack of Control in Tattooing

The control that tattooists enjoy over their working conditions and labor power is not only about the ability to maintain a flexible schedule while earning a decent living – the control described by Big Daddy. As Danny alludes to in the preceding quote, the flexible nature of tattooing as an occupation also relates to the ever-changing nature of the art form. As explained in Chapters 2 and 3, each client is also unique, not only in terms of the type of interaction they are seeking but also the content of the tattoos themselves. Every new client opens up the possibility of a new artistic project and thus the tattooist's personal artistic expression, though that possibility is not always realized.

Josh is 36 years old and has been tattooing for 10 years. During his career he has worked at 4 different shops, all within the same metropolitan area. He is fairly well known within the city for his distinctive style, and was spoken very highly of by his clients, several of whom I also interviewed. His busy schedule only afforded him an hour to speak with me, which made his interview the shortest that I conducted. However, while he initially came across as quite shy he opened up during our interview and was very friendly and forthcoming in his discussion of his career. He was by far the most positive of all the artists I interviewed, with nothing but kind

things to say about the industry, his work, and his colleagues at other shops. He explained to me that he had thought about leaving the tattoo industry, and going back to working in kitchens while painting and pursuing his art on the side. Ultimately, however, he decided to return to tattooing.

> *Josh: I took about a month off, I think. And that's the biggest break I've had in tattooing since I've started. It just pulled me back in. it was a mixture of money and just the love of doing it….But it was obvious I had already put so much work into tattooing, I just loved it so much. I think I just needed a vacation more than anything else. Luckily I came back into it.*

> *Sarah: Have you experienced that kind of burn out since then?*

> *Josh: Every once in a while, just like any job. Anything you have to do every day regardless of if you feel like it or not. Which is something that is very different from painting and drawing. I could just do it whenever I wanted to, whenever I felt like it. And if I didn't feel like drawing that day, I just didn't. And would do something else. But tattooing is a job as well. So you come in, do it every day. So that gets kind of tiring sometimes. But it beats having a 'real' job, really…I get bored doing anything over and over again. If have a few days where I'm doing nothing but big custom stuff, big Japanese stuff or portraits or something like that, sometimes after a few days of that, I really welcome the day of kanjis and cursive names. Sometimes those are just some of the best days for me. So much pressure is off and it's just really easy. I just like tattooing, so I like tattooing pretty much anything.*

Josh was unique, in that he was the only artist who did not complain about having to repeatedly do "boring" flash tattoos, like names and the Japanese symbols that continue to be so popular amongst young people. But his quote alludes to a problem that all tattoo artists face – while they may have entered the profession in order to have control, both the conditions of their labor and their artistic expression, in the end they still have to provide a service and a product that clients are willing to pay to consume. While Josh may not view tattooing as a "real job", it is

still a job, and even though tattoo artists are not accountable to management in the way that a worker in a bureaucratically organized institution would be, they are still accountable to their clients. According to Josh,

> *A lot of times it's kind of a battle. Being a tattoo artist, you have a responsibility to give them what they want, give the client what they want tattooed on them but also give them a good tattoo…So for me it's always trying to do the best technical tattoo I can do. Try to meet in the middle somewhere, try to make it look as good as I can. And if it's something that I just completely don't like the look of, or the style of or something like that, then it's just a matter of just technical tattooing. Trying to do the cleanest tattoo that's going to stay there, look good the longest, that's going to age well. Which is a lot of fun for me too. I like technical tattooing.*

Josh did not mind doing what he referred to as "technical tattooing", where the image was not something he personally cared for, but he recognized that it was still important for him to do his best work.

> *I don't do a whole lot of stuff that's just completely my artwork or my vision. It's always a collaborative effort. Even if it's something custom, it's always someone else's idea that's a springboard. Which is good because if it's just me, I'm probably just going to do skulls and roses. That's what people end up getting-. Every once in a while, somebody's just like, do whatever you want, go crazy. And that's gotten to where that's kind of hard for me. Can you give me some sort of direction, anything? Something. A tattoo is just so permanent, so personal for people. It's kind of hard for me to (push) my artwork.*

> *I feel like, there's a lot of tattoo artists I feel like sometimes kind of push their own artwork on other people, and their own vision. And use other people's skin as an outlet for their own vision and their own egos and stuff like that. And I'm not as much into that as a lot of artists are. There are always a lot of artists that do nothing but custom work. It's all their own vision. Really amazing, amazing stuff. But it's always been kind of weird for me. I've never wanted to step*

that far into it. Tattooing for me is more of a-, more of like a craft. And a lot of times, I'm kind of a hired gun…I'm totally fine with a Xerox machine and I just tattoo this on you and it's always a lot of fun. I like people that come in with real loose doodles and they have their own little ideas and I get to re-draw it and clean it up and kind of put my own style into it. But I don't do very much that's just completely my own thing. Usually that stuff tends to be the stuff I've worked on as paintings that people have seen in my (work)station or seen online or something. That's usually where that comes from, is kind of the other artwork I do. It's maybe like fifteen percent or something that's just going to be custom kind of artwork. Most of the rest is names and general tattoo stuff. Which I love. I love all of it.

While Josh was happy to work as a "Xerox machine", this was not the result of his status within tattooing. His name was repeatedly mentioned to me in my interviews with both clients and tattooists as someone who was highly skilled, and also as a kind and generous person to work with. Josh did not experience a great deal of internal tension in having to reconcile his own artistic preferences with those of his clients, but all of the other tattooists I interviewed did.

When faced with the redundancy of doing the same tattoos over and over again, or the economic necessity of having to do tattoos that did not fit within the artist's own personal aesthetic – when confronted with demand for "mechanical" tattoos - artists used strategies to manage the situation. Some artists would simply refuse to do tattoos that they were not personally interested in, for whatever reason. However, while all artists said there were some tattoos they simply would not do (for example, racist or gang related imagery), only one person that I interviewed said he would refuse tattoos based on pure aesthetics, and even then he would try to work with clients to refine the design and only refer them to another artist within the same shop if it was absolutely necessary. All of the artists that I interviewed understood the importance of building a reputation, and when faced with tattoos they personally did not prefer,

they would all still do their best, citing the importance of customer service within their

occupation.

Josh earlier referred to himself as a "hired gun", and many of the artists that I spoke with

used similar phrasing when explaining their artistic relationships with their clients. As Big

Daddy put it:

> *As a tattoo artist, you work for (the client). They're renting you. So let*
> *them do what they want to do…Whatever they want to do. And honestly, that's the*
> *best part of my job. Watching people, how they act with other people. You kind of*
> *let the client decide what they're going to do. You just go along with it. Because*
> *they're renting you. You know. They're your boss for that hour or half hour or*
> *whatever it takes to do to do their tattoo. They're you're boss so you just kind of*
> *let them pave the way for what's happening.*

It is interesting to note that Big Daddy claimed that he went into tattooing because he did

not like having a boss who told him what to do, and yet later in the same interview he referred to

his clients as his bosses. Tattooing is a competitive industry, especially in tough economic times

when many people do not have the money to pay for expensive luxury products like tattoos.

While it is necessary to make sure that clients are happy in order to establish a name for oneself

as a tattoo artist, giving up a certain element of artistic control does not necessarily require a loss

of structural control. Big Daddy can defer to his clients' wishes without having to be bound to a

strict schedule, a type of control over his labor power that he expressed as deeply important to

his choice of occupation. The ability to maintain a certain level of control over the structure of

his work life enables him to be more willing to put his clients first along other dimensions.

> *A lot of tattoo artists, you see them and they couldn't give a rat's ass what*
> *their clients want. They're going to do what they want and that's it. If you don't*
> *like it, sorry…I just try to make people comfortable. When I was in sales, I was*
> *top salesman. When I worked at a factory, I climbed the ladder quickly into a*

supervisor position. I make workers feel comfortable around me. I know how to talk to people. It just makes things easier for me to be able to read somebody and see how they want to be talked to or how they want to be dealt with. And that's how I deal with them. I know if I walk up to somebody and ask them if they need any help, what their response is, if they just want to be left alone until they come and talk to me. I just think-. It was something I had way before I came into there. It was something I had developed to work where I worked. I didn't have any jobs where I could work by myself. I always had to deal with people. So it was easier that way…

I see anywhere between ten to twenty a day, just people coming by, saying hi, what's up. Just wanting to chill. We try to give a cool atmosphere where people want to come by and say what's up. And I want that. I want to have the cool people come back. So it's nice to have the relaxed atmosphere where people can come and say what's up. We pause in our tattoo, what's up, man? What are you doing? Talk to them for a minute, tattoo a little bit, chitchat with them. Hey, this is Chris. Introduce him to the person I'm tattooing him with. And that starts a whole different community. People that we tattoo get to know each other. I just think it's better to have people feeling welcome to come back into your shop even if they're not getting tattooed. Sets a cool atmosphere. At the same time, you don't want people coming to hang out all day long…

Seeing people out in public, (they) want to talk to you about a tattoo. Just take two seconds out of your day to talk to them. Tell them, whenever, come on by. It's cool. Make them feel welcome and people will want to come. I'll probably see him within the next week. You just gotta make people feel welcome….That's really how you do it, right there. Just make sure you know your clients, say hi to them when you're out in public. Take that time out from your personal time to be cool with your client. That makes a cool atmosphere. I know tattoo artists that hate seeing people they know. Don't get me wrong, I have some people like that. Some annoying people. Most people are really cool. They're really cool about that. That's really how you get that relationship with people. Take a few seconds to talk to them. I mean…most of the people I'm with, that I sit with, most of the people

will know if somebody comes up to talk to me, I will take that time. It's my
business. It's what I do. I gotta take that time to talk to them. And the people I
usually associate myself with don't think it's rude anymore. They just know, that's
what he's got to do for his business…

A true professional knows how to take care of somebody. Knows how to
take care of anything that they need while you're there. If you're at my shop and
you start to get thirsty, I'll get you a drink? What do you want to drink? Not only
am I a tattoo artist, I'll get you a drink. I'll buy you-. You want some chips? I'm
going to the store, I'll get you a bag of chips. I think-. But at the same time, you
can't be turned into an errand boy or an errand girl. If you offer it, fine. Or if they
ask you nicely. I'll do it. But if somebody says, hey, go get me a bag of chips. Fuck
you. Put on your shoes and walk your happy ass up to the store…

Because we don't do as much advertising as the other shops. We rely on
word of mouth. If we do good work, the general rule is, if you do a good tattoo,
they're going to tell twenty people. If you do one bad tattoo, they're going to tell a
hundred people.

This (lengthy) portion of my interview with Big Daddy illustrates the line that tattoo

artists have to walk in their artistic lives and interactions with their clients. It is in his best

interests to be as friendly and personable with his clients, or potential clients, as possible. By

creating a welcoming atmosphere in his shop, Big Daddy and the rest of the artists working there

have established themselves as a hub within the local community. Their clients know that they

can stop by whenever they want to, and that as long as they are polite they will be met with open

arms. Word of mouth is particularly important in tattooing, as the right kind of referrals can

result in future work. Clients who are upset with their experience, whether it is due to the quality

of the artwork or the content of their interaction with an artist, are not only unlikely to refer their

friends but are also likely to try and dissuade potential clients from ever entering the shop in the

first place. Yet this does not prevent him from taking long blocks of time off from work without

notice or explanation, in part because he has created a welcoming atmosphere within his shop that will keep clients coming back even if they have to wait longer than they may prefer. The occupation allows him to maintain some forms of control, at the cost of others.

Danny had a very similar take on how the shop where he works is run.

> *Getting them in the door is the hardest part. Usually that's the biggest step for noobs and stuff like that. Just getting in the door and talking about what they want. Just coming in as a layman, you have to baby them a little bit. They don't know what they're getting into. Usually at most street shops, you come in and you're expecting to see some gnarly hairy biker dude with an iron potbelly and a gun strapped to his waist. Giving you the stink eye about your little cross and Psalms 3-whatever. You know what I mean? Because it's not a skull and a Harley patch. You're not in the carnival. So they're not going to treat you the same way. Whereas kind of what we like to do is we like to be there for a little bit of everybody. Know what I mean? I think that's probably the name of the game. I'm more concerned with integrity. Quality over quantity. Do your best work with the client at all times…*

> *(Y)ou constantly have to take into account that you're going to be with this person, right up in their shit, for a matter of hours, potentially…Being able to read people is a very invaluable situation. People come up to you and they'll say, they'll throw a few elements at you. And go you, one, how big? Where do you want it? Those two things are going to kind of really delegate what we can do with the design. You love the people that say, I want it big and money isn't an issue. But you also have to know your people. Hell, sometimes I'll have a moment of clarity where someone will hit the door and I know exactly what they want. I've had times where I've been in a bar and somebody will be like, I've got this tattoo on my foot. (And I'll guess) multi-colored stars. A little salt n' pepper (shaker). How did you know? I don't know, I just saw it all of a sudden. Good guess. Educated guess. You have to know how to read body language. Again, there's so many subtleties involved. I think to be a proper professional tattoo artist, knowing how to treat people, read people, giving them what they want, giving them*

something better than they expected, having them feel comfortable and keeping them coming back. And also trying to maintain what I was talking about earlier. Integrity. Trying to educate them a little bit about their skin, about the processing, about the after care. Letting them know that if they ever have questions or concerns, they can always come back. It's not like I'm a fly by night kind of guy. I'm not going to be gone. The term scratcher and butcher derived from the carnival days. Where everybody was so scared about infection that they would wrap it with toilet paper and butcher's tape. And say, don't even look at it for a week and a half. And by the time you would pull it off and everything is just ground in there and ate up terrible, they're gone. They're gone to the next town. So it's not like that. That's part of why I like staying in one place (right now). So I can develop this integrity, you know what I mean?

I've had three generations, grandma, mom, daughter, all in the same room together and I can talk to every single one of them at the same time and still individualize a comment, conversation. And they all-, one size fits all. But you kind of also let clients, in what we do and the kind of environment we're in, we also let clients take it as far as they want. We let them push the envelope. And we just abide. And sometimes, you get to know some people, you get to develop relationships with the regulars, repeat customers and stuff and then you can start telling them all your I'm-going-to-hell jokes and all that stuff. See each other out at the bar, stuff like that. It's always a fine line. It changes all the time. And even though the result is pretty much the same, really, it still changes. The dynamics of it are constantly in flux, know what I mean? That's another aspect that I kind of like about it. You don't get bored. I mean, sometimes you do. It's really dangerous to be bored at a tattoo shop. You end up with a bunch of goofy tattoos on you. But I think, I don't know, I guess I'm just geared for it.

Danny had described himself as a "gypsy" who suffered from "the wanderlust", and yet he simultaneously recognized that in order to build a solid customer base he needed to be able to establish himself in one place. Reading people, knowing what customers wanted before they asked, or at least being competent in collaborating with them not only helps tattoo artists to gain

repeat customers and positive referrals, but also could help alleviate the boredom that accompanied doing the same tattoos over and over again. Even if the artwork was mundane and repetitive (rational products), each interaction brought with it the opportunity for something new and interesting to take place (personalized interactions). Every artist that I interviewed told me that they did not have a typical client – they ranged in age, occupation, and station in life – and that this was something that they enjoyed about their work, since every day was different.

Tattoo artists recognize that even under the best circumstances, they are still creating art that is commissioned by someone else. They may have been drawn to the industry because it promised the potential to earn money while still living an unconventional lifestyle, but none of the artists I interviewed exhibited the "carnival" mentality that Danny mentioned. Many of the artists I spoke with referred to this mythical "other" type of tattoo artist, and while they may or may not exist in this era of modern tattooing, with an ever broadening client base and artistic influences, this provided a useful foil against which to define oneself. Josh also explained his relationships with his clients by referring to the unprofessional other – for him doing good work is dependent upon a certain measure of respect.

> *I think respect for the client is an important thing. Respect for the client, respect for tattooing, respect for its history. And respect for everyone involved. Respect for the people you work with, I think is important too. The only thing I can think of-, it's hard for me to think of how to define professional tattooing. It's easier for me to define unprofessional tattooing. Which, to me, I think is not caring what other people want and just doing it for the money. I do it for the money but doing it specifically for the money and not caring what the tattoo looks like, not caring anything about the client, what they want, making them happy at all.*

For the tattoo artists that I interviewed, building a reputation and providing quality work was not simply about being a talented artist. Control – over artistic expression and labor power –

was an impetus for entering the industry, but in the end was not the reality of their working lives. Instead of inhabiting a world where anything goes, and where they would be given free rein to create their own personal artwork, they entered an occupation where they were always working for someone else – even when this is what they thought they were escaping. As I outlined in the previous chapter, the constraints of the service triangle are not present in tattooing, because the form the work takes is creative and non-bureaucratic. This is what tattooists are referring to when they claim that tattooing is not a "real job", or that it is better than other forms of work. They are free from the conflicts inherent in the service triangle, but this does not mean that they are immune to a different set of constraints.

Rather than occupying a point in a triangle caught between the opposing needs of clients and management, tattoo artists exist on a sliding scale of control, constantly negotiating their position between two points. On one end of the spectrum is mechanical tattooing, what Josh jokingly referred to as the "Xerox machine" – the artist who traces a pre-drawn image without any input or opinion, a sort of tattoo-giving robot. On the other end is the self-serving artist, the freewheeling carnival operator that Danny referred to – the tough rabble-rouser who only does the designs (s)he likes, and who will pull a gun on anyone who offends his/her taste and preferences.

In reality, all of the tattoo artists I interviewed occupy a middle ground, and recognize the importance of co-operative interactions. The ability to maintain control over labor power, Big Daddy's scheduling flexibility or Danny's travel to work in tattoo shops out of state for extended periods of time, creates opportunities for control that are not available in many other occupations – particularly those that are available to people with low levels of formal education and an unconventional appearance. It is precisely the maintenance of these forms of control over the

conditions of one's work that make the concessions necessary in service provision more acceptable.

No one that I interviewed expressed a desire for total artistic autonomy; in fact, and the best-case scenario always included input from the client. Tattoo artists are, in reality, very customer oriented. They all spoke of wanting to do work that they found artistically challenging and aesthetically pleasing, but no one wanted to completely dictate the content of the tattoo for their client. The only exception to this was when artists told stories of tattooing their close friends or colleagues, never paying customers. The middle ground of co-operative experiences was what all were attempting to achieve. In Chapter 5, I discuss what happens when co-operative experiences are not achieved, the breakdowns that can result, and the importance of a reputational product market in tattooing.

Chapter 5

Death Before Dishonor: Authority and Autonomy in Service Work

In the previous chapter, I show how tattoo artists must give up a certain degree of control, and thus power, in order to please their clients and have successful interactions. Artists were willing to give in to the demands of their customers, provided that they felt their clients were willing to "give" something as well. As long as there was a feeling of respect and reciprocity, tattooists usually felt comfortable making at least some concessions to their clients. Yet when the balance of power tipped too far in the client's direction – when the artist's authority and autonomy were threatened in ways that could negatively impact the artist's occupational reputation– negotiations broke down, sometimes in dramatic fashion. Hard lines were drawn –in terms of aesthetics, tattoo content, what was deemed appropriate respect or deference to the artist– and when those lines were crossed artists either attempted to control the interaction and changed the outcome or simply refused to work with clients, even when it meant the loss of business and income. In this chapter, I explore what happens when negotiations break down, and artists exert their ultimate control over the client relationship.

While very few sociologists of work have studied tattoo artists, research by Michele Lee Maroto (2011) found that tattooists and body piercers used a number of formal and informal strategies in an attempt to maintain control over their occupation in the midst of its increasing popularity and ensuing greater competition. Maroto's research illustrates some of the ways body artists seek to exert control over their occupation, in large part through attempts to control other practitioners through formal and informal means, but does not focus on the ways that tattooists directly attempt to control their clientele. While her work is focused on the occupation rather than interactions between customers and artists, in both instances artists are attempting to exert control

over their work in the absence of strong occupational norms and practices. One way that artists can exert control over clients is by managing expectations from the start through the creation and defense of an occupational reputation.

In my interviews I found that tattooists' occupational reputations consistently contain, but are not limited to, three components: (1) a sense of artistic integrity; (2) a sense of morals and beliefs; and (3) a sense of appropriate workplace conduct. A tattooist's artistic integrity relates, in the context of my findings, to the aesthetics of a particular tattoo. Tattooists' occupational morals and beliefs are influenced by their personal ethics combined with their perception of themselves as arbiters for what is or is not an appropriate tattoo. Workplace conduct in this context primarily refers to the types of interactions that occur between tattooists and their clients, both in terms of content and conduct.

An artist's reputation is not static, but rather is a discursive construction that must be maintained and upheld. Reputations are important to tattooists because they reflect their understanding of themselves, their occupation, and their place within the world of tattooing, but also because they help to attract a clientele that ideally shares the same aesthetic tastes, morals and beliefs about tattooing, and expectations for interpersonal conduct. When client behavior threatens an aspect of the artist's occupational reputation , the artist can attempt to exert their authority to bring the interaction in line with their preferences, or exert autonomy and end the interaction completely.

Power and Control

Power at work can manifest itself as job authority and/or job autonomy. Job authority typically refers to the ability to sanction, supervise, or have decision-making control over others (Smith 2002). This can manifest as the ability to influence or determine others' salaries, make hiring and firing decisions, and supervise or manage other workers (Schieman and Reid 2008). Individuals

who hold management positions thus have a fair amount of authority over those they manage, as they are likely to have at least some control over the working conditions of their staff. However, holding a measure of authority does not mean that one is immune to the control of their work by others – mid-level managers still have an additional layer of supervision and control over their labor as well (Boulton and Houlihan 2010).

Job autonomy is related, although not exactly the same, and refers to the level of control one has over decisions relating to their own job and labor power (Choi, Leiter, and Tomaskovic-Devey 2008). Autonomy can take on a variety of forms, including the ability to set one's own start and stop times, control the content of work produced, or decide the location where one's work will take place. Industry and occupation can set limits on the expression of autonomy, as the self-employed tend to have greater control over their work decisions than workers on a manufacturing assembly line. Indeed, greater job autonomy is one of the reasons why some contract workers are willing to endure the risks and insecurity of contingent work (Osnowitz 2010; Neff 2012). Power is understood in this dissertation as the ability to influence/control decisions about the conditions of one's work and results in authority (the ability to make decisions for others), and autonomy (the freedom to control one's own labor-power). Within the world of tattooing, one way that autonomy is expressed in the ability to choose which clients to work with, while authority involves influencing the actions of those clients.

While customers do have agency in the service interaction, it is often in service providers' best interests to attempt to dictate the terms of the interaction, both from a personal and managerial viewpoint. Interactive service work can be much less predictable than jobs that do not involve direct contact with consumers, and thus requires multiple techniques and greater involvement from the worker in order to control the interaction. Service workers have multiple strategies at their disposal to

try to influence the behaviors of their clients, including emotional labor (Hochschild 1985; Leidner 1999; Chu et al. 2012), professional statuses (Corrado 2002; George 2013), sexualized practices (Van Leuven 1998; Lerum 2004; Tyler 2012), and the highlighting of personal embodied identities and characteristics (Trethewey 1999; George 2008; Foster and Resnick 2013).

The unpredictable nature of tattooing is one aspect of the occupation that is appealing to artists. Even when the artwork itself becomes repetitive, the nature of artists' interactions with their clients varies widely. Clients are different, and each comes in with their own preferred narrative about how the interaction should occur. And artists themselves are individuals who grow and change over time and as their skill progresses. The variability of their work is what allows them to accept interactions where they may have less autonomy in their choices than they would prefer, and allows them to reposition themselves constantly on a sliding scale between self-serving artistry and mechanical tattooing.

However, there are limits to how far artists are willing to go with their clients, and how much they will move along that spectrum. This constant renegotiation is a delicate process, and there are times in every tattooist's career when they interaction clients who want to take more than they are willing to give. Some of this was alluded to in the previous chapter, for example when Big Daddy said that he told some clients to "fuck off" if they became too demanding of him. However, in most cases artists are able to collaborate and negotiate with their clients by appealing to their job authority in ways that are mutually satisfactory, though the process may at times be painful. This is a difficult skill to learn, and one that can take years to fully develop. Negotiating with clients does not always work, and in some circumstances there is no mutually satisfying outcome possible.

These interactions can be particularly fraught when artists feel that their occupational reputations are at risk. Each artist has their own unique occupational reputation that they

communicate to clients, including their artistic integrity, their personal morals and beliefs, and their sense of appropriate workplace behavior. While each of these factors exists on a spectrum – some artists find certain types of imagery immoral while others take the moral stance of seeing no morality in tattooing – all of the artists that I interviewed understood themselves and their work in relation to these themes and had crafted occupational reputations that corresponded to their understandings of themselves and their work.

Occupational reputations differ from occupational identities because while they both contain an individual's sense of self as a worker, reputations are intended to be communicated to others as opposed to serving as an internal understanding. In an ideal scenario, an artist's reputation in the tattoo community precedes them, informing potential clients of what to expect from the interaction and funneling those whose interests and outlooks align to the tattooist, thus reducing the potential for conflict. But reputations are not static, and must be continually reconstructed with each new client. Any challenge to an artist has the potential to be highly damaging given the relative fragility of occupational reputations. When confronted with difficult situations that have the potential to challenge aspects of their occupational reputation, artists generally will first try to assert their authority and bring the client around to where they want them to be (often times as subtly as possible so as not to offend anyone), and when that fails or when the breach is particularly egregious, tattooists exert their autonomy over their work, by refusing to tattoo certain clients.

The decision to attempt to control the situation by exercising authority or end the interaction by exerting autonomy depends on a number of interrelated factors. Differences in personality are one factor that at least partially determines an artist's willingness to compromise with their clients. Some of the tattooists that I interviewed came across as decidedly prickly personalities and some were very assertively individualistic while others were gregarious, warm, and accommodating. While the

personalities involved are interesting and created a lively and always engaging data collection process, the commonalities between the artists I spoke with were far more striking. As mentioned in the previous chapter, none of the tattoo artists in my sample were completely willing to cede all control to their clients, for reasons that went far beyond their own potentially controlling temperaments.

Chapter 2 outlined some of the ways that clients create, communicate, and perform their preferred identity through their consumption of tattooing, but this is not the only level of identity construction taking place. Tattoo artists are also performing their occupational reputations through the interactive service interaction and the resulting product. The service interaction and the ensuing tattoo serve as a microcosm to display the artist's artistic integrity, morals and beliefs, and sense of appropriate conduct. Tattooing is a competitive industry, and one that only grows more so as the popularity of the art form increases and more and more artists enter the field. While some of the artists I interviewed have busy schedules and book their appointments weeks if not months in advance, others struggle to bring in enough work to fill their time and meet their expenses. There were several occasions during my data collection when artists offered to tattoo me for free after their interviews, because in their words they were "bored" or because they had artwork that they wanted to tattoo on someone but did not have enough willing clients.[3]

Building a robust clientele is dependent upon building a well-known reputation, which can be particularly difficult for newly minted licensed artists. Reputation building has somewhat of a snowball effect; the more tattoos an artist does, the more opportunities they have to showcase their work and work style through word of mouth and the display of their artwork on bodies in public spaces. It is not uncommon for complete strangers to strike up conversation and ask people with

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[3] I did not take any of the artists up on these offers, nor did I include artists who had previously tattooed me in my sample.

visible tattoos who did the work, so ensuring that the tattoo in question is consistent with the

tattooists' desired occupational reputation is of extreme importance. A tattooist does not want to do a

bad job not only because they do not want permanently mark their client with something they feel is

subpar – but also because they do not want a tattoo that they would self-define as "bad" attributed to

their name. Tattoos end up in essence doing double-duty, and the aesthetics and the interaction

communicate something about the identity of the wearer, but also of the creator.

Drawing the Line: Artistic Integrity

Subject One[4] is 36 years old and has been tattooing for 11 years. He attended art school for

several years before and during his tattoo apprenticeship, but ultimately dropped out when tuition

became too expensive. His name came up in other interviews as a talented local tattooist, and Danny

described him as a great artist and friend but a "weird dude." At the beginning of our interview he

was somewhat reserved in his answers, but opened up during the course of our two-hour

conversation. He is tall and rather gaunt with piercing eyes and a heavy beard, which combined with

his numerous visible tattoos on his hands and neck, make him a rather imposing figure. He was

definitely one of the less approachable people that I interviewed, and I could see how his clients

might be somewhat intimidated by him. When asked about his interactions with clients, he told me:

> *My people skills have definitely improved over the years. I used to be terrible*
> *with people skills. So much so that somebody would come in and want something*
> *done and if I didn't like it, I wouldn't say anything, I would just walk away. Which*
> *usually didn't go very well. Not very much a people person. But doing this for as long*
> *as I have, I've developed those more people skills. I'm still not great at it but at least I*
> *don't walk away and not say anything. Explain to them why I don't like it.*
>
> *It's still very important. Because it's such a personal thing with them. You*
> *need to kind of be personable with them. Otherwise, it's come in, sit down, shut up,*

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[4] All of my interview subjects were given the option to choose their pseudonym. Most did not have a preference, although "Subject One" was of the few who picked their own name for the purposes of my dissertation.

give me your money and leave. That's very old tattoo shop mentality. Years ago, it
would have been like that. You just walk into a shop. Pick something off the wall.
They did it and you left. Whereas now, because the creative process is so different,
you have to do, really, a consultation with the person. And they tell you what they
want. And you have this discussion on how it's going to be done. And that can take-,
sometimes that takes an hour. Talking about how they want it, what they want, where
they want it, how big, and all that. It's not just picking something off the wall and
doing it and leaving. The whole process has changed.

You have to have those people skills to make them feel comfortable. Even
though I'm here every day all day, some people forget that the average Joe coming
into a shop, it might be their first time walking into a tattoo shop. And that can be a
little bit nerve wracking for them. They don't know what to expect. They don't know-.
Of course, the stereotype of tattoo shops really haven't gone away. Somewhat of the
lower class society of bikers, sailors and hookers. And of course, in the past ten years,
that's changed a lot. ...(T)attooing has become so popular that it's not looked like
that as much. But somebody walking into a tattoo shop for the first time, you kind of
have to make them feel comfortable. Not just be an arrogant asshole. Because they're
not going to come back.

Subject One has worked to become more personable with his clients, in part because it is

necessary in order to develop a repeat clientele, but also because he recognizes that tattoos are

personal and he wants people to leave happy with both their work and the experience. His career

development has included growing and developing as an artist, but also growing and developing in

terms of customer service provision. However, there are some cases where he is not willing to give in

to the demands of his clients, particularly when it comes to aesthetic choices.

Lately I just tell them straight out, I don't do tribal. We've got a couple other
artists here that do it, they do it well. Talk to them about doing it. I won't. I just won't
do it. I don't like doing it. And I've gotten, I think I've gotten far enough in my career
and I have enough clientele that I don't need to do it. (You can afford to do this) when
you start booking out months in advance. I stay busy enough to where I can, I can

start turning things down that I'm not really into. The other thing too, it's not really fair to the person, I think, getting the tattoo. If the artist isn't into doing it. Even if they are really, really good as an artist, if they're not into doing the design, they shouldn't be doing it. You're not going to put a hundred percent into it.

That's the ultimate thing. That they're happy with it. I can look back on tattoos that I've done throughout the years and pick things out that I could have done differently with the tattoo design or just the approach of it that I'm not a hundred percent happy with. But that's part of the learning process, as an artist, growing and getting better. Ultimately they're happy with it and that's really all that matters. Because they're the ones that have to live with it.

I won't do stuff if it's just a bad design. Like if it's something that…You want to follow body lines. You don't want to…Say on a chest piece, you kind if want to follow the curve and the muscles in the chest. Something that goes straight across the chest isn't going to look as good as something that curves with the chest. So stuff like that. I'll try to tell them, we should probably go this way with it or that way with it or change this or change that. But if they're just adamant about something that is either design-wise, isn't a good design or if it's just not going to fit well with the body area, I won't do it. A lot of people come in and they have a picture, say like of, it could be something off a poster, something off a woodblock print or something like that. And not every image will translate to a tattoo that well. There are certain things that you could put on a flier or put on a poster that's fine for that image or fine for that way you're going to project it. But not all designs work as tattoos. And so trying to tell people, doing it exactly the way that it's done on this piece of paper is not going to convey the same way on skin. So trying to deal with that.

Because most people don't-, they're not real familiar with tattoos. They're not real familiar with how they're going to look or how they're going to age. And so you have to talk to them and tell them, you know-. And just from as long as I've been doing this, experience, seeing how tattoos age or seeing how tattoos fit on the skin. They're not familiar. So you have to kind of guide them through or educate them a little bit. It happens quite a bit. But most people are really receptive to it. Most people

take the advice and let me run with it. Or they'll, they obviously know that I know a

bit more than them. So they trust me that what I'm telling them is somewhat correct.

>*(If not) then I just tell them, maybe I'm not the artist to do this. Because*

there's plenty of artists in town that are going to take their money just to do the tattoo.

There are guys or shops that just don't care. They just want the money. But my thing

is, my name's going to be attached to every tattoo that walks out of here. Or the

tattoos that I do. And I don't want to do a bad design because someone seeing it is not

going to say, oh, did you design that? They're going to ask where they got it done.

And I don't want my name or shop associated with any type of either bad design or

poorly done design or anything like that. Even though I don't get their money, I would

rather not take the money and not do a bad design.

The most important thing for Subject One is his artistic integrity, which is a core component

of his reputation as a tattoo artist. When he feels that he is presented with a situation that does not

meet his personal standards, he will exert his autonomy and refuse to do the tattoo. Part of this is

because artists tend to become known for doing particular styles of work. If one client has tribal

tattoos done, and then refers everyone they know with similar taste, before long the artist becomes

known for that style and it can make up the bulk of their workload.

His approach also reflects a desire to be respected as an expert on his art form. He believes

that as a result of his training and experience that he knows better than the average consumer what

types of images will or will not translate well into a tattoo and where and how these images should be

placed on the body. He expects his clients to understand and defer to his authority on the subject, and

will refuse his services when they do not. It is easier for him to turn down clients because he has an

established customer base and books appointments months in advance. For him, turning someone

away does not necessarily mean less money in his pocket, because there is always someone else

whose taste is more in line with his own or who is willing to defer to his judgment waiting behind

him or her. For less established artists this attention to artistic reputation can be a much more painful process.

Harvey is 31 years old, and has been tattooing for six years. At the time of our interview, he had just opened up a new business with two of his friends after having worked at three different shops in the area. He is a large man with many visible tattoos and a bushy beard, but unlike Subject One, he was loud and jovial. At various points in our interview he would imitate people's voices and occasionally burst into song. His personality was very different than Subject One's, as was his economic situation, since he was in a new, relatively unknown shop location that had only been open for three months. However, he echoed many of the same points, though with a different outcome.

> *I can draw some goofy shit all day long that I think is cool but probably five people in the whole world that actually want it. So especially in my first few years, I had to learn how to draw a million things the way-. Like in a very general way. The way most people would like it. And that was really annoying. It almost made me not want to do the job. I don't want to draw a damn butterfly. I don't give a fuck about a fucking butterfly. But everybody wants the fucking butterfly. So I'm sitting here like, fuck this shit. Honestly, drawing, like fuck this dumbass motherfucker. Or tribal. The most boring god damn shit ever. Like fuck, I fucking hate it. And at that time, I was too bigheaded and too egotistical about my own art that I didn't give people enough attention. I didn't care enough. They're paying me. I had to make that choice. And that was what was so annoying. I couldn't within myself make peace with fact that I wasn't going to be able to do what I wanted to do.*

> *You get a lot of people that have their own drawing and they want their own drawing or they want their buddy's drawing. And they think it's awesome. And to them, sure, it's awesome. But in the grand scheme of educating a tattoo artist who knows his craft and knows the people around him who are awesome and follows the trends and sees what's going on in the tattoo industry. And what's clean and what lasts and what looks good on the skin...There's usually a lot of time where I will sit down with them and just lay it out. I like this, but we're going to have to make some*

changes. And see how they respond to that. But if they're like oh no, I can't change it.
Suzy drew it just for me. Well, it's just not tattoo-able because-. And I'll lay out why.
Sometimes I'm bullshitting to the point where I sound professional because I don't
know how else to explain it to them other than, well, skin cells are this big. When you
try to put something this big into the skin cell, the skin reacts-. Just overextend the
concept of it so they can get it. Usually most people get it. I have to keep it simple and
design it to where it will last. And that's usually, nine times out of ten, a nice way of
saying I don't want to do it because it sucks. You never want to say that. Because you
want them to get a tattoo and you want them to be happy and you don't want to insult
them. Some people take longer to get through to than others.

I think more and more people are starting to catch on to what is a good tattoo
and what isn't. Because of the popularity of it... I think that's really awesome. So it's
definitely gotten better… Maybe I'm just in the city now instead of being out…in the
country. You get the surrounding counties where you get a lot more sheltered people
who want a Taz or want a barbed wire armband. They don't get it. I'll do a Taz. I had
a guy, he wanted a Taz. And he came in like, I want a Taz. Well, how do you want
him? With his tongue out? Spinning around like a tornado? He gets this confused
look on his face like, what do you mean? Well, he's Taz from the Looney Toon
cartoons. He's the Tasmanian devil. He's a tornado. And he's like, what? I'm like
yeah, he spins, he turns into a tornado, man. We should do the tornado. And he was
so confused. I was like, have you not seen the cartoon? He was like, people at work,
they just call me Taz. I've seen a Taz tattoo before, I thought it would be cool. You
know what, I'm going to go home and watch that cartoon. And I was like, dude, good
job. All right, I like that. He's going to go do his research. So he comes back a week
later and was like, tell you what. Let's do the tornado on the bottom and his body on
the top. And I was like, all right man. You got it. So I rocked that Taz. That was fun.
So I don't know. It's just weird.

While Subject One would have turned down a Taz tattoo because it did not mesh with the

realistic style that was his specialty thus exercising job autonomy, Harvey was ultimately willing to

do it after consulting and collaborating with the client and convincing him to do his research,

appealing to his own job authority to make his point. Part of this is undoubtedly due to personality differences, but there is also an economic aspect to these types of decisions. Harvey explained to me that because their shop was new, and in a location that had not previously been a tattoo parlor, they were still struggling to bring in business. People did not know that their shop existed, and while they could rely on some amount of walk-in traffic due to their location on a relatively busy thoroughfare, they were also located only a few blocks away from a very well known competitor. Complicating factors even more, he and one of his co-owners had left another local tattoo shop under contentious conditions involving allegations of theft on the part of his partner, as was surreptitiously communicated to me in another interview. Potential clients who went looking for them at the location where they had previously worked were thus unlikely to be informed of their new business venture.

Tattooing is a reputational market, and previous clients serve as billboards for the artists who did their tattoos as well as the shops where they are located. Artists who are more established in their careers or who work in shops with more steady traffic are able to make decisions about the work they are or are not willing to do more easily than those who are just starting out, either because they are new to the industry or are in a new business venture. Once a reputation is developed, as in the case of Subject One, exercising autonomy and authority becomes relatively easy, at least up to a point. But for tattoo artists like Harvey, whose reputations are more in flux, establishing authority and autonomy with their clients requires a much more delicate interaction. Enacting too much authority and/or autonomy too early on in one's career or after a precarious transition can result in a loss of income or a reputation as difficult to work with, and one risks being known for having a difficult personality without the benefit of being known as a talented artist like Subject One.

But enacting too little authority or autonomy - being the artist that Subject One views as "going to take their money just to do the tattoo" - can result in developing a reputation as

perhaps *too* easy to work with. Putting work that they find to be personally unsatisfactory out into the public eye is something that all the tattooists I spoke with feared, as no one wants to be known as untalented – for the sake of their egos and their bottom-line. Service interactions at tattoo shops always involve the signing of a contract by the client, (an example of which can be found in Appendix D). These contracts are required in order to provide proof that the individual being tattooed is not a minor, but they also serve to protect tattooists from liability if an individual is not happy with their tattoo. Contracts often include information about how the client's tattoo aftercare regimen, combined with physiological characteristics (skin pigmentation, propensity for scarring, et cetera) can influence the final outcome of the tattoo. Contracts often include or are accompanied by detailed aftercare instructions, since the way a tattoo is treated during the healing process can have a significant impact on the final outcome. The contracts help to position tattoo artists as authority figures and help set client expectations for what can be reasonably expected from the final product. However, these contracts only come into play once an individual has already made the decision to be tattooed by a particular artist. Therefore they primarily exist to ensure the client acknowledges their responsibilities for their tattoos' eventual outcome, thereby playing their role in protecting the artist's reputation, rather than influencing the initial negotiation process.

Artists with the least status and the most precarious finances are more likely to exert their authority while still trying to maintain the interaction. Established artists are much more likely to exert their autonomy and simply end interactions that they feel challenge their occupational reputations.

Moral Beliefs

Each artist has to draw their own lines about what types of work they are or are not willing to attach their name to. Sometimes it is an issue of aesthetics – none of the artists I spoke with wanted to have "bad" artwork associated with them. But for others, it can be a moral and ethical issue. Charlie is 36 years old and has been tattooing for 10 years. He had worked at 7 different shops in the state, and had been at his current place of business for 4 years.

> *Something that just kind of depends on the shop that I'm at. I used to get asked to do swastikas. There'd be like some skinhead guy coming in with 'White Power' tattoos. And no one would really want to do them. A couple times that anyone ever did, it was something I witnessed that-. There'd be some artist like, yeah okay, whatever, I don't care. And they would do it on them. And the next thing you know, that guy comes in with all of his buddies. And suddenly there's a crew of racist scumbags in the shop. There's some people, the thought of, why should I care whether this guy wants a swastika or something on him? Fine. Mark yourself as a jackass. But it's a slippery slope.*
>
> *And I can see some people's view of it. The artist out there that are like who am I to judge what you get tattooed. That's not my job. I'm not your dad. But it's not something I'm comfortable with. But I'm fine with doing blasphemous tattoos. Everybody's different. There's people that come in here that have gotten turned away from shops because they wore upside down crosses or some heavy metal stuff that's got pentagrams and stuff in it. And the artists were uncomfortable with it. I'm fine with all that. It's just different for different people.*

Charlie wasn't willing to judge other artists who would do racist tattoos, partially because the people he saw who would do them were his friends and co-workers. He is right to point out that the ethical line tattoo artists draw is different for everyone, and depends on how they have developed their own occupational reputation. Charlie would not tattoo a swastika on someone, but felt

comfortable tattooing blasphemous imagery. Yet he also noted that this was not merely a one-time personal decision.

If an artist in a shop was willing to do "white power" tattoos, the potential end result could be a reputational shift for the artist, or even the shop as a whole. Once tattooists have marked themselves as willing to do a particular style of tattoo that others will not, clients who want this type of work done may flock to them. An individual artist or shop may not want to market itself as a place for "racist scumbags" while attracting those who want anti-religious designs may be more palatable. Drawing precise lines on ethical continuums is always ultimately an arbitrary act, but in the context of tattooing it is one that can affect an artist's, or shop's reputation in lasting ways, and can result in economic consequences. It is not difficult to imagine that many more mainstream potential clients would feel uncomfortable frequenting a tattoo parlor that was full of neo-Nazis – after all, this is the reason why I never returned to the shop where I got my first tattoo. An artist can risk their own reputation with their actions but may also be affecting the tattooists that work alongside them as well.

Jake is 31 years old and had been tattooing for 6 years, having started his apprenticeship after he left the military. He had been working in the Midwest for several years, and had been in the city where I interviewed him for a year and a half at the time of our meeting. Jake strongly identifies as a Christian, though he repeatedly rejected the label of "Christian tattoo artist" that he felt other people had placed on him. As a result of his reputation, by his estimation about half of his work was religious imagery. He would turn away clients who wanted tattoos that he felt offended his core beliefs.

> *This woman, sweet lady. And I thought she just was kind of a little too Hot*
> *Topic for how old she was. She had a pentagram on her shirt and all this stuff. And*
> *she just wanted her son's name and a spider on her arm. So I did that. And she was*
> *like, I really like your style and I want to get this other piece. I don't think that she*

knew that I was a Christian. And she pulls out this H.R. Giger book.[5] And I was like,
okay. This is a bad start. And then she starts flipping through, and I was like, this is
getting worse. And she flips to this page and it was one of the most demonic things I
had ever seen. And I was like, I can't do that tattoo. I just can't. I can't perpetuate that
imagery onto somebody. And I felt bad. Because she was actually a little
embarrassed about it. She wasn't mad at me. But now she doesn't come in any more.
She was just embarrassed about it. And I feel terrible about that but I wasn't going to
do the tattoo…Most people, I don't know why, because it doesn't say in my portfolio,
that I'm a guy of faith. Most people don't think to ever ask me that kind of stuff.

While ultimately he chose to exert his autonomy and refuse this client, the experience placed Jake in a delicate position. On the one hand, he felt that he could not in good conscience tattoo someone with imagery that he believed was demonic. But on the other, he recognized that even though he was polite in his refusal, he lost a paying client. This was a woman who had already been tattooed by Jake once and was primed to become a repeat customer – the type of person who can be of the most help in establishing the reputation for a tattoo artist. Repeat customers, by acquiring more work done by the same artist, serve as more effective "human billboards" for tattooists. They clearly like the artist in question as they keep returning, resulting in a greater likelihood of being willing to recommend the artist to other potential clients. Repeat customers also have multiple pieces by the same tattooist that they can display, thus providing a more compelling case for the consistent quality of an artist's work. Luckily for Jake, he works in one of the most highly esteemed shops in the area, and like Subject One, turning away or potentially offending a client was not economically detrimental to him or the business.

In the aforementioned examples, the conflicts that arose with clients were all related to the content of the tattoo itself and its relation to the artists' occupational morals and beliefs. In Harvey's

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[5] H.R. Giger was a painter and set designer, most famous for his design work for the film, "Alien." His artwork is known for its dystopian themes and dark, often sexualized, content.

case these issues were overcome through his client ultimately acknowledging Harvey's authority and following his advice, but Subject One, Charlie, and Jake all exercised job autonomy and turned down work when it was disagreeable to them. These problems come down to a matter of taste – and it is likely that in all of these situations, and certainly in the story that Charlie told, that the clients were able to later find an artist who was willing to tattoo them with the images they desired. Subject One, Charlie, and Jake were also far more economically secure than Harvey, making it easier for them to pass up a paying client in favor of guaranteeing no damage would be done to their occupational reputation. Harvey had to take more of a chance and hope that he would be able to exert his authority sufficiently to overcome the challenge to his occupational reputation.

Appropriate Conduct

Additional conflicts arise not due to differences in artistic or moral tastes, but out of what artists perceive to be lack of respect.

> *(The worst clients are) people that don't listen to-. I don't want to say people that don't listen to me. But people that don't appreciate the fact that I probably know more than them. And they just want what they want when they want it. A lot of people get mad that I can't get them in, in their mind, in a reasonable amount of time. Or people that want me to do this big elaborate drawing and are calling me the next day to see if I have it done. Because sometimes I think that people think they're my only client. When I've got twenty people before them that have come to me first wanting me to do something. But they want it done on their time. So they're the ones that probably annoy me the most. Even though you do explain to them, I've got a pretty hefty workload, I'll get to this when I get to it, but it might be a month before I can even think about drawing it up. So impatient people I would say are the worst.*

Here Subject One expresses the main issue that tattoo artists articulated having with their clients – problems primarily arose when the client was not willing to cede that the tattooist was the authority figure in their interaction. This relates back to the collaborative art process as well. As long

as the client is willing to accept that the artist knows more about tattooing, and thus what is and is not aesthetically possible or appealing, then the collaborative process can go smoothly. When clients will not back down or defer to the artist's opinion, interactions can start to break down. And when clients behave in ways that the artist finds disrespectful, things can get ugly, and quickly. Because these challenges to what the artist views as appropriate conduct arise from challenges to the tattooist's authority, it is less likely that they will be able to successfully exert their job authority to address the breakdown in the interaction. In these instances tattoo artists have fewer options at their disposal and are more likely to result in displays of autonomy.

Jake works in an upscale, custom only tattoo parlor, and as a result the majority of his clients were willing to accept this authority and defer to him on most issues since it was his reputation as a highly skilled artist that tends to have brought them to him in the first place. However, like all the artists I interviewed, he too had experiences with people not treating him or the shop in the way he felt it deserved.

> *I like people who respect my area. People not bringing in sodas. I have people, nervous type people, they set something down then knock it over. People bring their kids in. That's one I don't like. I don't feel like that's a place for kids. And even-, they're not allowed past a certain point in the shop. But even in the front, we've had kids and parents are just watching them run all over. Knock magazines over. All this stuff. And they're like, aw, it's cute. And I'm like, I'm going to hit you in the mouth. Not that I ever would. But just respect our shop as much as we're going to respect you. Because it just creates an uncomfortable environment. If somebody's acting like a jackass, then everybody is like, I don't want to be around this, I don't want to hear this, I don't want to-. You know.*

In the same way that Charlie did not want racist skinheads hanging out in the shop he had worked at, Jake did not want parents with unruly children creating an atmosphere in his workplace that was not conducive to his work or that would promote an atmosphere that was inconsistent with

the way that he understood his own occupational reputation. Jake takes his work seriously, and takes pride in his conduct that includes treating his clients respectfully in an occupation that has a history of not necessarily being respectable. In a separate interview I spoke with Topher, the shop manager of the tattoo parlor where Jake works. At the time of my interviews it was the most exclusive and expensive tattoo parlor in the area, and the only one with a shop manager. The shop manager did not supervise any of the tattoo artists, but managed the day-to-day operations of the parlor, answering the phone, ordering supplies, maintaining the website and online presence, and organizing advertising and public events. Topher stressed to me the importance of customer service, and that the owner and artists considered themselves different from other tattoo shops in the area because they cultivated a high-end environment that did not "look or feel like the typical tattoo shop". While Jake was joking when he said that he would hit someone, as this would definitely not be in keeping with the tone of the establishment where he worked, one of the artists I interviewed actually did.

Frank was 28 years old, and had been tattooing for 4 years. He was physically very large, and while I found him overall to be very personable, open and talkative, he wore an angry scowl through most of our interview. I asked him if there were any people that he would refuse to tattoo, and he told me the following story:

> There's only one person I can think of that I would not tattoo. He came in
> with his girlfriend. She wanted a tattoo. She had one above her privates. And she
> needed to cover it up. It was an ex's name. And when they come in, he was all drunk.
> We have a policy, you don't tattoo drunk people. And that's fine, he wasn't getting a
> tattoo. It was his girlfriend and she was sober. He didn't want me or (the other male
> artists in the shop) tattooing her. But we have a female artist there, so that's fine. But
> at the time, she was an apprentice. She lays stencils, we look at it to make sure it's
> straight. She's doing line work, we look at it to make sure she's doing it right. So I
> mean, you have to watch your apprentices still. We told him that. We told him that
> and we told her that. Even if she's tattooing (the woman client), we're still going to

have to come look to make sure she's doing things right. And he was cool with it. He was cool with it as long as we didn't touch her, blah blah blah. Well, about halfway through the tattoo, (the apprentice) didn't know how to do a technique right. And I told him, listen man, (my apprentice) doesn't know how to do this and I'm going to have to show her. And apparently, I didn't know it because I was tattooing too, he was outside in his car, drinking. And (the client) was cool with it, she was fine with me showing (my apprentice) how to do it. It's just one little spot, show her how to do it and be done with it. (The client) was cool with it, he threw a fit. He was like, you touch her, I'll kick your ass. And stuff.

I'm of the opinion that this is the kind of business where you can't let people talk down to you. If you let it happen once, it's going to happen again. As soon as he told me he was going to beat my ass if I touch his girlfriend, I didn't want to knock him out or hurt him real bad. I'm a big fan of bitch smacking people. I think it's the ultimate dis. I just bitch smacked you and you didn't do anything about it. So I bitch smacked him, grabbed him by his throat and knocked him backwards out the door. And threw him outside and told him to stay outside until we were done. And when I got back to the room, his girlfriend goes, thank you. She said thank you! And I was like, if you're uncomfortable with this, we do not have to do it. It's whatever you're comfortable with. She was like, no, I want it done right. So go ahead and show her.

I show (my apprentice), it took me five seconds to show her a technique…And she had it. I barely even touched the girl. And it had to cause all that drama. But he's-. I don't even know his name but I'd recognize him if I saw him. He's the only person I would not tattoo. I'd probably do the same thing to him if I saw him again. He's the only person I would think of that I wouldn't tattoo.

In this instance, Frank was upset that the client's boyfriend was not respecting his authority as a tattoo artist. Instead of being recognized as someone who was simply doing his job, training his apprentice, and ensuring that the client got the best possible tattoo, her boyfriend was also implying that there was a sexual undercurrent to their interaction. This type of "disrespect" was problematic not only because it offended Frank's occupational reputation as an artist who was above sexualizing

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his clients, but also because he viewed it as potentially impacting his reputation and thus setting a

pattern for additional disrespect in the future. In Frank's mind, if he became known as someone who

clients could "talk down to" it would continue to happen again and again. He attempted to appeal to

his authority by explaining his role as the supervisor to his apprentice, but this appeal fell on deaf

(and apparently drunk) ears. Because Frank was not able to exercise authority in his job, by being

unsuccessful in his attempts to appease the boyfriend and convey his respectability, the interaction

broke down in a dramatic fashion and he exerted his autonomy by kicking the drunken boyfriend out

of the shop.

Tattooing's reputation as a wild occupation with an equally wild clientele continues to impact

the interactions that take place at tattoo shops, even in the face of an ever expanding client base. As

previously mentioned, having status and the economic security that comes from having a large

clientele makes it easier for artists to assert their autonomy and simply refuse to engage in

interactions that challenge their occupational reputation. But this reputational process is cyclical.

Having a strong occupational reputation means being more readily able to defend challenges to it.

Yet challenges to a still forming occupational reputation are important to face head on, because the

reputation is less established and still evolving. This means that tattooists who are earlier in their

careers must develop their abilities to control interactions through accessing their job authority.

However, some interactions are too egregious and even relatively unestablished artists will have no

choice other than to exert their autonomy and end the interaction. Veronica, a 22 year old tattoo artist

with bright pink hair and colorful tattoo sleeves that belied her demure demeanor, told me the

following story about kicking a couple out of the shop she had been working at for the last 6 months:

> *(The) junkies in the parking lot! They'd come by the day before. And they*
> *were smoking heroin in their car. You could smell it when they came in. They smelled*
> *like ass. I was just like, uh. And then the girl disappears in the bathroom for twenty*

minutes before she gets tattooed. And she comes out and there's bloody paper towel bits all over the sink. And I'm just like, really?

So they came back the next day to try to get tattooed. And I saw them in the back parking lot. I was watching their car. Because I was going to call the cops on them. We don't need-. That was one thing that I was mostly concerned about is we don't need people thinking that it's okay to go smoke dope behind the shop because more and more people are going to come and we're going to be notorious for that. And that's totally going to ruin the shop's reputation.

So I'm watching them. And they see me staring at them. I'm standing on the porch like this (crosses her arms and makes a disapproving face). Staring at these people. And they're looking at me. And they get out of the car. And are performing another-. Like, they did a drug deal, left, came back and then did the drugs with the drug dealer that they just bought. And this dude is standing up next to his car with his box of something. And he sees me staring at him, leaning in closer to try and figure out what it is. And he just looks at me and starts putting all this white powder in his mouth. Like, really? And then he throws it in (his car) and comes into the shop immediately. Like, hey man, I want to get tattooed. You're going to die in five minutes because you just overdosed on something. No. Get out of here. That's definitely the craziest thing I've seen.

And he came in trying to get tattooed with fucking white powder all over his nose! And he was like, yeah man, just looking to get an appointment. And I was like, nope. He was like, you don't have any openings today? Not a one. What about next week? No. You're going to have to leave. He was like, okay. That was pretty wonderful. I've seen other people have to get kicked out. There are a couple people who can't come in our shop. And we have various melee weapons laying around the shop.

Veronica's story highlights how the need to maintain a positive occupational reputation overrides economics in some extreme cases. She had only been tattooing for less than a year when this story took place at a tattoo shop that housed a number of more established artists. The location had recent issues with some of the previous artists leaving with little notice, thus reducing revenue that

contributed towards overhead expenses. And she herself was so new to the occupation that she had simply not had enough time to establish a reputation for herself – positive or negative. While she and the tattoo parlor where she worked needed the business, drug addicts openly using in the parking lot was more than she could allow to take place, even though she wanted more clients.

Echoing the same sentiments voiced by Charlie and Frank, Veronica knew that if she allowed this kind of behavior to take place, the shop would develop a reputation as the type of establishment where this kind of behavior was permitted. This would attract the wrong kind of future clients so exercising her autonomy and asking the man to leave, while resulting in a short-term economic loss, had longer-term benefits for the reputation of the shop,. This was important for Veronica and the development of her occupational reputation as well, as she was the youngest and least known tattooist working there.[6]

While the importance of developing and maintaining an occupational reputation is hardly unique to the tattoo industry, the structure of tattooing as non-hierarchical and entrepreneurial results in an occupation where an artist's status has important economic consequences and is fiercely guarded. A tattooist's reputation as an artist and as a customer service provider is important to their future social standing and success. While clients create and convey their own identity and sense of self through the tattoo interaction and their embodiment of the artwork, so too is something communicated about the artist. The stories that people tell about how they acquired their tattoos paint a picture of how the individual wants to be seen, but they also illustrate something about the other actor in that story – the tattoo artist who makes the process possible. They are just as invested in

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[6] In an interesting twist, multiple acquaintances of mine subsequently mentioned to me without prompting that the owner of the shop where Veronica worked is a known heroin addict. I did not include him in my sample because he had previously tattooed me, and I do not have personal knowledge of his alleged drug use. However, it is worth noting that in this case behavior that occurs outside of work may have little bearing on what is viewed as appropriate conduct within the confines of the tattoo shop.

making sure that the story told reflects accurately upon their self-perceived artistic integrity, beliefs, and appropriate conduct, as the client is in communicating their own sense of self.

A tattooist's occupational reputation is built from their understanding of themselves as artists, and is communicated to clients and potential clients through direct observations of behavior and word of mouth. While occupational reputations can be made up of a number of different aspects, in case of tattooing they contain a sense of artistic integrity, a sense of morals and beliefs, and a sense of appropriate workplace conduct. Threats to an artist's occupational reputation can range from the relatively benign to aggressively combative.

Tattooists deal with these threats by appealing to or enforcing their job authority and autonomy. In the best case scenario, and one that is most likely to be pursued by lower-status, less economically security tattooists, the artist is able to control the scenario by convincing the client of their authority, achieving a result – an interaction and a tattoo – that meets the needs of both parties. This can take the form of encouraging a client to change their mind about a design, or assuring them of the artist's far greater technical expertise. In the worst-case scenarios artists enforce their autonomy by refusing to do certain tattoos or to even work at all with particular clients, strategies that are most readily available to higher-status, better established, and more in-demand tattooists,. Tattooists will reject designs or refuse to work with potential customers if they feel that their artistic integrity, ethics, or honor are at stake.

The extent to which a particular artist can protect their occupational reputation by enforcing their authority or autonomy depends on their current standing. Those with the strongest reputations already – the well-established artists with many clients and steady business – have the least to lose and thus can far more readily set boundaries in their work. If they cannot convince a client to see things their way they can afford to lose the business. The ability to be discerning in turn reinforces

their occupational reputation by ensuring that the artwork and stories put out into the marketplace will align with their intentions and set the tone for future client interactions. Those who are less established – younger artists, those who have less experience, and those who are new in town or starting new business ventures – tend to be less able to turn paying customers away, which has the potential to threaten their reputations if they are not able to exercise sufficient authority. However, reputation is too important in this industry and even the young and the relatively unknown artists will exert their autonomy and reject clients who are viewed as playing too far outside their preferred rules.

Chapter 6

Homeward Bound: Conclusion

The cultural practice of tattooing has a long and vibrant history, and while the designs and meanings attached to tattoos have varied over time and between cultures, the act of permanently marking the body has long been practiced around the world. As with any longstanding cultural practice, both the art form and societies' understandings have changed over time and place. While the sociocultural meanings contained and communicated thorough tattooing are not static, the practice has persisted as a rich source of meaning making. Tattoos are a fascinating sociological subject, and previous scholars have explored their meanings from a variety of theoretical viewpoints ranging from their aesthetic qualities to their ability to contribute to the social construction of subjectivity.

Relatively little attention has been paid to the facet of tattooing that I find the most compelling: the labor involved in the production of tattoos. Tattooing is an interesting occupation to study for obvious superficial reasons. It is an industry full of colorful characters with big personalities. In spite of the ever-increasing prevalence of tattoos in modern society the occupation retains an outlaw character, and it is an understudied sector of the service economy. But more importantly for the purposes of this research project, tattooing is a useful case study because the product is so meaning laden for clients, and because the work of being a tattoo artist falls outside the framework of how interactive service provision has historically tended to be theorized. Tattooing presents an opportunity to study something that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been explored before: how interactive service interactions exist as

complex terrains upon which workers and customers co-construct and communicate consumptive and productive identities.

I leave the study of meanings behind tattoo aesthetics to other scholars, but the fact remains that customers acquire tattoos because they are interested in communicating something about themselves to others through the process. The postmodern self is constructed through a never-ending series of iterative and self-reflexive processes, and as a result consumption and the display of commodities are important aspects of individuals' constructed identities and presentation of self. The imagery, placement, size, and quality of tattoos all tell a story about the wearer. A loved one's name, crisply outlined across one's easily concealed bicep conveys a very different message than the same name poorly scrawled across one's throat. Choosing a tattooist who will meet the client's aesthetic desires is only one part of the process.

While the tattoo itself is important to the way individuals construct and communicate their biography to those around them, the interaction through which the tattoo is acquired is also an important component of identity construction, as consumption can also be a form of production. People tell stories about what their tattoos mean to them and why they got them, but they also tell stories about *how* they were acquired. And the meanings people have behind their tattoos, along with their motivations in acquiring them, influence the expectations they have when they step into a tattoo shop's front door. Tattooing is interactive service work, but it contains within its interactions stronger expectations on the behalf of the customer than in many other forms of service provision. The interactions that take place between tattoo artists and clients are part of service provision involve not only the production of a tattoo, but also the co-production of consumptive identity. Studying tattooing can help to shed light on how the needs and intentions of customers inform service provision.

Service work is unique from many other forms of labor due to the immediate presence of the consumer. There is little solitude in service work, and labor is performed through complex interactions with customers. Service work is unlike other forms of work because it is the only industry in which labor is co-created through social interactions. But not all service work is created equal. The jobs that typically spring to mind when one thinks about the service economy – the barista at the coffee shop, the retail worker at the mall, the flight attendant, the domestic worker – tend to exist within clear bureaucratic structures. In these industries workers usually operate within the triangular model, caught between the demands of management and the needs of the customer. Management wants work completed quickly and efficiently; their end goal is to maximize profits by encouraging workers to serve as many customers as swiftly as possible, while simultaneously providing an appropriate level of customer service. Customers often have different needs, seeking emotional labor and time-consuming assistance. Service workers in these types of jobs have to find tools and strategies to successfully manage these competing expectations - no easy task in an industry that is supposedly "low-skill." Leidner's theoretical framework is well suited to explain these types of service occupations, and is a tremendously useful framework through which to understand work that is bureaucratically organized (1993). But how should we understand labor that is produced under different circumstances?

Tattooing provides a compelling case study to examine interactive service work that occurs in a far more entrepreneurial environment. The tattoo industry is composed almost entirely of independent contractors who operate with virtually no bureaucratic oversight. While there are some licensing requirements in some states, these regulations are not uniform and the oversight is minimal at best. What little control does exist limits who can legally enter the occupation, since passing a blood borne pathogen exam and paying the appropriate fees is a

requirement in some states. However, there is no oversight pertaining to the day-to-day interactions that occur within tattoo shops. The state may require certain sterilization techniques, for example, but they have no influence over the artwork or interactions that make up the actual tattoo service encounter. This bureaucratic oversight from the state does not operate in the same way that traditional management operates within bureaucratic workplaces. The study of tattoo artists can therefore help to elucidate how service work is performed when management does not exist in a meaningful form.

In this dissertation, I use interview data with tattoo artists and clients in an attempt to answer two related broad questions: (1) what meanings do clients bring into the tattooing interaction and how do artists address these needs? and (2) absent managerial control, how do tattoo artists understand and address their work?

Findings

Chapter 2 explores tattooing from the customer perspective. What meanings do clients imbue the tattoo interaction with, and how does this influence the expectations they have for their service interactions with tattoo artists? Consumption involves both the consumption of interactive services and the consumption of material goods, and consumptive identity is co-produced through these interactions when service providers and customers enact their appropriate roles in tandem. Every tattoo, regardless of its style, content, placement, or method of acquisition tells a story about the person whose body it adorns. Tattoos are highly personalized aesthetic choices, and while consumption of many forms is used in the construction and communication of a preferred identity, the permanence of tattooing lends it a heightened level of importance to consumers. Service interactions between tattoo artists and their customers are an important component of the identity formation process for clients.

Clients come into the tattoo interaction wielding different narratives for how they expect the interaction to unfold, and these narratives influence the way that they act and the way that they expect the tattoo artist to respond to them. I identified three distinct, albeit potentially overlapping and co-occurring, client narratives: Commemorative, Rebellious, and Artistic. Clients seek out artists who will not only affirm their personal narrative, but also help create an interaction that reinforces it. Both parties need to be in alignment in order for the client to successfully produce their desired consumptive identity through the process.

Clients who bring a commemorative narrative into the tattooing interaction intend to communicate something deeply individualistic and personal about themselves through the tattoo and thus the application process. Because their tattoos commemorate something personal – a loss, a victory, or a deeply cherished identity – the narrative requires a personal connection to the artist, even if it is fleeting. Clients adhering to a commemorative narrative have a tendency to assume that others share their beliefs about tattooing, and thus read their own motivations and intentions into others, making them somewhat easier to please.

In direct contrast are those clients conforming to a rebellious narrative, who see tattoos as communicating their status as wild outsiders. This narrative is more difficult to maintain effortlessly in a society where tattoos are becoming more and more commonplace. Because other tattooed people can be viewed as challenging their status as rebels, clients who want to enact this narrative are quick to distance themselves from other tattooed people who they view as having more conventional and thus less desirable tattoos. This makes them more demanding clients, because they need to ensure that they can align themselves with the artist, who they see as being more like them, and not with the types of clients who do not meet their standards.

Finally, some clients are interested in an artistic narrative that reflects their aesthetic tastes. These clients desire an interaction that indicates the tattooist takes the artwork seriously, and that they understand their client as an art collector with rarified tastes. In these types of interactions it is important that the tattooist have the appropriate kind of ability and talent to meet the needs of the clients, but it is also critical that they reinforce the client's sense of self and recognize their taste as superior to others with less aesthetically pleasing tattoos.

Clients bring their narratives into the tattoo service interaction, but artists also have their own expectations and preferences. Chapter 3 explores the ways that tattoo artists understand their work by investigating their own occupational desires and how they understand the expectations of their clients. Tattooing is unique from other forms of service work because customers are highly invested in their preferred narrative and corresponding needs, while the labor process of tattooing is non-bureaucratic and entrepreneurial. Tattoo artists do not have to engage with management but do have to negotiate their own needs and preferences with the narrative desires of their clients in order to have a successful interaction.

Broadly speaking, tattooing resists the routinization and rationalization that other forms of service provision may be subjected to. Each tattoo is distinctive, as there is no way for them to be mass-produced, and the differing narrative needs of clients resist a rationalized approach to customer service provision. Instead, tattoo artists must adapt their artwork and behavior to fit each individual client. This is how most tattoo artists understand their occupation, and how they prefer to work. All of the artists I interviewed indicated that they preferred a variable product and a personalized interaction with their clients.

Yet not all clients are the same, and several different types of clients exist. The "Model" client is one whose desires match those of the artist. These individuals, regardless of their

overarching narrative needs, desire individualized custom artwork and a personalized service interaction. "Quiet" clients are also interested in custom artwork, but are less invested in personalized contact and therefore involve a more rationalized interaction. "Flashy" clients are those who choose flash designs that are selected from a catalogue of pre-drawn designs and thus are looking for a more routine product. However, they are still interested in a personalized interaction, which can help alleviate the boredom of a less aesthetically challenging interaction for the tattooist. Finally, the least common and least desirable (from the artist's perspective) is the "McClient" who only wants a routine product and rationalized interaction.

Despite the unique organization of their work, tattooists are not immune to the forces of routinization and rationalization in their work. These forces are directed upon them not by management, as is the case in other forms of service work, but by their customers. But the application of routinization and rationalization is not uniform, and each interaction contains within it the possibility to take one of these four forms. The entrepreneurial nature of their work affords tattoo artists a certain measure of control over their labor power, but as interactive service providers they are still at least partial beholden to the needs and desires of their clients.

Chapter 4 continues to describe the ways that tattoo artists must yield power to their clients in order to negotiate a successful service interaction. Tattooists often speak of the independence of their profession, as the non-bureaucratic organizational structure allows them a greater deal of self-determination than is found in many other forms of service work. There is also a great deal of artistic freedom in tattooing, since tattoo artists regularly create custom artwork or modify existing designs. But at the same time, they do not have complete control over their work since they must meet the narrative and artistic needs of their clients as well. This structure provides an interesting case within which to examine power.

Tattooists can theoretically choose to exert total control over the service interaction, determining the artwork and interactional style without consulting or cooperating with their clients. However, this is an extremely unlikely scenario and was not a desired outcome among any of the tattoo artists I interviewed. But artists were also not interested in the other end of the spectrum, where they would be entirely at the whim of a client's artistic and interpersonal desires with no input of their own. Instead, most strove for a co-operative outcome, where they would work with their clients to achieve a mutually satisfactory service interaction. They were willing to make concessions and yield power to their clients within reasonable bounds as long as they were able to maintain some level of control over their working conditions.

Giving up some measure of power and control in order to facilitate a successful service interaction and earn a living is economically and professionally reasonable for tattooists under normal, moderate circumstances. Chapter 5 describes the limits to what tattoo artists will cede to their clients. The entrepreneurial nature of tattooing presents a great deal of independence to artists, as discussed in Chapter 4. But it also results in a highly individualized labor force where reputation gains increased importance. An individual working under the banner of a large company can call upon the reputation of their employer that extends far beyond their individual contributions, and benefit from the work done by his or her predecessors to establish that reputation in the public eye. Tattooists, on the other hand, are entirely responsible for building up their own name within a community, and must rely on their reputation of their own work and to a lesser degree the reputation of the shop where they work in order to build a client base, garner repeat customers, and manage expectations about future interactions. The appropriate reputation can help address the issues identified in the preceding chapters. Once an artist becomes well-known within their local tattoo community, their reputation can serve as a gatekeeper, attracting

clients who fit their preferred typology and who will not require them to relinquish any more power and control than they voluntarily choose.

Every tattoo artist has an occupational reputation that is communicated to potential customers and other artists through their interactive service provision. Occupational reputations are built upon the tattooists' self-perceived artistic integrity, morals and ethics, and sense of appropriate professional conduct. But reputations are never entirely safe, and exist as discursive social constructs that must be constantly guarded and protected lest they fail to achieve their desired result. Client challenges to any of these aspects of an artist's reputation can be addressed by appealing to artists' job authority, by positioning themselves as experts who know more than their clients but had their best interests at heart, or job autonomy, by simply refusing to do particular kinds of tattoos or by refusing to work with particular clients.

Appeals to their own authority were most common when artists were faced with challenges to their artistic integrity. When working with clients who wanted tattoos that failed to meet the aesthetic standards of the artist, many tattooists would attempt to collaborate with their clients in order to come up with a mutually satisfactory tattoo. This was particularly common among younger and less established artists, as they tended not to be in a position to turn paying clients away. Yet at the same time, they could not afford to have subpar artwork attached to their names, potentially creating a negative reputation that could be difficult if not impossible to overcome. More established artists who had already built up a robust clientele were more likely to be able to appeal to their autonomy and simply refuse to do certain styles of tattoos.

The ethical lines drawn by tattoo artists differed, but most identified at least some types of tattoos that they were unwilling to do. For most it was racist imagery, while others would not do tattoos that they considered blasphemous or otherwise offensive. Appeals to authority were

uncommon in these cases; none of the artists I interviewed reported trying to talk a potential customer out of getting an ethically problematic tattoo in favor of another design. Instead, in these cases artists would simply refuse to do the work, often citing concerns for their reputation and the fear of becoming known as the person in town who would do this type of work and thus attracting an unsavory element to their place of business.

Finally, an artist's reputation could also be threatened by challenges to their sense of appropriate workplace conduct. Clients who insinuated that a tattooist was sexualizing their interaction with a customer, or who engaged in illegal activity such as drug use, threaten tattoo artists' occupational reputations while creating the potential to discourage future business or attract the wrong kind of clientele. This type of behavior can be discouraged, but egregious displays were often interpreted as disrespectful and would result in an artist enforcing their autonomy and ejecting the offender from their shop.

Broader Applicability

Tattooing makes a compelling case study because it is so distinctive. The customer desires that inform the service interaction are heightened due to the permanence and cultural meanings of tattoos, and the extreme entrepreneurialism and emphasis on artistic and structural freedom within the occupation create a striking contrast with many other forms of service work. But while tattooing may illustrate these differences in a heightened manner, these aspects are by no means unique to only this industry. There are a number of other occupations with similarities to tattooing that could provide additional insights and information into the themes addressed here.

The embodied nature of tattooing provides the backdrop for all of my findings. While the permanence of tattooing contributes to the importance of the consumptive experience and its

impact on identity formation and communication, so too does its embodied nature. There are a number of other service occupations and industries that involve the creation and consumption of embodied aesthetic products. Seamstresses, hair stylists and barbers, makeup artists, nail technicians, estheticians, massage therapists, personal trainers, and some health care professionals all engage in work that involves intimate bodily contact and the provision of aesthetic services that directly relate to the image the customer is trying to create and project. While the exact natures of the preferred narratives brought into these interactions by clients are likely different in nature, there is ample reason to suspect that a similar dynamics are in play.

In addition, many of these service occupations involve the development of close relationships and repeat interactions on a much more frequent schedule than is seen in tattooing. While tattooists strive to build a customer base that involves repeat customers, these repeat appointments are usually months, if not years, apart. In comparison, it is not uncommon for clients to purchase services from the same hair stylist or barber on a monthly or bimonthly basis for years; some customers see the same nail technician on a weekly basis; and similar patterns exist for estheticians, massage therapists, and trainers. This frequent contact has implications for how client narratives are developed, sustained, and how they evolve over time. More research is needed to determine the similarities and differences of client narratives across occupations and types of services.

The gendered nature of these industries would also provide a useful opportunity to explore the impact of gender and sexuality on interactive embodied service provision from this perspective. Hairstyles, for example, are highly gendered, as are the occupations related to cutting hair. While the overwhelming majority of hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists are women (94.2 percent) as are most of their clients; the majority of barbers – who are more

likely to serve male customers – are male (77.9 percent) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016a). While the limits of my sample prevent me from theorizing about the impact of gender on my findings, barbers and hairstylists would present a useful point of comparison to determine what impact gender and gendered consumption may have on the themes outlined here.

Tattooing is also novel because it is devoid of meaningful managerial oversight, creating opportunities for independence and self-determination that do not exist in many other forms of service work, at the same time that it is highly collaborative and involves a relatively needy clientele. These aspects may be heightened in the field of tattooing, but they are not unique. Many other forms of artistic service work are highly entrepreneurial, or at least involve high levels of worker-client collaboration. In addition to many aesthetic and/or embodied occupations, public relations, web design, wedding and portrait photography, graphic design, and event planning are all entrepreneurial fields and are highly collaborative occupations where the needs and desires of clients must be directly addressed in order to successfully provide services.

It is highly likely that these fields, along with other forms of artistic service work, also contain potentially contentious power relations between clients and service providers. While products such as websites and wedding photographs are not embodied like tattoos, they are still highly personalized and identity laden. Clients purchasing these types of services are perhaps less likely to challenge the professional identities of the workers creating the product, but they are no less likely to see these items as important extensions of their own personal or business identity, creating the potential for conflicts in the collaborative process. I strongly suspect that the similarities outweigh the differences across these types of occupations, and further research is needed to more fully explore the ways that artistic and entrepreneurial service jobs are organized and how interactions with clients unfold.

Finally, tattoo artists are nearly all independent contractors because this is the structure the occupation has historically taken. But other occupations that were once dominated by formal employment within bureaucratically organized firms have seen dramatic employment shifts resulting from the recent Great Recession and recent macroeconomic trends. The freelance economy has exploded, and firms such as Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit, and Air BnB are some of the most visible examples of the new employment model, where workers are not formal employees. In these new employment configurations the parent company serves as 'match-maker' – connecting independent contractors with clients. Writers, editors, programmers, engineers, and other highly educated workers are not exempted from this trend, as previously stable careers have been transformed into risky and insecure contract positions. Not even academics are safe, as tenure-track positions have begun to disappear, replaced by adjuncts teaching the same classes for a third of the money (if they are lucky) and none of the fringe benefits or job protection.

Tattooing has not seen a restructuring; it has always existed in the form that is now beginning to dominate other professions. The understanding of how work is organized and enacted in an occupation that has always been structured this way can help to shed light on how workers operate in other precarious jobs.

Tattoo artists are able to fare relatively well within this occupational arrangement because they actually do have the ability to draw upon their autonomy and authority as expert workers. Tattooists are true entrepreneurs, not taxi-drivers deprived of the collective bargaining rights by Uber, or slumlords evading hotel safety regulations through Air BnB, or the writers and programmers and software engineers whose jobs were eliminated but who are still dependent upon large organizations to provide them with work and income (Friedman 2014). The development of a precarious, post-bureaucratic economy, what has been referred to as the gig,

sharing, or freelance economy, is still being taking place (Schor and Fitzmaurice 2015). Understanding how an occupation like tattooing can function well and empower workers can provide insights into how these new economic forms should be molded to ensure that workers are protected. This is particularly important in today's context, when increasing numbers of employees are misclassified as independent contractors, and thereby potentially denied access to legal protections such as the minimum wage, the right to overtime compensation, unemployment insurance, and other basic labor protections (U.S. Department of Labor 2016).

For example, the power that tattoo artists are able to exercise comes in part from their ability to harken back to stereotypes of rough-and-tumble tattoo artists who were not to be messed with; in short, through inspiring fear. While an occupation like copyediting does not share a similar outlaw history, that same ability to stand one's ground and be taken seriously can be created through unionization (King 2014). The end result is the same – the ability to garner respect and not be unduly challenged – although the means are quite different. Similarly, the flexibility that tattoo artists appreciate about their work - the artistic freedom, the variable interactions with clients, the ability to pick and choose with whom to work and when – is the result of having the ability to exert control through their job authority and autonomy and of not operating under meaningful managerial oversight. While this is a positive aspect of their occupation and one that drew many tattoo artists to the field, it is in stark contrast to the labor of many in the contingent workforce whose labor is structured identically to their permanently employed counterparts. These workers are not able to access the same independence, self-determination, and control over their labor power that tattoo artists enjoy, and highlight the importance of addressing the issue of worker misclassification.

But while tattoo artists may have access to some forms of power that currently elude other self-employed workers in the freelance economy, they are also subject to many of the same problems and concerns. Tattooists operate within a highly reputational marketplace, where word of mouth and client referrals are highly important to the development and continuation of a successful career. This is not unlike the rating systems used by apps such as Uber, where drivers can be barred from working if their ratings fall below a company-determined benchmark (Uber 2016). Even for occupations that are not app driven and do not have direct feedback collection mechanisms the internet still provides greater opportunity for customer reviews to take on heightened importance. Tattoo shops also show up on Yelp and other customer review websites alongside other service providing organizations. Gig workers in other occupations are very likely to have to make the same kinds of negotiations with clients in order to ensure that they are able to maintain satisfactory feedback and ratings, although their ability and mechanisms for exerting job authority and autonomy will differ.

Conclusion

When briefly explaining my research to non-sociologists, their focus tended to hone in on tattooing as an "exotic" and "interesting" field of study. Again and again I found myself having to reiterate that my interest was not in tattoos per se, but in the labor behind them and the interactions through which they are acquired. While the novelty of the case study may prove unduly distracting under some circumstances, the fact remains that tattooing provides insights into aspects of direct service provision that are otherwise understudied.

The service industry is the fastest growing sector of the American economy, and the majority of new jobs being created and the majority of jobs projected to grow into the next decade involve direct interaction with clients (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016b). This fact alone

makes it a worthy subject of sociological inquiry. Most of these jobs do take place within bureaucratically organized workplaces, and the triangular model of service provision is a useful theoretical lens through which to view these types of jobs. But there are a number of occupations, including but in no way limited to tattooing, which cannot be meaningfully contained within this framework. In these instances, a new way of thinking about and understanding service work is needed.

Appendix

A. Interview Guide: Interviews with Tattoo Artists

1) Work history

First I want to start out by talking about your work history, how you became a tattoo artist, how you were trained, and try to map out a time-line of where you have worked.

    a. What is your current line of work and where are you employed?

    b. How long have you been working in this field?

    c. How long have you been employed at this location?

    d. Where were you before that?

    e. Can you walk me through your employment history?

    f. How were you trained? What did your training consist of?

    g. What sorts of things were not included in your training that you wish had been, and what have you had to learn on the job?

    h. Who/What inspired you to become involved in tattooing?

    i. Who have your mentors been? What did s/he teach you?

    j. Do you now have the opportunity to train/mentor others? What do you teach them?

    k. What does your average workday look like? Can you walk me through what happens from the time you come to work until the time you leave for the day?

    l. How many clients to you normally see per day? Would you prefer to see more or fewer, and why?

    m. Do you ever turn clients away, or refuse to work with certain people? Why?

2) Professionalization

Now I want to ask you about what it means to be a professional, both in a general sense and in relation to your work as a tattoo artist.

    a. What does the term 'professional' mean to you?

    b. What does it mean for someone (or others) in your line of work?

  c. What percentage of the tattooists that you know would you say are 'professionals'? What percentage would you say are not, and why?

  d. Do you think of tattooing as a professional occupation? Why or why not?

3) Body Work

Your line of work is unique compared to many others in that you work directly on people's bodies in a way that can be very personal and permanent.

  a. What are your thoughts/feeling about working on other people's bodies?

  b. Were you ever uncomfortable with the idea of working on bodies? Has this changed at all since you started tattooing?

  c. What do you think your clients think/feel about having their bodies worked on? How can you tell?

  d. How do your clients react to having their bodies worked on?

  e. How do you deal with their reactions?

  f. Can you walk me through both a best case, and a worst-case scenario?

4) Narratives

A big part of my project centers around the expectations that your clients have when they come to you. This can relate both the quality of your artwork, but also the type of relationship they expect to have with you, and how they hope their experience of being tattooed will happen. I want to ask you a few questions now that relate to what type of interaction you think your clients are hoping to have with you when they come to you to be tattooed.

  a. What do you think your clients' expectations are when they come to be tattooed? How do they act?

  b. How do they expect you to act?

  c. Do you ever feel pressured to act a certain way when you are working on someone? Has this changed over the course of your career?

  d. Is it important to you that you act in the way your clients want you to, and why or why not?

e. Are your clients' expectations different when interacting with you than they might be if they went to someone else? How and why?

f. What kinds of expectations do you have of your clients?

g. How do you expect your clients to act when they come to see you?

h. What happens when they do not act the way you want them to?

i. Do you ever try to control their behavior, and if so, how?

j. Do you watch any of the reality shows about tattooing? What do you think about them?

k. Do your clients watch them? What do you think they think about them?

l. Do you think that these shows have influenced other tattoo artists in their work?

m. Do you think that these shows have influenced clients and what they expect when they come to be tattooed?

5) Client Interactions

Now I would like to talk specifically about the kinds of interactions that you have with your clients.

a. Who are your clients? How would you describe them? (Average age, gender, race, SES, etc.)

b. Has this changed over the course of your career?

c. What was the worst interaction you have ever had with a client?

d. What made it so bad?

e. How did you deal with it?

f. How often do things like that happen?

g. What was the best interaction you have eve had?

h. What made it so good?

i. How often do these types of interactions occur?

j. What kinds of things do you do to connect with your clients/put them at ease?

k. What do you do (if anything) to make your clients feel more comfortable when they have to be undressed in front of you?

l. Did your training include anything about interacting with clients? What sorts of things were you told/taught?

m. If you did not get any explicit training on how to interact with clients, what have you learned on the job?

6) Workplace

Next I am going to ask you some questions about the shop that you currently work in, and how it might compare to previous places you have worked.

    a. How would you describe the culture/atmosphere of the shop you currently work in? Of other shops you have worked in?

    b. How many other people work here?

    c. How are the stations set up?

    d. Do you and your coworkers share stories about your clients?

    e. What kinds of stories are likely to be repeated?

    f. Do you ever find yourself giving advice about how to interact with clients? What sort of advice do you give?

    g. Do you ever find yourself receiving advice about interacting with clients? What sort of advice did you receive?

    h. Have you ever thought about opening up your own shop/What made you decide to open up your own shop?

    i. What would be the ideal shop to work in/What were your goals in opening up your own place?

7) Demographic Information

Finally, I just want to ask you a few questions about your background.

    a. What is the highest level of education your parents completed, and what are their occupations?

    b. Where and in what year were you born?

    c. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

    d. What is your race/ethnicity?

    e. What is your religious affiliation (if any)?

    f. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

g. How would you describe your political beliefs?

h. If you feel comfortable answering, which corresponds with your income from tattooing last year?

    i. Under $15,000

    ii. $15,000 – $19,000

    iii. $20,000 – $29,000

    iv. $30,000 – $49,000

    v. $50,000 - $59,000

    vi. $60,000 - $69,000

    vii. $70,000 - $79,000

    viii. $80,000 - $89,000

    ix. $90,000 - $99,000

    x. Over $100,000

i. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to discuss?

Appendix

B. Interview Guide: Interviews with Clients

1) Tattoo History
   a. How many tattoos do you have?
   b. When did you get your first tattoo?
   c. What made you decide to get one?
   d. How did you decide where to go and who to be tattooed by?
   e. Can you tell me the story of what happened the first time?
   f. What did you expect the experience would be like, and did reality differ from your expectations?
   g. How did you know what to expect since it was your first time?
   h. How did the artist treat you? Was this what you had wanted/expected?
   i. [If they have more than one tattoo] How many different tattoo artists have you been to?
   j. Is the experience different when working with different artists, and how/how not?

2) Tattoos and Meaning
   a. What do you think it means when a person has tattoos?
   b. What does it mean to you to be a tattooed person?
   c. How important are your tattoos to your identity/sense of self? Why?
   d. Does it matter to you who does your tattoos? Why?
   e. What would make you prefer one tattoo artist over another, besides just artistic ability?
   f. Is there any type of artist that you would never want to be tattooed by, and why?
   g. Does the relationship/interaction that you had with your tattoo artist matter to you?
   h. When you go to get tattooed, what are you hoping will happen, and how do you want the artists to act towards you?
   i. If you had to describe your ideal tattooing encounter, what would it look like (the artist, the shop, the interaction, etc.)?

3) Demographic Information

 a. What is the highest level of education your parents completed, and what are their occupations?

 b. Where and in what year were you born?

 c. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

 d. What is your race/ethnicity?

 e. What is your religious affiliation (if any)?

 f. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

 g. How would you describe your political beliefs?

 h. If you feel comfortable answering, which corresponds with your income last year?

  i. Under $15,000

  ii. $15,000 – $19,000

  iii. $20,000 – $29,000

  iv. $30,000 – $49,000

  v. Over $50,000

 i. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to discuss?

Appendix

C. Inerviewee Demographics

Clients

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race
Jessica	26	Female	White
Faith	22	Female	African American
Jason	34	Male	White
Michael	27	Male	White
Warren	20	Male	African American
Ace	32	Male	White
Monica	18	Female	White
Jacob	20	Male	White
Caleb	50	Male	White
Karla	46	Female	African American
Marcus	36	Male	White
Eddie	25	Male	White
Lars	27	Male	White
Ty	19	Male	African American
Kate	18	Female	White
Harry	29	Male	White
Rochelle	23	Female	White
Dylan	39	Male	White
Zeke	22	Male	White
Henry	18	Male	White
Lydia	29	Female	White
Thomas	31	Male	White
Jessie	21	Female	White
Tracey	38	Female	White
Jonathan	29	Male	African American

Tattoo Artists

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years tattooing
Gwen	22	Female	2
Justin	30	Male	3
Ben	34	Male	10
Big Daddy	37	Male	7
Josh	36	Male	10
Subject One	36	Male	11
Harvey	31	Male	10
Jake	31	Male	6

Veronica	22	Female	1
Liz	29	Female	9
Buck	38	Male	15
Stevie	21	Male	1
Grant	37	Male	13
Vivianne	27	Female	5
Robert	25	Male	2
Christopher	40	Male	18
Anthony	27	Male	2
Billy	30	Male	7
Marcia	33	Female	8
Patrick	26	Male	6
Lincoln	31	Male	4
Clark	27	Male	6
Ike	29	Male	4
Oliver	30	Male	8
Carter	30	Male	9
Kevin	26	Male	5

Appendix

D. Sample Tattoo Contract
CONSENT TO TATTOO PROCEDURE

NAME	DATE	DOB	LICENSE NO.
ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP
HOME PH.	WORK PH.		

I acknowledge by signing this agreement that I have been given the full opportunity to ask any and all questions which I might have about the obtaining of a tattoo and that all of my questions have been answered to my full satisfaction.

I specifically acknowledge I have been advised of the facts and matters set forth below and I agree as follows:

- If I have any condition that might affect the healing of this tattoo, I will advise my tattooer. I am not pregnant or nursing. I am not under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- I do not have medical or skin conditions such as but not limited to: acne, scarring (Keloid) eczema, psoriasis, freckles, moles or sunburn in the area to be tattooed that may interfere with said tattoo. If I have any type of infection or rash anywhere on my body, I will advise my tattooer.
- I acknowledge it is not reasonably possible for the representatives and employees of this tattoo shop to determine whether I might have an allergic reaction to the pigments or processes used in my tattoo, and I agree to accept the risk that such a reaction is possible.
- I acknowledge that infection is always possible as a result of the obtaining of a tattoo, particularly in the event that I do not take proper care of my tattoo. I have received aftercare instructions and I agree to follow them while my tattoo is healing. I agree that any touch-up work needed, due to my own negligence, will be done at my own expense.
- I realize that variations in color and design may exist between any tattoo as selected by me and as ultimately applied to my body. I understand that if my skin color is dark, the colors will not appear as bright as they do on light skin.
- I understand that if I have any skin treatments, laser hair removal, plastic surgery or other skin altering procedures, it may result in adverse changes to my tattoo.
- I acknowledge that a tattoo is a permanent change to my appearance and that no representations have been made to me as to the ability to later change or remove my tattoo. To my knowledge, I do not have a physical, mental or medical impairment or disability which might affect my well being as a direct or indirect result of my decision to have a tattoo.
- I acknowledge I am over the age of eighteen and that I have truthfully represented to my tattooer that the obtaining of a tattoo is by my choice alone. I consent to the application of the tattoo and to any actions or conduct of the representatives and employees of the tattoo shop reasonably necessary to perform the tattoo procedure.

CLIENT: DATE:
TATTOOER: DATE:

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