Healing Marks: Body modification in coping with trauma, identity, and its ramifications for stigma and social capital
Healing Marks: Body modification in coping with trauma, identity, and its ramifications for stigma and social capital

by

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by

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Dedication and acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to the members of my sample. These were friends, friends of friends, and strangers that went out of their way to generously donate their time to this project for no perceivable compensation. For many this meant trusting me with the most sensitive stories of their lives, and for that reason this work is ultimately for them. This is not to ignore the immeasurable support from my family, advisor, committee members, employer, and multiple counter culture communities that support me. This project would not have been completed without that support and is truly invaluable.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge base on the experience of living as an individual who engages in body modification. Body modification is the intentional and voluntary alteration of the body for non-medically necessary reasons and not meant to intentionally “harm” oneself. The study seeks to understand how individuals negotiate the personal, emotional, and social experience of engaging in body modification. The specific aims of the research are to:

1. Understand the place of body modification in one’s life narrative, and how it can be reflective of major transitions and changes.
2. Explore subjective experience around the physical and mental health, social, and identity related experiences of people who engage in body modification.
3. Increase the knowledge base on how this practice shapes the social experiences of individuals who elect to modify (e.g., at work, with seeking medical or mental health care, in their peer group, with legal authorities, etc.)
4. Understand how those who engage in body modification practices negotiate pain and how pain impacted their experience.

The methodological approach used in this study includes both interviews and ethnographic immersion. The understanding of how these practice impact one’s life is produced through a co-constructed coding rubric created by both the researcher and participant. The researcher works with the participant to represent their lived experience as a modifier by also drawing on their own experiences on the subject. The major contributions of this research is 1) an increased understanding of personal trauma, and its healing through modification and 2) the
expression of stigma in medical realms that has previously been unexamined. Additional findings include notions of a priori social difference in the choice of modification that impacts stigma, continued stigma from legal representatives, and the intersectional nature of modified stigma with other social status categories. Finally, this work also further documents the general finding of increased acceptance of body modification in society.
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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While unorthodox, possibly the best way of explaining why the topic of body modification is worthwhile is simply by sharing how its insidious tendrils have worked their way into my identity. Over the years I have pierced and significantly tattooed most of my body allowing me to function in counter culture environments. To those of the heteronormative dominant paradigm I bear the label of “different” and have to hide or manage my alternative embodiment. However, the stigma with body modification is rather relentless because it is an alternative embodiment I chose. Hence my perspective is one of stigma management through most of the 1990’s and 2000’s, and only in the Bay Area in the last 10 years has the social perspective of body modification shifted wherein it is simultaneously a stigma to be managed and social capital in the correct environments. Thus, the prime focus of this research is to further knowledge of the lived experience of modified individuals such as myself, but in particular explore problems of social disparity that may or may not still exist.

Body modification is a symbol that in counter culture, and the Bay Area, grants significant social entrée, but in other more formal environments, such as professional careers it is still taboo. For a select number of participants their personal modifications even functioned as bodily capital in their careers as modification professionals. Similarly, I have witnessed white cisgender—those whose gender identity matches their physicality—males with educations who do not think twice about their very visible full sleeve tattoo at their engineering job. Conversely, I have seen poor, minimally college educated cisgender white males lose jobs and get in fights in the street because of their modifications. This speaks to an interesting transition in the status of body modification such that while it is now become more commonplace and widely culturally
accepted, especially in the Bay Area, it still connotes stigma in individual situations. More often than not, participants used the symbol to show their affiliation with counter culture and maintain a lifestyle in accordance. As a result, their modifications did not need to be managed for stigma, but were instead a source of social capital. The noteworthy exceptions were with legal officials, medical and dental practitioners, and some mental health practitioners. Those who interacted with more working class origin professionals, such as nurses, commented on their greater acceptance and appreciation of the practice. It is this very issue of stigma that going forward the reader needs to remain critical. What assumptions they bring to the practice and how that affects their interactions with those bearing the symbol has the greatest power for the shifting tides of structure, particularly in mental health.

Almost every individual in this sample had some major emotional hardship they gave a voice to through body modification. Sometimes it helped solidify an identity post trauma, sometimes it helped mark closure, and sometimes it was merely catharsis for the pain trapped in their psyche that need to be made manifest. It is hard to escape the framework of clinical approaches, diagnostics, and mental health with this finding. However, it is my request that readers see the positive and therapeutic aspects of modification in the lives of these people rather than providing them a diagnostic label, or assuming they need some form of sanctioned Western treatment. *A finding of this work is that body modification is a way of dealing with profound emotional realities in a social web of meaning that allows an individual to find a highly social community through their marked difference.*
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Classical Social Theories: The Profane, Parallel Social Structures, High Culture/Subculture

One of the earliest and clearest examinations of the social divide between acceptable behavior and deviant status is Emile Durkheim (1915) The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, wherein he shows that designations of “right” and “wrong” are extensions of the categorization of “sacred” and “profane.” More importantly, he shows there is nothing inherently wrong with that which is construed as “profane,” and that such designations are relative. These labels of sacred and profane change across cultures, and are empirically supported by the multitude of religious and cultural systems worldwide. Durkheim uses the example of the Churinga to illustrate the relative and arbitrary ascription of “sacred” or “profane.” The Churinga is merely a piece of wood until there is the inscription of markings that transform it in the eyes of that culture into a sacred object. The sacred is something like a contagion that is religiously imparted into objects, people, or spaces, and “it is thus that the objects themselves get a religious value which is not really inherent in them but conferred from without” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 324). From a multitude of empirical examples, he shows the relative and culturally constructed ascription of “good” and “bad.” Such systems reveal the world around us as a uniquely social creation. Ultimately, this implies that what is labeled deviant is essentially the profane of local current cultural standards. Regardless of whether such designations dropped their religious origins and moved into the realm of the medico-scientific (e.g., illicit drug use or consensual self harm), these are still socially constructed categories with associated emotional responses. And while some may argue that there is an objective basis to the scientific realm of “profane,” it is still a
social ascription and stigma that is socially agreed upon out of an emotional—often fear-based—response:

Things are above all sacred or profane, pure or impure, friends or enemies, favorable or unfavorable, i.e., their most fundamental characteristics are only expressions of the way in which they affect social sensibility. The differences and resemblances which determine the fashion in which they are grouped are more affective than intellectual. This is how it happens that things change their nature, in a way, from society to society. (Goffman, 1955, p. 89)

Durkheim more explicitly examined the formation of deviance in his earlier work, The Division of Labor in Society. He argues that during times of frequent change in society, particularly during the transition from mechanic to organic solidarity, moral codes will not be able to keep up with the increasing social divisions. The result will be a sense of meaningless and lack of moral regulation in the face of rapid economic change, which he terms “anomie.” In this situation, violence, particularly suicide according to Durkheim, results from larger structural changes that impact individual moral codes. Durkheim was a founder of the structural functionalist perspective wherein all deviance has a social function. He argued that society would react to the transgression of social norms with increased solidarity, generating a newfound reaffirmation of moral boundaries. Durkheim also argues the importance of deviance as a means of adaptation for society. Deviance pushes new boundaries and often is the label given to spearheading factions of social change. In this way deviance may also be innovative. Thus, normative identity is so intrinsically dependent on socially distancing itself from deviance that it becomes understandable why non-normative factions utilize deviant status and actions as a
mechanism for solidifying communal identity. In this process they not only reaffirm the boundaries of normativity but also expand the general social sphere of behavior.

Following closely on the heels of Durkheim was Robert Merton. While Durkheim saw issues such as deviance as both a result of social structure and also having a beneficial social function (i.e., solidarity), Merton discarded the idea that deviance had a social function and instead claimed that some social structures would result solely in social dysfunction. Merton posits an alternative notion that not all social structures are functional, “from critical scrutiny of this postulate, it is developed that a theory of functional analysis must call for specification of the social units sub served by given social functions, and that items of culture must be recognized to have multiple consequences, some of them functional and others, perhaps, dysfunctional” (Merton, 1968, p. 36). Thus, some structures may be cultural “hangovers” from a prior era and have no real function in the complexity of modern society. Thus, while deviance is still seen here as a result of social structure, it is more a measure of the discord between social structures which shape individual goals, and the means one has to achieve such goals. Individuals might not have the resources to achieve their goals, such as the American dream of a house and family. The resulting strain is akin to anomie. Individuals must then either reject the goals dictated by society and come up with new ones, or find new and innovative ways to achieve those goals, which may take the form of social deviance.

One lay perspective cultivated from Judeo-Christian traditions is that individual actors have free will, but Merton’s perspective is that, “some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in nonconformist rather than conformist conduct” (Merton, 1938, p. 672). These pressures come in the form of socially and culturally
defined “goals, purposes, and interests” and become problematic when one does not have the socially acceptable means for achieving them. Therefore, it is not a failure of the system that causes people to find alternative, and mostly illegitimate, means to fulfill their goals, but a predictable latent dysfunction of the structure. Those individuals with fewer resources are trapped by their status in the lower echelons of society; clearly this has some theoretical roots in Marx. While paralleling the Marxist structure of the “have and have-nots,” Merton does not see an inevitable conflict of classes since the disparity is structurally imbedded in society. Instead of class revolution, Merton predicts a continual, and literal, demoralization with the persistence of dominant class goal ideology. Within the functionalist system vision, the only answer to deviant behavior is a change in the structure of society to better coordinate goals and means. In the absence of such dramatic change subcultures emerge where one can redefine meanings, values, and ultimately the goals that they inform, Merton (1968) termed these parallel social structures. In sum Merton argues that subcultures are solutions to status problems that social structures produce. This moves the issue from individual deviance to group formation and involvement, and ultimately group deviance. One of the major assumptions of this perspective is that subcultures are the result of top-down influences in society, and in many ways are an expression of anomie.

Antonio Gramsci makes a significant contribution to the sociological understanding of deviance in his examination of hegemony. Gramsci follows a neo-Marxist perspective and looks at mechanisms of control utilized by those in power, namely the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, and the means through which this relationship is reproduced. He elaborates on Marx’s claim that the mode of production determines the relations of production by arguing that there is also the
overlooked factor of cultural hegemony that works as part of ideology. Those with power establish a way of life that is taken for granted as the correct way to do things, and through its ideological dominion it becomes the accepted norm for all classes even though this only benefits those of the upper and bourgeois class. Through cultural hegemony, the culture of the dominant class becomes seen as the natural and “common sense” resulting in a manufactured consent to existing systems (Hoare & Smith, 1971). A fundamental example of this is the myth that hard work and education are the means to success, and thus those who are successful have earned it through a fair merit based system. Part of this claim is the egalitarian nature of success—even those at the bottom have an equal chance of achieving the same success. Such egalitarian claims are the appeal of the “American Dream” resulting in a lack of rebellion against a system that structurally perpetuates inequality. Essentially, the culture of the successful is seen as the correct manner to achieve the same ends, and there is less resistance than expected under traditional Marxist theory. This understanding of cultural hegemony becomes important in the study of subculture, as subculture comes to be understood as a means of reclaiming social and cultural space from the dominant culture.

Coming from a neo-Marxist French theoretical tradition, Pierre Bourdieu framed culture as more explicitly class based. In Bourdieu’s examination of culture, he shows that “high culture” is a form of hegemony enacted by the dominant class. In contrast, those not in accord with that system of aesthetics are in a disadvantaged position and seen as illegitimate and less valuable.

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of
those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 7)

As in Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life there is again the division of the higher, good, and refined cultural aesthetic and that of the profane, vulgar and lower cultural aesthetic. Moreover, often to appreciate high art or music there are prerequisites of education. The naïve artist or unschooled person may not be able to appreciate certain works without being versed in the history and tradition within which it is placed. In this manner, higher culture is restructured to some degree to those with access to formal education or a social background—a habitus—that “naturally” incorporates such knowledge. Plebian, everyday forms of artistic and musical culture are easier to access and may offer an ideal realm for oppositional and/or deviant identities to dominant culture. For those sectors of society that are distanced from legitimated high cultural knowledge, everyday “low culture” or “popular” forms abound. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus alerts us to the socialization into both high and low forms. For Bourdieu there is also a third path:

Thus, what is nowadays called the ‘counter-culture’ may well be the product of the endeavour of new style autodidacts to free themselves from the constraints of the scholastic market (to which the less confident old-style autodidacts continue to submit, although it condemns their products in advance). They strive to do so by producing another market, with its own consecrating agencies (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 96).
To try to independently educate oneself in these realms, autodidacts create a new world with its own knowledge structures. Through such structures, counter cultures create their own legitimating agencies, some of which are the overtly obvious realms of dress code and appearance, while others are in beliefs, behavior, and knowledge of “good” and “bad” musicians. In such underground or alternative worlds, knowledge of how to rap or use lingo has what Bourdieu called “cultural capital” rather than traditional high aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1984). For the research conducted here cultural capital is used to refer to the accumulation of status through subcultural signifiers such as dress, appearance, reputation, or behavior. For some modification professionals this also extends to their very bodies, e.g. body capital, wherein through their modifications they are able to further their careers.

**Chicago School Deviance and Labeling Theories**

Most early theory addressing the construction of subcultures takes a functionalist or structuralist perspective. Specifically, due to structural stressors (e.g., race, class, anomie, etc.) subcultures are formed which allow for expression of alternative norms, values and beliefs. “Whenever individuals sense in one another like needs, generated by like circumstances, not shared generally in the larger social system,” they may form a subculture as a solution to their predicament (Cohen, [1955] 1997, p. 51).

The Chicago school is one of the earliest theoretical perspectives to move the image of deviance away from the individual and into the realm of group dynamics. Previous widespread notions of deviance had offered explanations based in spiritual failing (Judeo-Christian traditions), individualistic rationality (criminology), and pathological derivation (psychiatry). Scholars at the University of Chicago crafted a theory of their era, citing rapid social change as
the source of social disorganization which may result in deviance (Pfohl, 1994, 1985, p. 174).

This theoretical perspective is sometimes called ecological theory as the conception of social disorganization is based in ecological invasion. When invading plants come into a new realm they can uproot existing ecosystems thus forcing the existing plants to move further into alternate areas. This was initially envisioned as occurring in concentric circles with the source of the upheaval at the first and innermost sector, rippling outward. Social disorganization theory translates this into concentric circles of sequential social upheaval, or disorganization, as a result of rapid change in the central sector (Pfohl, 1994, 1985, p. 189). This theory paralleled the historic events of their time with the increases in agricultural technology, urbanization, and immigration during the 1920’s. They argued that as communities were displaced via urbanization, new immigrants, or the loss of a job market due to new technology, the resulting migration of displaced individuals reduced the bonds that held traditional social networks together. Those in areas of rapid change were more prone to an “anything goes” mentality resulting in increased deviant behavior.

Critiques of this perspective are that it conflates alternative forms of social organization with social disorganization, side-steps issues of systematic structural inequalities, and neglects “respectable” white collar deviance (Pfohl, 1994, 1985, p. 211). It was thought that those nearest the urbanized city center would have the highest rates of social disorganization as indicated by deviant behavior. Not only did this offer a circular definition of social disorganization it also assumed that alternative forms of social organization were somehow less valid than traditional white (male) perspectives. Thus the presence of single African American mothers was cited as an aspect of social disorganization, rather than merely an alternative social organization created
through systematic removal of African American males dating back to slavery. Additionally this
neglects the structural forces that result in the unequal distribution of resources to those groups
that often occupy areas of “social disorganization,” in this case the slums in the city of Chicago.
Lastly, there is little examination of “white collar” crimes such as embezzlement that is a
relatively invisible crime.

The reframing of deviance as a social position rather than a characteristic of the
individual allowed for theorists in the 1950’s and 1960’s to examine deviance as social
consequence of rule application. This theoretical perspective was termed labelling theory
popularized by Howard Becker and others. Becker (1963) argued that deviance was socially
constructed through expectations of behavior and the resulting labelling of individuals as
outsiders or deviants. More simply, deviants are only deviant in that they are labelled as such.
The label in itself then has major social ramifications for that individual or group beyond the
transgression of a rule. For instance, an individual with a criminal record may be discriminated
against in the job market, and have to find alternative means of financial support (Becker, 1963,
pp. 31-35). In this case, the label may lead to secondary deviance such as theft because the social
stigma afforded from one’s deviant status (Lemert, 1951).

Howard Becker highlights that the issue of labelling is not a clean and clear process
wherein one breaks a rule and thereby gains the label of outsider. There may be conflicting
systems of rules, such as the rules of the street verses the rules prescribed by the law. There may
be explicit rules against a behavior, but that behavior is tacitly accepted by a community,
creating a hypocritical situation. Becker outlines a case of first maternal cousins who engage in a
romantic relationship (Becker, 1963, pp. 10-11). In this situation there is a social taboo against
incest, but at the same time a blind eye is turned to the situation. He goes on to identify the intersection of “acts of deviance” and the “label” that results in one being a pure deviant, secret deviant, falsely accused, or conforming. This simple matrix addresses the hereto unexplored realm of visibility in regard to deviance, and that those with the power to create the rules that construct deviance are often the ones to have very invisible deviance. Their deviance may be just as taboo but relatively invisible behind corporate bank accounts and legitimated social structures that further social inequality. Yet, because their deviance isn’t overt, they do not garner the social stigma of “deviant” nor the social repercussions.

Becker identifies the power of the label as also being the force that initiates the formation of deviant subcultures. Once one has the label of deviant, certain social avenues may be closed off, or no longer viewed as desirable. As such, the marijuana smoker may not desire relationships with those who strongly disapprove of its use, and thus wilfully disassociate from more “straight’ individuals. This person comes to embrace the company of fellow users. Similarly, fellow deviants may have functional knowledge required for a deviant career, be that how one “correctly” smokes marijuana or cracks a safe. In these communities, deviant behavior can be redefined or “justified” as somehow normal. Becker sites the use of historical and natural examples by homosexual groups to redefine their deviant status as “natural” and therefore more normative (Becker, 1963, p. 38).

Problems of social control arise in a myriad of realms from the law to social relations. Those who are close to the “deviant,” namely family, friends, and spouses, may exert pressure on this person to be more normal. In the case of the jazz musician, there may be pressure to conform to more normal job choices to procure stable financial support. Laws/rules alone are not enough
to curtail deviant behavior since it is dependent on the enforcement of such a rule. In the modern city, this role has been outsourced to professional watchmen—police officers. Otherwise the urban environment cultivates a mentality of “reserve” wherein people understand that the enforcement of rules is not their primary role. As a result, deviant behavior becomes regulated through more subtle means such as social pressures vis-à-vis family and friends (Becker, 1963, p. 125). Additionally, drug user’s fears of being “found out” also help limit their interaction with more “straight” individuals thus cementing the relationships that create deviant subculture.

Others theorized that that deviance within subculture may also be a response to the pressures of industrialized society. Much like the jazz musician rejects a normal job as part of their deviant status, many subcultures embrace an antithetical ethos in their culture to that of the dominant value system. In this way individuals can escape from the structured bureaucracy of day to day life in the subterranean realm of “play” (Young, [1971] 1997). Here subcultures are starting to be understood as cultural reactions against hegemonic ideologies, and thus constructed as their opposite. For example, a work culture that focuses on deferred gratification would have a corresponding subterranean culture of short-term hedonism. Those repressive realms that require conformity to bureaucratic rules will have subcultural play that is more “ego-expressive.” While this is a rather reductionist, and a reactionist perspective, it identifies that individual deviant behavior is not what is of concern to the dominant system, but the culture of deviance. All societies require a division of work and play, and many use hedonistic means to delineate this difference. Thus it is not the individual behavior itself as much as cultures that form a rejection of dominant values. Control efforts particularly fall on those that do not have access to
established means of achievement, e.g. minority and low income groups, or those who reject the dominant value system all together such as bohemian youth (Young, [1971] 1997, p. 80).

Chicago School perspectives were later augmented by work from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University which focused on ‘youth’ subcultures. This group focused on emerging music cultures such as Teds, Mods, Skinheads, and Punks to analyze their unique look and placement in relation to “parent culture”, “dominant culture”, and mass culture. Their argument for focusing on culture is based in its production: “identity is created through the use one makes of, and the meanings one ascribes to, the ‘raw materials’ of existence.”(Gelder, 1997, p. 84) Here structural issues such as class may take a back seat. While they are still recognized for their significance, they are not the ‘raison d’être’ of subculture. Instead a strong Gramscian perspective is taken where subcultures are the means through which working class and middle class youth take social space with their newfound financial income in the post WWII era.

A strong focus of the CCCS perspective is that of reclaiming social space from hegemonic structures of control. One of the clearest studies of this is Willis’s work on secondary school boys (Willis, [1977] 1997). Those who behave well and follow the control systems established by teachers are termed “lads” while those who differentiate themselves with deviance and disregard for the educational system are called “ear’oles.” Ear’oles are mostly middle class boys who set themselves in opposition to ‘high boys’ or ‘lads’ of the upper class. Ear’oles recognized that control is maintained through an academic paradigm and therefore reject education as a mechanism of regaining some social control.
Some subcultures could be characterized as rebellions against their parent cultures, such as the ear’ole boys who reject middle class mechanisms of advancement, specifically education (Willis, [1977] 1997). In the same manner punks are working against the working class parent culture of post-WWII Britain (Hebdige, 1979). Both examples must be understood as different responses to the larger parent culture from which they emerged, but are similar forms of resistance to the dominant paradigm that recreates structural inequalities and manufactures consent through hegemonic ideologies. For these individuals, subcultures are understood to be fruitless in terms of providing a financial means of existence, such as in the case of the jazz musician. These individuals don’t have a solution to their education disadvantage, unemployment, or imposed structural inequality, but do mount resistance to the dominant culture that has created these conditions. In most cases this resistance perpetuates these inequalities, such as the ear’ole boys who reject normative education and means of advancement. However, the street corners and dance halls of the neighbourhood become their territory. These individuals share certain facets with their parent culture, such as socio-economic position, but it is in their dress, and leisure activities that they fight the conditions that have placed them in such a predicament (Hall & Jefferson, 1993). There are also subcultures that resist mass culture, such as the systems of gender. As such there were cultures of female punks that represented new progressive forms of expression for females.

Other subcultures studied by the BCCC included the Teddy boys, mods, and skinheads. Teddy boys were working class youth who embraced Edwardian fashion intended for upper scale dandy boys (Jefferson, 1993). It is theorized that in their recycling of high fashion as a symbol of resistant identity, they were evidencing the desire to move higher in social class, but unable to
because of structural inequalities. Thus, the utilization of upper class tailored suits in their social world showed that while they could not achieve dominance in normative day-to-day affairs, in their leisure time they could have a nicer tailored suit than their boss. They were well known to be very sensitive to insult regarding their dress and violent in their responses to perceived offenses. Mods similarly claimed a respectable social image, the scooter bike, and used it as an identifying icon in their effort to transform a social image of respectability into something of their own (Hebdige, 1993). Mods defined themselves by their consumption patterns; constant efforts to get the newest trendiest item. In this effort to be the cutting edge consumer, they also defined themselves with significant amounts of amphetamine use. The more awake a person was, the more they could be a conscious consumer with the newfound income for youth in post WWII Britain. Skinheads were even more obvious about their simultaneous embrace and rejection of parent culture that came with disposable income for youth. They viewed themselves as preserving the working class perspectives in their biases (being against foreigners, Pakistanis, and upper class individuals) and affinity for such sports as football and traditional images of masculinity (J. Clarke, 1993). Doc Marten boots, close cut hair, jeans and suspenders became symbols of the skinhead subculture. This group was reincarnated in the punk and ska movements of the 1970’s and took a polar anti-racist perspective to its prior ‘paki’-bashing.

**Foucault, The Abnormals, and Theories of the Body**

In one of Foucault’s lesser known works, “The Abnormals” (1997), he directly addresses the issue of social deviants and their formation. He identifies three types of abnormal individuals in society. First is the human monster, an abnormality to human society in both its physical formation and resulting placement in social and legal rubrics. It cannot fit into the systems and
laws of man because of the mere malformation of its human form. For example, hermaphrodites—individuals with sex characteristics of both males and females—complicated the laws of male inheritance. Second is the individual to be corrected, a failure in normal societal techniques of control to train individual behavior. Unlike the human “monster,” this abnormal is a lesser monster of psychopathology and considered “incorrigible” in defiance of social expectations. Yet once again, this is not seen as the fault of the individual. The “imbeciles, the retarded, the nerve-disordered, the unbalanced”—are lesser violation of natural law (Foucault, 1997, p. 55). Finally, Foucault identifies the third abnormal form as that of the onanist who transgresses regulations regarding sexuality, namely having “forbidden relations of the flesh”—adultery, incest, sodomy, bestiality, and masturbation (Foucault, 1997, p. 53).

In this manner, Foucault has classified abnormal presences in society into those of the flesh, mind and sexual behavior. “Each one will be taken into autonomous systems of scientific reference: the monster, into a teratology and an embryology; the incorrigible, into a psychophysiology of sensations, motricity, and capacities; the onanist, into a theory of sexuality”(Foucault, 1997, p. 55). With his strong focus on medical and institutional means of regulation and rectification, Foucault neglects a discussion of physical violence as a forbidden relationship to the flesh regulated through social means. Foucault hints at this in asserting that the mechanisms that regulate abnormal sexuality and relationships to the flesh are the same as those that regulate physical harm to the body, namely social pressures, psychiatric institutionalization, and ultimately legal action should the violation be severe enough and discovered.
Thus, in his discussion of the regulation of deviance, this work hints at an underlying truth that the legal and medical systems of regulation work in tandem on the human body. Both assert moral justifications for their control: incest is regulated for its immorality as much as physical assault. There is an interesting intersection that occurs in the study of Bondage Dominance Sado-Masochism (BDSM) where physical harm and sexuality have an interplay that is consensual and yet pushes established boundaries of both the legal and medical realms. This is extremely prevalent in the goth/industrial music culture, and understudied. Similar aspects of this issue of bodily regulation are echoed in the transgressions of drug use and body modification, both mechanisms for identification of ‘social outsider’ and deviant identities. Here, counter-culture identity and its performance through the body also questions medical presence that has become pervasive in the modern consciousness in ways Foucault presaged.

Regarding pervasiveness of the medical gaze in society, we can examine Foucault’s other examinations medical history. One notable examination was of the social construction of “sane” and ”insane” in psychiatry (Foucault, 1961/1989/2001). Psychiatry held such power in its labeling that those who bore the label of insane could be quickly whisked away to special realms of physical isolation. Historically, medical space expanded within the social arena and the task of the doctor became increasingly that of social organization. The medical professional was not only to “distribute advice as to healthy life, but also to dictate the standards for physical and moral relations of the individual and of the society in which he lives” (Foucault, 1963/1973/1994, p. 34).

The primary and most overt facet of control by medicine is the direct proscription against particular behaviors, but secondary to that is the internalization of the medical gaze by the
general populace. This “gaze” was historically cultivated through the transition of medicine from the home into the clinical hospital setting, whereupon the examination of an ailment translated into treatment (Foucault, 1963/1973/1994). The internalization of this medical gaze has had an impact on social norms and behavior as discussed by many scholars drawing on Foucault. In the effort to reduce exposure to health risks, such as STIs or organ damage via substance use, the internalized medical gaze becomes the second regulatory and definitional agency of “deviant” behavior. Thus, the management of health risks can be viewed as translating into a submissive position vis-à-vis medical discourse: it tells us what to do to promote health, and we self-regulate our behavior in compliance. Health risks and “risk” in general is how we talk about increasing efforts to control hazards and the anxieties associated with them. But it is also a way for surveillance medicine to broaden its realm (Armstrong, 1995). Normal populations become new realms for identifying disease and bringing them into a mode of self-surveillance to maintain their health. This seems especially true in an era where “the AIDS ’epidemic’ [has created] a political climate within which intervention and control are seen to be both necessary and benign. Individuals need, especially in the area of sexual etiquette, to become self-regulating and self-forming” (Turner, 1997, p. xix).

**Identity Theories: Early Symbolic Interactionism**

Part and parcel to the notion of being socially deviant is the construction of an identity that is perceived as deviant. The rejection or acceptance of the very label “deviant” and its inclusion or exclusion in one’s constructed self-image is a major line of inquiry. As much as this work focuses on notions of social difference, deviance, and stigma, it equally only has importance in regard to identity. A symbol as vociferous as body modification has implications
for one’s subjective identity, psychology, and how others may perceive that identity interpersonally. This extends to social dynamics in the work force, and with authority figures. Theories of identity—particularly those in regard to stigmatized identities or identities that are constructed against perceived “normativity”—elaborate on the mechanics of identification that body modification plays into.

George Herbert Mead saw the individual emerging out of social experiences in the processes of subjectification through the perspective of the other. “The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises out of social experience” (Mead, 1970, p. 384). More specifically, the self is an internalization of the social, and by taking oneself into the position of the other, one becomes an object as seen through the eyes of others. Mead claimed this is the only way for people to see themselves in the social world, and it is done through communication in the form of language and gestures. In essence there is a “calling out,” wherein one’s self is able to evaluate one’s own behavior and presentation in the eyes of others and, through this interpretation, adjust their behavior to their own benefit. Therefore, communication and social interaction that is symbolic in nature conveys meaning resulting in a changing and impermanent sense of self.

As Mead’s student, Herbert Blumer took it as his charge to posthumously publish the works of his mentor, and by doing so made his own theoretical work an almost inseparable extension of Mead. He took the above theoretical perspective and coined the term “symbolic interaction” and presented the Mead’s theory in a more refined, explicit and sociological (rather than philosophical) manner:
Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world . . . The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969/1993, p. 2).

In an essay that has relevance for understanding subcultures, Blumer shows the application of these three premises in the construction of racial prejudice as a form of meaning ascription in social relations. In “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position,” Blumer shows how “black” is only meaningful due to its role as a symbol, otherwise it is a mere state of melanin. Racial prejudice is therefore an example of premise one above. Following premise two, “the process of definition [of groups such as “black”] occurs obviously through complex interaction and communication between members of the dominant group” (Blumer, 1958, p. 5). By the dominant group trying to define itself over or against another they have not only defined themselves, but also the “other” through their relation to them. Meaning is created through this opposition, and this positioning is then abstracted to the group level, applying to all those that share the characteristic of “blackness.” Additionally, the symbolic meaning of “black” also encompasses a history of social interaction. The meanings of this social category have changed and been reinvented over time due to social interactions that lead to change, e.g. civil rights movement. Relations between racial groups are shaped by the relative position of these groups over time.
Anselm Strauss on Identity

Anselm Strauss continues the work of Blumer on the concept of identity construction. He particularly contributes to this discourse in Mirrors and Masks (1959/1997), which is his most explicit and theoretical work on the concept of identity. Ironically, Strauss refuses to provide a definition for identity because he sees identity as the domain of psychology and psychiatry as it examines the “structure, or organization, of personality.” (Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 15) Thus, Strauss says he uses the concept of identity as a springboard for his discussion of its creation and change through social processes. This tailored treatise carries the seeds of his later notions of “negotiated orders” and “webs of negotiation" that look at how social positions and networks shape interaction. In its form in Mirrors and Masks, this is addressed in a manner reminiscent of Blumer’s work on positionality, since Strauss shows how interaction can be determined by the social relation between “groups” (e.g. doctor/patient) and thus impacts personal identity by the very presence of symbolic interaction.

Through the construction of personal identity, Strauss explicitly excavates the interplay between larger structures of society and individual agency. While Blumer’s assessment of positionality is utilized, Strauss adds the important factor of temporality and change over time. Blumer (and Mead) showed that the self is in constant flux because of the process of social interaction, but here it is also a construct of its time and place in the world. This emphasis on temporality takes the constantly changing nature of the individual “self” one step further into its relation with surrounding social structures. The two are inherently intertwined as the structure shapes the individual and the individuals change structure through their expression in interaction, “This is a temporal view not merely of interaction but of structure itself, the latter shaped by
actors through interaction”(Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 7). Not only do one’s surroundings, in the form of time and place, inform how the self changes through interaction, but the self is also an accumulation of personal history. “A man must be viewed as embedded in a temporal matrix not simply of his own making, but which is peculiarly and subtly related to something of his own making-his conception of the past as it impinges on himself”(Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 166). This influence of personal history is similar to the notion of habitus put forth by his contemporary Bourdieu, and that of Blumer who saw the symbols we use and identify with as containing a history. Both envision one’s history as always carried with an individual into their current interactions and influencing how one interacts in the social field. However, the uniqueness of Strauss' conception is that this is one’s constructed conception of their past, not what the surrounding world has accepted in a passive manner. Additionally, this is not static in the slightest as one’s self conception and perceived identity is an always changing process, that affects how one reflects on their self, their personal history, future behavior, and identity via grouping.

Much like Mead, Strauss starts his examination of self, identity, and the aforementioned grouping through an analysis of language. Here the focus is not on gestures, but words themselves and the meanings they carry with them, which he shows in the form of “naming.” A name can reflect the history of a larger social group and its values. He shows this in the naming of African-American children “Lincoln” in honor of their political liberator. This reflects the unique historical background of this group and their struggle for emancipation. By taking something as seemingly innocuous as a name, Strauss shows how laden with meaning communication can be. “To name, then, is not only to indicate; it is to identify an object as some
kind of object. An act of identification requires that the thing referred to be placed within a category" (Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 21). Naming is thus a form of classification which Strauss used in his larger project of grouping, particularly social worlds in interaction.

However, naming is not enough to solidify, and maintain social groups, much less a continuous sense of identity. Individuals must have motivation, dedication, and the willingness to spend time with the groups they identify with. For those who do not want to be a part of a particular group they can sometimes disassociate themselves (their experience with said group will continue to influence their future social interactions). However, not all have this luxury; again the example of race is appropriate. Strauss addresses this in the form of status-forcing, which is a forcing of an often temporary identity on another; this can be more permanent in the form of slavery, expulsion, or detainment in concentration camps or prisons. As Strauss puts it, “every society—through its agents—can thrust individuals into the status of the ‘shamed one’” (Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 79). This can range in the degree of status change and the length of identity duration. In all its forms there are social rules and regulations in place that determine how this occurs, some explicit such as in the judicial or medical systems, and some implicit such as between two youth of a common social scene. In the courtroom one is pronounced guilty, and in the club one is called a “wannabe” and rejected as an authentic and/or legitimate member. Strauss identified such designations as directional in their application such as “up-down” and “in-out.” They are forms of judgment by those in one’s social network.

Strauss proposes a more intuitive understanding that presents identity development at a series of related transformations. The finalization of this process is the recategorization of self through the changing of “terms” one uses for their own self assessment, “Terminological shifts
necessitate, but also signal, new evaluations: of self and others, of events, acts, and objects; and the transformation of perception is irreversible; once having changed, there is no going back” (Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 94). One might say that the self naming of one’s new stance is a (maybe more than one over time) penultimate point of self-reflection and development in adulthood. By saying “I am part of subculture X,” one has incorporated a transformation and irreversibly changed their own perception of self and others.

   Strauss must now tackle the issue of how one would come to recognize a “series of transformations” and introduces the concept of “turning points.” Turning points are incidents that make one aware of one’s own identity transformation through a critical incident. This can take many forms, some of which are the surpassing of a teacher, a betrayal, overcoming a challenging event, or an awakening to a new role after trying it on. These can take place in a personal relationship or on a larger institutional level. In the end, “these are points in development when an individual has to take stock, to re-evaluate, revise, resee, and rejudge” (Strauss, 1997/1959, p. 102). In a subculture, this may be the first whim of acceptance, or a show of commitment to that group identity. Others have illustrated this through the extremes of subculture style and fashion that clearly delineate association with the culture. Examples could be the shaving of one’s hair into a mohawk, the dying of hair, body piercing, tattooing or some other event that one finds jarring enough to recognize as transformation.

   Goffman

   Erving Goffman greatly contributed to the field of identity namely in his reconceptualization of identity as a performance and delineated the many faces we play for the world (Goffman, [1959] 1995). These different faces relate specifically to how individuals
manage stigma and the different roles one individual can occupy in society. Specifically
Goffman argues that the self is presentation through actions and that to maintain a stable self-
image people must perform for their social audiences. An individual presents a face to other
social participants which represents their particular stance in a situation and is also a pattern of
expression of their viewpoint. There is an emotional association with this face, and to the faces
presented by others. Through this judgment process, there is an inherent reflexivity to the face
one presents as they may try to align themselves with one context or another to get a desired
response. For instance individuals can be said to have “lost face” or “saved face” within their
social setting dependent on some behavior. Here Goffman doesn’t explicitly talk about identity
as much as contextual performance and interaction, but shows these micro level social
interactions are part of identity formation. Namely, identity is a performance, and thus the
deviant action as performance is inextricable from the deviant identity. It is in this manner that
one can understand the use of BDSM activity in the Goth/Industrial subculture as an
authenticating force that identifies one’s insider status. The same can be said of “free love” and
hallucinogen use during the hippie era, cocaine use during disco, aggression in rap, ecstasy in
raves, etc.

In a separate work by Goffman (1963), he addresses stigma as something that affects the
interpretation of “face.” In our interactions there is a virtual social identity—the face as it is
appears to other—and an actual social identity representing the actual person which may be at
odds with how their person is perceived. A stigma is a rare, often physical characteristic, which
may place a member of society as an outsider, criminal, or other betrayer of the social norms that
shape a social group. It is an important factor in the virtual social self. It is a blazing indicator of
a distinctive social place in relation to others, and not an “attribute” of the individual for it may not be congruous with their actual social persona (e.g., someone faking an illness to escape military service). However, a stigma may also apply to those who have voluntarily bowed out of their assigned social role. Subcultures that embrace an anti-establishment lens (e.g., beatniks, hippies, punks, industrial), take on the social outsider position and its associated stigma. Identification as part of that community through alternative physical appearance is yet another means of solidifying their deviant position and embracing their stigmatized cultural stance.

**SUBSTANTIVE LITERATURES**

The body itself is increasingly utilized as a contemporary landscape of identity formation, which can create a fundamental barrier to access for unmarked researchers. Ethnographers attempt to understand the position of the subject through cultural immersion. However, without undergoing a similar physical transformation to those being studied, there will be physical and social boundaries to their knowledge, and limits to entrée. Some have hinted that this may provoke a new “extreme” ethnography which recognizes the body as “a site of incarnate ethnographic experience” (Kosut, 2010, p. 194). Working this boundary of incarnate physical experience and inscription, this review examines how body modification has become part of cultural discourses and individual notions of identity.

In contemporary society, more traditional structures that create meaning and identity are receding, or at the least being fiercely questioned. More normative systems that imparted meaning included: religion, race, gender, and sexuality. Due to the semi-permanent and permanent nature of tattoos and piercings they earned their place as anti-fashion, wherein they are used to ground identity in a postmodern world of seemingly detached floating signs
(Sweetman, 1999). Clinton Sanders’ investigation of tattooing articulates its use as modern ritual, e.g. a rite of passage, due to the decline of formalized ritual outside of religious social worlds. Moreover, individuals use it to give voice to important life events (i.e., the passing or birth of a loved one, survival of cancer, or the joining of a social group) (Sanders, 2008 [1989]). These marks are used to signify identity in the social world, and the world in turn treats the bearer differently as a response. Often, this is the delineation of group member status, e.g. insider or outsider. Howard Becker (1963) was one of the first to articulate this issue of becoming an outsider, partially due to social and economic circumstances, and also by the choice of not living a “square” life—choosing a different meaning paradigm. Others who know this life were those that chose an alternative music subculture (e.g. punk, goth, industrial), or alternative sexual lifestyle (e.g. Lesbian,-Gay-Transgender-Queer, Bondage-Dominance-Sadism-Masochism). In fact, it is hard to find an “outsider” community that doesn’t also have members which also engage in body modification as part of that identity (ex: gangs, circus performers, criminals, counter culture music subcultures, LGBT leather community) (Rosenblatt, 1997).

**Fashion**

Fashion transcends individuals, offering a larger system of symbology. Fashion can be used by both insiders and outsiders of particular social worlds to enact or perform their social position(s). Fashion is meant to convey a projected identity carefully crafted by the wearer, but also reflects certain claims vis a vis social structure and life-style. Possibly presentations of self are dictated by what have been termed “sumptuary laws” wherein class and social status is reflected in ones adornments (Sanders, 2008 [1989], p. 4). In Sander’s discussion of historical body modifications he also references the use of fashion as social marks of stratification.
Examples include how only the highest class of ancient Egyptians were allowed to wear sandals, and in eighteenth century Japan, lower class citizens were forbidden to wear brocade, silk, and other fine fabrics. Clearly the meanings of these signs and their intended messages are context-sensitive. For example, a safety pin on a diaper is usually only functional. However, a safety pin holding together tight fitting plaid pants in the US today is commonly an identity statement for punk acolytes. A solid gold safety pin is also a statement. Thus, fashion offers a means of solidifying identity in a realm of social diversity and ambiguity.

Scholars of fashion cite engaging ambiguity as a main appeal and function of fashion. Following the work of symbolic interactionists, it is understood that there is an internal dialogue regarding the social world, the reflective self (the “I”), and consciousness (the “me”) (Mead, 1970). This constant reflection results in flux and a certain degree of ambiguity in one’s self perception. It is this ambiguity that fashion plays upon, allowing individuals to try to cement a more stable sense of a persona (“I”). The very meaning of the word “fashion” is to create or make something out of components, and that is what it also does on a symbolic level vis-à-vis identity. Specifically, fashion items may reflect claims to a “master” status such as female, male, rich, poor, healthy, disabled, racial identity, etc (Hughes, 1945). During the 1980’s, women crafted minor modifications to work outfits to make them appear more masculine (e.g., shoulder pad), illustrating their efforts to negate the impact of their master status as female on their professional opportunities. In fact, fashion’s power to signify social status is so profound that youth have been killed by peers for their shoes or jacket (Davis, 1992, pp. 61-62).

Historically in the West, fashion was demarcated as “high” if it was costly, luxe, served elites and involved specialized designers such as Chanel or Dior. “Popular” fashion used to copy
elite modes in cheaper “knock-off” versions. Various subcultures had their own distinctive
modes of attire that also changed. More recently however, the trajectories of both high and
popular fashion appear to mimic those of subcultures. Since fashion is a key mechanism of
definition for such groups, this is not surprising. Fashion tends to follow cycles of “invention and
introduction; fashion leadership; increasing social visibility; conformity within and across social
groups; social saturation; and decline and obsolescence” (Davis, 1992, p. 134). In both high
fashion and subculture fashion, there is an effort to resist appropriation on a mass level. If that
occurs, what was originally signified by a fashion statement/sign is transformed and loses its
original meaning, becoming a cliché or outmoded. The ultimate result is a decline in the use of
that signifier.

What is unique to fashion is that as an object of study it also underlies the dynamic
relations between the individual and their chosen social world(s). How they interact to change
one another produces meaning in a very concrete manner. One can see the change embodied in
the introduction of a new sign to either refute or modify an established status. Additionally, one
can trace what happens as a sign moves from controversial to acknowledged appropriation, and
eventually redefinition through mass use such that it no longer carries the same meanings and
connotations for identity.

Body modification is but another form of fashion that is dictated by historical trends,
social context, and the internal construction of the self. As such, body modification has ranged
from tattooing, piercing, scarification, waist cinching, foot binding, head shaping, tooth
modification (ex: grills—the contemporary plating of teeth, fangs, Aztec bejewelling and
sharpening), wilful amputation (including circumcision), plastic surgery, body building, to even the seemingly innocuous dieting, hair style, and makeup trends.

**Body Modification: Fakir Musafar and Modern Primitives**

The world of body modification is broadly outlined as any semi-permanent change to the human body. Subcultures focusing on these practices have emerged in recent years, but the practices are often thousands of years old (Forsyth & Simpson, 2008; Miller, 1997; Sanders, 2008 [1989]). More extreme versions of this redefinition of one’s relationship with body, include notions of the human spirit and how body modification can be an intensely spiritual event in a world seemingly stripped of the “sacred” (Vale & Juno, 1989). Here, body modification is utilized as a manner of reconnecting to the body in a highly spiritual framework. It is often left to the individual to define the meaning of their modification, yet is most notably a construction of Fakir Musafar and Modern Primitives.

Other activities this periodical delves into include: body painting (Musafar, 1997a), excessively long hair or nails (termed “claws”) (Musafar, 1994a, 1994b, 1997b), Maskon (wearing a mask covering the entire body) (Musafar, 1999), hairlessness (the extreme shaving of all body hair) (Musafar, 1997b), clamping (often utilizing clothes line pins) (Musafar, 1996a), contortion (Musafar, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996a, 1999, 2000), bondage/dominance/submission/masochism play (aka, BDSM) (Musafar, 1994b, 1996a, 1998) as well as fetishizing of alternative modes of interaction with the body. This latter grouping comes under the heading of “body play” or “body rituals” rather than “body modification” or “body sculpting,” due to the fact that they are not semi-permanent changes to the shape or nature of one’s physique so much as alternative modes of interaction with the body.

*Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* also distinguishes between approaches to body modification, namely the distinction between “Modern Primitives” that view body modification as an intensely spiritual practice, and “Radical Moderns” who engage the body in a radical and counter cultural manner to challenge normative understandings (Musafar, 1994c). However, there is a troublesome blurring of boundaries to these approaches. For instance, in the narrative “Seventy Stitches,” extensive piercing is utilized by a young woman plagued by chronic pain (Musafar, 1994b). In a ritualized environment she was temporarily pierced with over seventy stitches tracing the pattern of her chronic lower and upper back pain. The stitches were left in for three days, during which the woman cited release of many emotions she had affiliated with this condition. She claims this experience helped alleviate her chronic pain and was subsequently able to discontinue physical therapy (Musafar, 1994b, pp. 8-11). Here, body modification is utilized as a manner of reconnecting or reclaiming the body in a highly spiritual
environment, yet she was not appropriating a ritual of a prior “primitive” culture. Therefore it is often left to the individual to define the meaning of their modification. However, Fakir Musafar has articulated disdain for those who use body modification as a mere performative art without understanding the cultures from which these practices originated. He is well aware that without promoting reflection on the origin and spiritual nature of these practices, he is merely appropriating the rites of another culture, joining an extensive legacy of exploitative white colonizers (V. Pitts, 2003, p. 141). With the focus on the ritual and spiritual practice there is an inversion of the value system to that of “primitive” or tribal systems over Western consumerism and appropriation.

Others engage in practices even more radical than these. Every year there is an invite-only convention termed “Modcon” dedicated to “extreme” body modification. This group engages in practices discussed above in addition to sub-dermal implants, dental sharpening/modification, wilful amputation, castration, artificial hermaphroditism, penile splitting/subincision, transscrotal piercing (a piercing going from the scrotum up the shaft and out the glans of the penis), saline enlargement of the testes (and sometimes the forehead), and transgender modifications (Larratt, 2002). From the most basic endurance test of extended tattooing sessions to the more extreme practice of insertion of needles into the testicles, the importance of ritual in these acts is key. This is distinguished from the spiritualized “tribal” of the Modern Primitives who see these activities as rituals unto themselves, defined by the practitioner, that allow one to make their body their own creation beyond given biological limitations. Additionally, practitioners experience mastery of one’s response to pain, complete control of the body, and at the same time a wilful surrender to it (Larratt, 2002, pp. 7, 9).
Individuals cite their decision to partake in these practices as well thought out and considered plans that sometimes utilize illegal surgeons. Subincision in particular must be done only a little at a time and involves lengthy processes like stretching of the ears, presenting many opportunities for one to change their mind and rethink their decision. Some individuals have been prosecuted for practicing medicine without a licence or held against their will under the “harm to self or others” rubric of involuntary commitment. There is simultaneously a desire for these practices to be better understood and a fear of exposure due to persecution by medical practitioners\(^1\). Those with subincision are fearful of interactions with medical practitioners where their modifications may come under scrutiny, and many of those who have consciously amputated or castrated themselves must construct false stories explaining the “accidents,” which caused their modifications.(Larratt, 2002, pp. 25, 30, 40, 41).

Suspension, the act of hanging from specialized hooks through the epidermis, is unique in modification culture since it is one of the more prominent practices done as a performance piece. It can utilized not only as an intensely spiritual and ritualistic experience, but also as a showmaship piece (Larratt, 2002, p. 59). There are even suspension teams that do group performances involving multiple individuals simultaneously suspended such as Constructs of Ritual Evolution (CoRE), or its predecessor Traumatic Stress Discipline (TSD). Most notable of these is TSD that does three person tandem suspensions. The individual at the top supports the weight of the two hanging below, a total weight of 460 pounds from 12 different hooks, making

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\(^1\) In 2000 a Scottish surgeon (Robert C Smith) assisted in an extreme body modification: willful amputation. Due to public outrage over this the physician was persecuted in the press and any future procedures of the kind banned by the hospital at which this occurred. The issue was debated in parliament and became a cautionary tale for body modifiers.
TSD arguably the most advanced suspension act, as traditionally multiple suspension acts (such as deviant ART in Australia) only suspend one individual from each “rig” (Larratt, 2002, p. 90).

Some have criticized the Modern Primitive movement as exploiting past cultures to lend meaning to a practice that should be respected in and of itself irrespective of spiritual claims (Califa, 1994). As the Modern Primitive movement is inextricable from the BDSM movement and grew out of San Francisco leather culture, there are feelings of alienation amongst those who choose to practice body modification and BDSM as an embodied practice separate from spirituality. There is a rift amongst those who do not wear their “primitive” modifications boldly and don’t practice modification as a spiritual practice. They are devalued and looked down upon as somehow “lesser.” “If a guy with feathers in his hair is blowing a nose flute while he puts needles in somebody who is standing on a buffalo skin, that trip is assumed to be more important or superior to the naked, greasy folks in a fist-fucking sling who have spanked each other silly and are now oinking their way to thunderous simultaneous orgasm.” (Califa, 1994, p. 256). One factor that both factions agree upon is that body modification can be understood as an expression of control in a society where individuals may feel otherwise powerless (Califa, 1994, p. 248; Vale & Juno, 1989, p. 4).

**Tattooing**

Common discourses on tattooing have looked at cultural justifications, such as those of a rite of passage, marking tribal/gang affinity, or social role (e.g. criminal) (Atkinson, 2003; Sanders, 2008 [1989]). Similarly, quests for increased individuality within a society of homogeneity is also a common justification in the repackaging of tattoos as a socially acceptable commodity (DeMello, 2000). Other more recent examinations have outlined how tattooing is
part of a personal “reclaiming” of the body from trauma, disease, patriarchy, or some other force that has supposedly robbed them of their body (V. Pitts, 2003). There is also the understanding that modification is part of a spiritual practice, such as with the modern primitives, or as a remembrance of their faith and belief indelibly inscribed in the flesh (DeMello, 2000; V. Pitts, 2003; Sanders, 2008 [1989]).

Michael Atkinson, in his work *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003), takes a close look at the practice of contemporary tattooing in Canada. He approaches this practice from the perspective of figurational sociology wherein tattooing is part of a self-reflexive social act which moulds a “figure” or identity interdependent with internal psychological and external social forces (Atkinson, 2003, pp. 8, 9). Many aspects of Bourdieu’s work with habitus are cited along with other works by Elias such that tattooing is discussed as a mechanism by which one actively changes their habitus over time. With the acquisition of tattoos, one may become immersed in a complex web of social interactions around this practice: namely with the artist(s), other tattooed individuals, and of course non-tattooed individuals that also compose the world at large. Atkinson’s examination of tattooing is constructed around five points of investigation: 1) Is there a distinct subculture around tattooing? 2) How can tattooing be understood across time and as a product of specific time-place habits? 3) Why is tattooing the most prevalent form of body modification? 4) How are tattoos part of one’s lived experience? 5) How might the sociological theory of habitus formation and change over time be particularly helpful in understanding tattooing as a body project? (Atkinson, 2003, pp. 67, 68)

Addressing the first of these inquiries, Atkinson cites numerous prior theorists on the general subject of subculture such as Durkheim, Merton, Bourdieu, Cohen, Hall and the CCCS.
From this review, he concludes that a subculture is a group of people who live their lives organized around a particular activity that defines itself in relation to a larger culture as a reference point (Atkinson, 2003, p. 96). As tattoo enthusiasts incorporate tattooing into a pre-existent lifestyle and define their tattoo’s meaning for themselves as opposed to the tattooing defining them (while admittedly some use this in the construction of alternative identities such as motorcycle clubs or prison gangs), they do not necessarily constitute a cohesive subculture. Tattooed individuals are myriad and diverse, existing in almost all walks of life, thus this diversity blurs any lines one might draw to encapsulate a subculture. Instead, Atkinson views tattooing as part of a social body project—or figuration—that is socially contextualized for meaning (e.g., tribal tattooing or gang symbols) but is an intensely individual practice with meaning ascribed by the wearer.

Atkinson’s second point is a historical review of tattooing in culture across time and is a summary of the work Clinton Sanders (2008 [1989]) did showing tattooing as a historically situated practice that is not new or foreign to civilization. His third point addresses the predominance of tattooing in Canada beyond that of other body projects (e.g., plastic surgery, piercing, foot binding, scarification, contortion, etc.). This may be his weakest argument, as there is little data to justify the claim that tattooing is the most frequent body project currently practiced in Canada. Regardless, he argues that the wide-spread acceptance of these practices is due to globalization and ease of access to other forms of culture via new technologies. Primarily citing the Internet as a source of easily accessible knowledge on the subject, Atkinson asserts that tattooing has come to be seen as a “tolerable” difference (Atkinson, 2003, pp. 147-150.). As a “tolerable difference” the deviant status of tattooing has been partially ameliorated. “Through
increased exposure to an assortment of cultural ideologies about bodies, ritual body practices, products to enhance bodily function and display, and homologies of body style, Canadians feel encouraged to be more tolerant of and willing to experiment with a full range of corporal experiences” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 154).

It isn’t until Atkinson addresses his fourth investigative point that he delves into his own research on tattoo enthusiasts, addressing the life of the tattoo enthusiast and how they go about choosing and acquiring their body modification. What is gleaned from his research is what one might expect from his prior discussion: tattoos are at once an intensely personal decision that reflect one’s own knowledge of greater social meanings (e.g., personal “otherness” and affiliation with outsider groups such as gangs), and are at once defined by the wearer and the larger social world’s understanding of that symbol. Thus the tattoo is not as much a simple modification of the body as much as a lived experience and identity (Atkinson, 2003, pp. 157-205). One particularly interesting aspect that Atkinson touches upon is the use of tattooing by females as a form of masculinising the self, thereby reclaiming social space from a practice that has been historically male dominated (e.g. sailors, biker gangs). Historically, women practicing body modification were so rare that until recently highly tattooed females were commodified in circus sideshow acts as the infamous “tattooed lady” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 35). This social reclamation is most manifest in tattooing’s newly evolved status as a “tolerated difference,” and its presence in the female population is much more widely accepted.

Finally, in reflecting upon tattooing’s changing status in society and altered social meanings, Atkinson cites sociological theory regarding habitus as part of personal figuration, which he considers an ideal conceptualization for understanding tattooing and body modification.
in general. Clearly, this is a reflection of greater trends in sociology brought about by Foucault, Goffman, Elias, Bourdieu, Butler and other feminist theorists. Modified individuals carefully manage the stigma of their change in the eyes of outsiders, and in doing so also negotiate the changing social habitus they exist within. As such, their identity as a modified person is a self-reflexive figuration. Atkinson’s affinity for habitus theory is therefore predicated on its ability to change with social context and is not a static image of body modification practices. He breaks habitus theory into four contributing elements that mutually influence one another: 1) figurational embeddedness, 2) figurational discourse, 3) lifestyle, and 4) biological characteristics (Atkinson, 2003, p. 262). We all have biological characteristics that influence our status and position in society. This affects our lifestyle, including for example, workplaces that frown upon modification as a rejection of anti-normative ways. The social embeddedness one has with their family, peers, and occupation strongly impacts one’s identity and value system, making it a strong factor in one’s decision to modify. These social boundaries presented by one’s lifestyle, embeddedness within certain value systems, and biological characteristics shape the discourse one has between internal desires and the external social world at large. Taken together, these four factors compose the habitus one has and how it changes over time through either biological change (disease), lifestyle change (career change), and/or social pressures (family and peer values).

While tattooing is the explicit focus of Atkinson’s text, he also makes reference to the social construction of body modification over place and time wherein the body is the material upon which a cultural text is written. There are several broad categories of body modification
that the above might be theoretically classified into: camouflaging, extending, adapting, and redefining.

1) **The most basic modifications are camouflaging** and is exemplified by fashion, and conceptions of style and hetero-normative beauty. Possibly the most important facet is the impermanence of these changes—they are no indelible marks to the body. Examples include: hair styles, makeup, binding, corseting without waste training, and other issues of aesthetic maintenance.

2) **Extending** modifications are slightly more permanent as they are aimed at overcoming some form of biological limitation, such as wearing a prosthesis, contacts, or other forms of interactive technology (Atkinson, 2003, p. 26).

3) **Adapting** modifications deal with moderate changes to the body to meet external constraints or expectations, be they physical (e.g., some form of disease that requires removal of a body part, such as a lumpectomy), or social (e.g., losing weight, cutting hair). The core of this type of modification is the “moral imperative” to be healthy beyond rather immediate and necessary medical measures (Atkinson, 2003, p. 26).

4) **Redesigning** is the most serious and permanent form of alteration and can include replacing joints, having a defibrillator implanted, wilfully tattooing, piercing, scarring, or “mutilating” the body as one so desires. This is the most dramatic form of modification as it not only invasive, painful, and emotionally trying, but also one that requires a reconceptualising of how one is constructed physically and sometimes socially.

The focus of this dissertation is Atkinson’s fourth category of redesigning modification because modifications of that nature are most related to negotiating identity and conceptions of
self (Adams, 2009; Atkinson, 2003; Benson, 2000; Califa, 1994; Chen, 2006; DeMello, 2000; Ferreira, 2009; Fisher, 2002; Jeffreys, 2000; Kosut, 2010; Langellier, 2001; Mifflin, 1997; Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005; V. Pitts, 2003; V. L. Pitts, 1998; Sanders, 2008 [1989]; Vale & Juno, 1989). This is due to the severity of the change in one’s physical countenance and the usual experience of extreme pain associated with its practice. Thus the impact of this type of body modification on the construction of one’s “figuration” is possibly more accessible in participant narratives than the subtle transformation brought about by more nuanced camouflaging activities such as putting on make-up.

Moreover, because of the severity of pain involved in this type of change I believe it warrants further exploration concerning how negotiation of pain may impact one’s somatic experience of the world. The classic notion of this is the ‘rite of passage’ that was prominent in many more formalized cultures that had coming of age rituals. Notable for carrying out this practice is the extensive body tattooing done by the Samoan’s marking the transition to adulthood. Often the practice is a ritual of multiple days and is a testament to a man’s to ability to persevere in the face of pain and challenge. These types of activities are noteworthy due to the transition in identity that occurs once one has endured them.

Key to Atkinson’s analysis of this final subset of body projects is his understanding that the fourth and final category of modification—redesigning—has frequently been deemed “deviant” behavior, unlike the other three more legitimizized categories. Similar like to Clinton Sanders (2008 [1989]), he calls upon sociologists to remove tattooing and body modifications that are not medically necessary from the polarizing nomenclature of “deviance.” Clinton Sanders’ work Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing, while representing one
of the first in-depth explorations of tattooing and body modification, may as well have been subtitled “In defence of tattooing, a study of why it is a normal part of the human experience.” Atkinson builds upon this perspective to argue that Western views of body modification as a deviant act must be understood from situated and historical perspectives. He claims that individuals modify primarily to show social association and create group identity. Only because disreputable groups such as circus acts, sailors, bikers, and outlaws were particularly associated with tattooing, piercing, scaring and modification in general, does the modern West have the association of such modifications with deviance (Atkinson, 2004, pp. 33-50). Taken outside this cultural context, to *not* modify the body would often have been historically abnormal and is well documented among Maoris and Mayans, and in Polynesian, Japanese and Chinese cultures.

An important discussion of tattooing and deviant social status is found in the preface to Sanders’ newly revised text *Customizing the Body* (2008 [1989]). Here he outlines how sociologists group deviance in the following three ways: 1) as a phenomena that causes some form of social harm, 2) as a literal deviation from the mean—a rarity, and 3) as something that is collectively seen as “bad” whether or not it affects the well-being of other members of society (Sanders, 2008 [1989], p. vii). It is these last two definitions of deviance he concerns himself with, as tattooing does not qualify under them. It is no longer a social rarity as it is estimated that as much as 24 percent of the American public between the ages of 18 and 50 are tattooed, and one in seven are pierced somewhere on the body other than the earlobe (Sanders, 2008 [1989], p. viii). Moreover, this increase in popularity reflects tattooing as well as piercing, as more widely acceptable behaviors. Thus it no longer qualifies as deviant under the third criterion, historically its major reason for inclusion as deviant (Atkinson, 2004, pp. 33-50). Despite the increasing
acceptance of tattooing and body modification in general, there are still the cultural vestiges of it being viewed as a questionable practice due to internalized medicalization wherein the health and state of the body are the moral responsibilities of its bearer (Turner, 1997).

Clinton Sanders’ work is particularly problematic as it is now outdated; there are statements contained within that no longer hold true. Sanders ignores the delineations in style that have become an important focus in “fine art tattooing.” For instance, both James Kern and Guy Aitchison, who are both referenced in Sander’s text, are acclaimed for their exceptionally rich colouring and heavy lines that still convey depth. In contrast, Amy Justen and Marie Brennan are well known for the use of delicate colours and fine line colour technique. Additionally, he does not discuss the headway made by female tattoo artists such as Karen Rose, one of the first and most prominent female tattoo artists, and Sanders was no longer researching when Amy Justen, Marie Brennan, or Buffy Lauer came to prominence and have significantly altered the place of women in the tattoo industry. Sanders was initially writing in the era of Don Hardy, one of the first fine art tattooists to bring tattooing from the realm of impulsive sailors into the realm of coveted art form. As Sanders’ book was initially written just as fine art tattooing was becoming publically known, much has changed and so has the place of tattooing in society. Claims of his such as high end tattoo artists refraining from tattooing socially inappropriate exposed areas, such as the hands or neck, are no longer true. Mostly this is due to the decrease in stigma surrounding tattooing. Other aspects of his text however are still accurate, such as fine art tattooists preferring custom work, rueing “flash” or “sketch” tattooing, and wanting their patrons to heavily weigh their decision before proceeding (Sanders, 2008 [1989]).
The most valuable part of Sanders’ text is found in the new edition’s epilogue. Most notably, he acknowledges that with the growing acceptance of tattoos, their use as identifiers of social deviance and difference is mitigated. “This means tattooing no longer is effective as a mechanism of conspicuous outrage and, in order to symbolically divide ‘us’ from ‘them,’ marginal, alienated, or unconventional members of the society must continue to find innovative ways to induce outrage” (Sanders, 2008 [1989], p. 187). With this, he makes reference to the Modern Primitive movement, the use of implants, and suspension practices.

It is no surprise that Sanders does not address plastic surgery, female fetishism, transgender modification, or other forms of body play that queer gender. While Sanders still does not discuss the place of women in tattooing beyond the female preference for traditional images of femininity (e.g., flowers, butterflies, unicorns) and their preferential selection of easily concealable locations—the hip, breast, and shoulder to mitigate the possible ramification of being labelled a “bad woman” (as contrasted to men who prefer more visible locations such as the forearm or bicep), the issue is at least finally mentioned (Sanders, 2008 [1989], p. 170).

Lastly, he admits that his text is not so much about the practice of tattooing as much as the transformation of tattooing into a “fine art form,” and the social perceptions associated with it at that time. Thus, he highlights that the purpose of his text was to show what factors were hindrances and what factors were bringing tattooing into the more socially acceptable status of “art.” Important factors that have hindered tattooing’s progress include its ability to be mass produced (“flash”), historical association with disreputable groups, use of an unconventional medium, and its lack of formal legitimization. This is due in large part to its difficult
collectorship as a fine art form—mostly because of its use of an unconventional medium that is hard to capture for appraisal in museum and academic settings—resulting in its lack of acceptance by legitimating agencies (e.g., academia and social elites). Moreover, this hasn’t been aggressively addressed by fine art tattoo artists because of their lack of official organization concerning their craft (Sanders, 2008 [1989], p. 156).

**Modification and Body Politics**

Victoria Pitts’ text *In The Flesh* (2003) is an overlooked gem in the body modification literature as it is one of the few to approach body modification from the sociological perspectives of feminism and postmodernism. While most of the text is sociological exegesis from a theoretical lens rather than a rich ethnographic narrative, it does thoroughly explore the use of body modification from the feminist perspective of “reclaiming” the body. This reclamation can be from prior physical abuse, sexual assault, or even dominant discourses on gender identity and beauty. She notes that the use of body modification to “reclaim” the body is limited in its applicability. First and foremost, too much modification of the body could become harmful, mutilating, and dangerous. Of course, in the process of re-evaluating modification as reclaiming, at what point modification becomes harmful, mutilating, or dangerous is of primary concern, and Pitts defers this examination to others (see Favazza (1996). Second, Pitts points out that body modification as a private practice of social resistance is limiting as the self is both private and public. Thus, if the self that is reclaimed is only private and not introduced into social discourse regarding one’s identity, it is limited in the extent to which it can actually impact one’s persona. Last is fetishism of the exotic and colonialist hunger for appropriating and commodifying such practices. In the act of reclaiming the body from dominant discourses on beauty, one also risks
objectification of their body as an exotic other to be surveilled (V. Pitts, 2003, p. 81). In recent years the undeniable increase in tattooing of youth, much of it not performed in an overtly ritualized manner, nor an investment in “fine art” tattooing, exemplifies cultural appropriation of the “exotic other” for those grasping at individuality in a post modern era where traditional structures imparting meaning and identity are more diffuse or lacking in social prominence and distinctiveness.

When discussing reclamation of bodies in In The Flesh, Victoria Pitts revisits a critique that the act of modification is mutilating (e.g. creating scars on a body dominantly socialized to be pristine), and/or an expression of patriarchy in its accidental reification of those structures. The radical feminist argument claims that in the act of reclaiming the female body from patriarchal notions of beauty and femininity, one is merely reinforcing the structures and differences that originally created such notions: “the fact that the women’s attempts to reclaim the body begin with their acknowledgements of the ways the body has already been inscribed for them without their consent, often through violence”(V. Pitts, 2003, p. 81). Antithetical resistance creates a socially constructed other that is a reverse image of the powers that initially created it, ultimately reinforcing the initial system (V. Pitts, 2003, pp. 49-54). Some feminists have argued that only the natural unadulterated female form is free and reclaiming the body via modification is a “false consciousness”(V. Pitts, 2003, p. 82). From this perspective, body modification is pathologized as mutilation of the female form, instead of utilization of morally questioned behaviors to create a new social construction of femininity and normative identity. However, radical feminist arguments neglect that in pathologization as an expression of mental illness in the US/West, it is relegating body modification to the realm of the unhealthy “other” which is
often ethnic, poor, or female—anything that is not male, white, economically superior, and sporting colonialist fervour—once again supporting the patriarchal dogma it seeks to oppose.

Pitts also explores the relationship between body modifications and the BDSM and queer communities where they were initially popularized. The queer and BDSM communities of the San Francisco Bay Area are ostensibly the primordial soup for much of modern body modification, as they were originally used here as speech acts to articulate counter cultural identities. Pitts argues that they were used specifically to draw parallels to other marginalized populations, namely tribal populations subject to Western colonization as well as to visibly “queer” the body, making it antithetical to white, hetero-normative discourses on the body (V. Pitts, 2003, p. 91). From this community grew the Modern Primitives, the bridge that brought the Bay Area BDSM and queer aesthetic into body modification and allowed for its growth into widespread popular culture (V. Pitts, 2003, p. 127). This relationship is important as both the LGBT-BDSM-queer culture and Modern Primitives use the body in their active resistance to normative standards.

Others have also commented on the resistance perspective of the Modern Primitives and have analysed them from a different viewpoint than Pitts’. Rosenblatt (1997) in particular takes a neo-Marxist perspective and frames the Modern Primitive movement as a reclaiming of “desire” from Western capitalism, wherein desire is often the drive behind consumerist identity. “In seeking to reconstitute desire as an antisocial, antimodern force, modern primitives attempt to harness for their own ends a force that the larger society encourages at every turn, and should they have any lasting effect on the larger society I suspect it will be because of this fact.” (Rosenblatt, 1997, p. 326) While Rosenblatt’s point is valid, his argument is more applicable to
the BDSM community, which actively endeavors to understand the body in new and nontraditional manners, namely through pain as an object of desire. Modern Primitives articulate a much more active focus on the spiritual practices that were civilized out of society, rather than on the pain itself as something to be desired (Vale & Juno, 1989). This is a subtle but important distinction, as Modern Primitivism’s focus on the spiritual is its defining feature, while unapologetic sensualism is BDSM’s defining feature. One factor that both factions agree upon is that body modification can be understood as an expression of control in a society where individuals may feel otherwise powerless (Califa, 1994, p. 248; Vale & Juno, 1989, p. 4).

“Accepting tattooing as a symptom in this context, it follows that the socially diseased body is suffering from a loss of agency due to the complex power of the state over the functioning of the body” (Fisher, 2002, p. 103).

In Leslie Heywood’s work Bodymakers there is a small but worthwhile section on the role of trauma in the place of body building practices. While bodybuilding is not part of the purview of modification to be explored in this project it has sometimes similar emotional motivations as outlined in the feminist perspectives of Pitts. Very simply, Heywood places female bodybuilding as a system of empowerment through its active rebuilding of a new body for those that have been violently dis-empowered and made passive victims; “The built, engineered body that science makes possible is the stage for compulsively reworking the original trauma and creating a body that is experienced as visible and present, unlike the feelings of erasure experienced by the abused body”(Heywood, 1998 loc.1934). As the result of abuse the female body is cast as passive, invisible and disempowered. However, in another section she references a man named Zane who builds to overcome perceived insecurities, “That muscular
growth is often motivated by a desire to overcome a sense of inferiority by armoring the body with a protective layer of muscle” (Heywood, 1998 loc. 816). In both cases the body is theorized as the site through which the layering of muscle is psychologically protective and restorative. What is problematic is that little of this text cites actual data or participants, unlike Pitts, and is mostly ungrounded theorizing from secondary texts or her own experiences regarding the construction of heteronormative masculinities and sometimes less heteronormative femininities. Explicitly she calls the female bodybuilder’s form monstrous for violating normative visions of femininity as soft, passive, and weak. Even when discussing violence and its relationship to motivating bodily changes she heavily genders her argument focusing on violence against women, an admittedly vulnerable population, and the perspective she herself is writing from. However, in low SES environments, as is historically typified by modification, the vulnerability transcends gender and is ubiquitously found throughout the small sample for this research. However, while this work is more grounded in participant data than some of its predecessors, it still owes its roots to those that tie the association of trauma to a reconstruction and reconceptualization of the body, e.g. the reclaiming narrative present in Pitts and reconstruction narrative of Heywood.

**Resistant Subcultures**

Utilization of body modification as a mechanism of resistance, wherein the modification itself represents a “speech act,” is merely the latest redefinition of resistance. Previous overtly resistant subcultures include: the punk music movement, Riot Grrls, rap subculture, Black Panthers, and LGBT-BDSM-Queer communities, and other integral identifiable segments of society that helped further the feminist, alternative sexuality, and racial equality agendas of the
liberal left, as well as the human rights movement at large. Body modification subculture is furthering an established body rights movement first truly articulated in abortion discourses of feminism and LGBT communities. Hence it isn’t surprising that one of the vectors of popularization of modification was through alternative sexual subcultures like BDSM (Myers, 1992; Romanienko, 2011). The underlying message of having rights to one’s body and the freedom to do with it as one will is an extension of the values these communities established and propounded, while having a uniquely distinct unifying behavior. While they may also be members of the LGBT-BDSM-Queer communities, ethnic minorities, or disenfranchised urban youth, body modifiers are redefining resistance via their own bodies.

Punk subculture has uniquely embraced body modification, particularly in the “cyber punk” realm which reflects on post-human notions of the body. They believe that through the appropriation of modern technology and its integration with the body, individuals can transcend normative notions of gender, race, and class. Much of the community once were, or actively are, “hackers”—technology fetishists who strongly believe freedom of information is a fundamental human right—and aficionados of science fiction literature such as Neuromancer (Gibson, 1984) or Snow Crash (Stephenson, 1992). This accounts in part for the fetishizing of the incorporation of modern technology with the human body (V. Pitts, 2003, pp. 151-156). Here, common body imagery includes sub-dermal implants that have technological uses to increase natural abilities, such as implanted computer chips or bionic eyes. It grew directly out of the intensely politically-aware punk rock movement as well as the extreme body modification culture that extensively utilize implants spurring imagination of those who would like to merge modern technologies with their physical bodies. They are acutely aware that through engaging in these practices, they
are appropriating elite knowledge from medical practitioners, using it in subversive manners, while articulating their own rights to their body (V. Pitts, 2003, pp. 180-181). Steve Haworth and Jesse Jarrell are main figures of this movement pioneering the implantation of magnets into the side of the ring finger.

At its inception: “The punk subculture, like every other youth culture, was constituted in a series of spectacular transformations of a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc. It was through these adapted forms that certain sections of predominantly working-class youth were able to restate their opposition to dominant values and institutions.” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 116) However, it has been almost 30 years since the punk subculture took root and British cultural studies took note. Authors of the CCCS documented this phenomenon and commented on the return of community through the punk rock/skinhead aesthetic, and its notable association with misogynistic and problem behaviors such as “paki-bashing” (J. Clarke, 1993, p. 102). Today, punk is well known for its mohawk aesthetic, heroin use, and antiestablishment ethos, making it anything but unique. Over time, its superficial stance as a rebellious identity has led both to its own commercialization and to a current self-reflexive state. “For tribes of contemporary people who might be called punk (and who often refuse to label themselves), their subculture is partly a revolt from the popular discourse of subculture, from what has become, in punk eyes, a commercialized form of sage, affected discontent—a series of consumed subjectivities, including pre-fabricated ‘Alternative’ looks” (Clark, 2003, p. 225).

Subcultures rebel against appropriation into general society to maintain their social space and alternative identity, however that means they must also guard against transients who appropriate. Thus there is a ubiquitous focus on insider and outsider status in the form of
“posers” and on demarcating them through stylistic means. Bondage gear, piercings, chains, dyed hair, and tattoos are all physical hurdles for the poser to learn how to utilize in their goal of demonstrating or performing authenticity (Hebdige, 1979, p. 115). Ultimately, the more extreme factors used, the more difficult is their temporary appropriation. Extensive tattooing is not only costly but painful, and something that is easily visible 24 hours a day. It cannot be easily taken off like a costume. Ironically, cyber punks’ focus on post-humanism and its ability to move past the constraints of the natural human body (post-humanism) might allow for the increase in “identity tourism” wherein people can pose as part of a subculture without permanently marking membership (V. Pitts, 2003, p. 181).

It is not only cyberpunks that have noted the inherent power that a corporeal change utilizing medical technology can have on identity. At its most basic understanding, because the construction of the self is a social act, and body image is an act of “self conscious” making, the body as an object and a facet of identity is therefore a shared construction amongst a group (Weiss, 1999). For instance those that have engaged in a “tissue economy” through the practice of organ transplantation find there is an overwhelming desire to know the character of their donor. In an effort to reconcile their new physical state of containing part of another person, something foreign and new to their body, individuals must do identity work to deal with their shared corporeal nature. Their physical state is now the outcome of larger social structures such as the medical institution, the transplant surgeons, and of course the donor—it is no longer a self with physical boundaries separating them from the outside world constructed by nature (Waldby, 2002). The individual must reflect on how their new physical status might alter how people see and interact with them, and thus adjust their sense of self to be in line with this new reality.
Emotional motivations

Most notably the emotional motivation for modifying the body is addressed in the form of self-harm. This is exemplified in cutting, which results in a scar, as a form of self-expression when other forms of expression fall short. An important factor in this is that this behavior is highly scrutinized as a problem behavior in the treatment of mental illness, i.e. depression, suicidality, Body integrity identity disorder, and Gender Identity Disorder. In the case of cutting, the focus is on the pain of the modification, not its final impact on one’s appearance, due to its role as a coping mechanism for something askew in their lives (Adler & Adler, 2011). Similar to notions of reclaiming other psycho-analysts attribute extensive modification not to suicidal behaviors but an effort to make themselves “at home” in a body that didn’t feel like their own due to abuse or some form of body identity disorder (Lemma, 2010). Here modification is still problematized because it is believed that modification, e.g. corporeal expression, would not be required if the client could adequately express themselves otherwise.

In this regard modification is not appreciated as a pro-social or healthy behavior as it is seen as a lesser, and highly problematic, form of expression. Even the most sympathetic of this perspective look at many forms of modification as a “morbid form of self-help” and self-mutilation—defined as “the deliberate destruction of alteration of one’s body tissue without conscious suicidal intent” (Favazza, 1996 p. xix). Favazza’s work is later echoed in Strong where once again body modification is couched in clinical terms such that it is non suicidal self injury (NSSI) (Strong, 1998). Both Favazza and Strong are major works and therefore had a significant influence on the discourse around self-harm and body modification such that it is only contentiously separated in later editions as late as 2011 of Favazza and even then it still classed
as NSSI. Others have gone so far as to say while there may be some cases where body
modification is a redirection of detrimental psychopathology that “In the large majority of cases,
BM are not related to any psychological or suicidal abnormalities. Therefore, any a priori
incrimination of individuals with BM should be avoided” (Stirn & Hinz, 2008, p. 332).

An important factor in most of these perspectives on modification is the importance of
how one uses modification to tell a narrative about who they are with their skin (Oksanen &
Turtiainen, 2005). There are several secondary factors that cannot be ignored when addressing
the impact of body modification on an individual’s identity and personal narrative. First is the
notion of being a “deviant” or social otherness. For example, “In eighteenth century France
criminals were branded, signifying the crimes they had committed, for example ‘V’ for ‘voleur’.
The English army tattooed bad characters ‘B.C.’, and deserters ‘D’ still at the end of the
nineteenth century, and tattooed number series were used in the concentration camps of the Third
Reich only a half century ago” (Falk, 1995, p. 97). More recently, in a 2008 Harris Poll of 2,302
US adults it was found that 27% of respondents thought those with tattoos were more likely to
engage in deviant behavior.

It is unrealistic to delve into the topic of body modification without anticipating this issue
of deviance and its regulation. Important questions informing this research are:

1) What are the lived experiences and narratives of modified individuals?

2) How does the individual embrace or reject normative standards of deviance both
in terms of how they conceive of their position in society and with their body?

In the regulation and social control of “deviant” activities there is overt disapproval through the
legal system. Hence deviant behavior is often designated in the more obvious forms of illegal
behavior, e.g. drug use and aggression. Second, deviant behavior is manifest in the regulation of bodies by the medical complex that regulates issues of sexual risk-taking and bodily modification as issues of physical and mental well-being (Turner, 2008). Moreover, historically those who have been under the thumb of nation-state regulation are more likely to have tattoos (ex: prison populations, military, and working class individuals) (Benson, 2000). However, as the social constructionist labeling perspective argues, there is no objective basis for moral designations applied to deviant behavior, and with the label unwittingly impact that person’s behavior with others.

To what degree modifiers can articulate their concerns of a larger conception of “rights to the body” is still to be seen, but it is an issue that does undergird these practices. Extensive body modification, while admittedly becoming more accepted in some enclaves, is most often constructed or understood as something unhealthy or sick by psychiatric perspectives, or even criminal because disreputable groups such as circus acts, sailors, bikers, and outlaws were particularly associated with tattooing, piercing, scarring and modification in general. Fundamentally, the modern West still has the underlying association of such modifications with deviance (Atkinson, 2004, pp. 33-50). Some individuals have been prosecuted for practicing medicine without a licence or held against their will under the “harm to self or others” rubric of commitment. This is particularly the case for individuals who engage in wilful amputation, but more commonly even those with genital alterations are held to a higher scrutiny by medical practitioners (Larratt, 2002). Thus, there is the question of whether those who have modified their body have felt increased scrutiny from legal, medical, and mental health professionals after disclosing their modification.
The literature provides several themes in the history of modification, and they become very informative in this exploration of contemporary modification practices. The first and strongest of these is the theme of stigma which is found in the ground-breaking work of Clinton Sanders. The second prominent theme is that body modification is part of the formation of a conscious self and narrative, sometimes in the form of a body project, and this can be seen in the work of Michael Atkinson and Victoria Pitts. As an extension of this there is an emotional component that motivates the nature and form of modification as Victoria Pitts and Leslie Heywood suggested. These emotional motivations can also be viewed through the lens of psychiatry which conflates issues of self-harm with body modification, a lens that is changing with modern times and is represented by Favazza, Strong and behavioural correlation studies.

More generally, a framing of the history of these problematic associations is found in the history of tattooing with sailors, criminals, and bikers. Margo DeMello showed that this practice is moving into the middle class as a fine art form challenging many of its negative associations, even though their presence in those realms persists (e.g. prison tattoos). These practices are still used to show social status in outsider communities which are wholly individual systems of meaning, as represented in social and body capital which are the gaining of status socially or in a modification profession through the acquisition of modifications. These themes in the substantive literature around modification foreshadow the analytical coding structure to come in the methods and analysis. Methods focus on an inductive approach trying to capture what it means to live as a modified individual knowing there are issues of stigma and changing social status due to the shift into the middle class.
SAMPLE

The individuals under examination are those that have previously had willful alteration their bodies in legitimated (e.g., tattooing in a city regulated studio) and non-legitimated environments (modifications done at home or non-industry regulated environments). Inclusion criteria to participate for an interview were as follows a) Has at least two types of modification of the four eligible classes: tattoo, piercing, scarification/branding, and suspension/hook pull, b) engaged in this practice in the past ten years, c) was willing to volunteer time to an interview for no formal compensation, and d) was 18 years of age or older. All results emerge out of ethnographic immersion in body modification worlds and counter culture scenes and through 20 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were collected from July 7th, 2013 to March 7th, 2014 in the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento. This resulted in 65 hours and 26 minutes of recorded material, which translated into 1987 pages (573,872 words) of transcribed material. The average interview was 3 hours and 16 minutes, but could range from just over 2 hours to just under 6 hours.

The sample of interviews consisted of 10 males and 10 females, and was predominantly white yet loosely followed 2010 census data of Bay Area racial demographics ("Bay Area Census-San Francisco Bay Area,"): 15 were white (2 of which were Hispanic, and 2 of which were Jewish), 2 were White and Native American, 1 was White and Asian, 1 was White and African American, and 1 was Asian. The median age was 34.4 with a range of 24 to 47. This sample was highly educated with 11 individuals possessing at least a Bachelor’s degree, 7 with some college or a two year degree, and only 2 that stopped with a high school diploma. The vast majority of the sample, 13 people, identified as currently “working class,” 2 identified as
currently “lower middle class,” 4 as currently “middle class,” and 1 as currently “upper-middle class.” In comparison, when they were asked about the class they were raised in only 4 identified themselves as coming from “poverty” or “working class,” 6 from “lower middle,” 5 from the “middle class,” and 5 from the “Upper middle class.” As this second category of raised class was over a much longer period of time (0-18 years of age) and had increased variability in individual answers what is reported here is the lowest class in their raised range. Additionally, three individuals volunteered a status of queer or homosexual.

All of the individuals in this sample were pierced and tattooed at a minimum, half of which had also practiced suspension or a hook pull, and 8 had also engaged in scarification/branding (for convenience scarification and branding are collapsed however they are distinct practices that both aim to achieve an aesthetic through the body’s ability to scar). Six of these people had practiced all of the categories being tracked for inclusion, meaning they were pierced, tattooed, scarred/branded, and had suspended or done a hook pull. Other items that were not being exclusively tracked that were also present in this sample were two individuals with silicone dermal implants (one with implants in the upper ears, and one with an implant in her finger), two individuals with split tongues, and one with a history of waist training via corsets. All but three of these people considered their self visibly modified such that anyone could easily see their tattoos, piercings, or scarification/brandings—and in most cases the idea of covering up was an impossibility. As part of the inclusion criteria, all of these individuals had also done some form of modification practice in the past 10 years, however in most cases these individuals were active in a modification practice. Even beyond a personal modification practices 7 of these
individuals earned income off of modification as a career (1 tattoo artist, 1 performance artist, and 5 piercers-two of which were also performance artists).

METHODS

The core of this project was a mixture of semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic immersion. Interviews were a lengthy process that involved a set of questions that were highly variable depending on the individual narrative. Coding of these interviews was a co-constructed venture both in the interview process and after at a follow-up with the participant, ultimately contextualized with ethnographic observations. During the interview I used active listening techniques at the end of a segment of narrative. At that time, I would try to state what I said and synthesize my understanding with some of the emergent codes. This had a twofold benefit of not only ensuring understanding of section of interview, but correction, elaboration and further probing. Then after the interview has been transcribed and coded in Atlas Ti 7 the participant was given a measure of control over the way their data was coded. Participants would discuss the available codes that were emergent or that they felt needed to be added. The final count of codes was 61 codes for interviews, several of which were provided by very insightful participants. Should they have felt there was something missing, they were to free to add it and further elaborate on certain ideas. They were also reminded that should they desire it they could remove parts of their narrative, but only one participant chose to. Only one participant was unable to complete a follow-up due to surgery and ongoing medical concerns. All information collected was approached from the grounded theory perspective wherein knowledge is inductive rather than deductive, thus highlighting the importance of triangulation with the participants themselves.
This methodology is in direct response to research that frequently dictates the truth of the subject, rather than allowing the subject to dictate their own truth through the researcher. As John Heron illustrated:

If research subjects do not exercise their right to self-determination with respect to research decision-making, and if they are required to produce behaviour according to a research protocol in which they have had no say, then they are not present in that behaviour as fully functioning, self-directed persons, but as conformist, other-directed subpersons. They are asked to acquiesce in being oppressed and disempowered by imposed values and norms. The research is thus not telling us anything at all about real human personhood. This is the case with traditional quantitative research. And while traditional qualitative research does seek to study people's own behaviour in their own settings, the authenticity of their acquiescence and of their behaviour in the study is compromised by the researchers' unilateral design of it (Heron, 1996, p. 22).

Considering that a guiding framework for this research is phenomenology—the study of consciousness and experience—there was a strong focus on trying to represent the perspective and meaning of the interviewee. Hence, the use of active listening to try and confirm and correct the interviewer’s understanding in the interview process. In fact, the participants are informed active listening techniques will be used and that is their opportunity to correct or further explain statements should I be misunderstanding their perspective. More importantly, is that after the interview is reviewed I return it to the interviewee to verify the coding and representation of their narrative. This is not to claim that this work is a fully co-operative research project, but a partial one, mostly due to practical issues of maintaining anonymity as much as possible. Therefore
discussions of each interview, coding, and presentation were kept at the individual level with the interviewee.

Much of this perspective is borne of the work of Norman Denzin’s work around post-colonial discourses. He particularly problematizes the role of the researcher when that researcher is an outsider making truth claims about an “other” population; “As agents of colonial power, Western scientists discovered, extracted, appropriated, commodified, and distributed knowledge about the indigenous other” (Denzin, 2005, p. 935). This colonialist power relationship remains largely intact in most scientific efforts where the researcher is appropriating data from a subject only to use it to their research ends in dictating truth. However, the effort to balance the power of the participant over the data is in tension with the presence of the researcher in the process. No researcher can be invisible in the data and its representation due to their role in the process of its creation (i.e. the social interaction or interview, construction of methodology, presentation, etc.). Thus, the added layer of being both participant and researcher aims to subvert this disproportionate power relationship that is historically placed around insider and outsider, researched and scientist, powerless and powerful in the framing of truth. This naturally extends itself further to a co-constructed interview narrative where the researcher acknowledges their role in the construction of the data as much as the subject. Moreover, if the researcher is also an “insider” of said population, as is the case here, the reporting and co-constructing the data hopefully becomes less exploitive.

This perspective and methodology is not without its drawbacks. Namely, some claim that it is not self-reflexive enough, not only on the position of the researcher but also on larger framing structures, in an effort to maintain the purity of the data (Fontana & Frey, 2005). That
through an effort to let the data and participants speak for themselves, this limits the academic and theoretical placement of data that is expected by many in the scientific traditions. However, as Denizen writes, and Heron similarly reminds: “The interpretations that are developed about a subject's life, however, must be understandable to the subject. If they are not, they are unacceptable” (Denzin, 1989, p. 65). In this work, tension abounds within myself who is both modified subject desiring to maintain the perspective of my fellow modified individuals, and researcher also trying to produce academic research. By constructing truths only known and understood by academics the data is useless, and equally if the data isn’t in some way academically placed it is useless. Others have identified these same tensions of being both academic and subject, but also that there are tensions between applying theory and representing the individual human experience (Plummer, 2005). Ken Plummer argues that these tensions often exist unexamined, such as in his own earlier work Telling Sexual Stories, and that the goal is not to reconcile or resolve them but to acknowledge these tensions. For him this was the juxtaposition of a humanist perspective—wherein focus is on the individual—with queer theory that he describes as the post-colonial treatment of gender. In one theoretical framework the subject is assumed male, white, Western, and individual, whereas in the other the subject is deconstructed, fluid, other, and put within historical context. However, it is in the messiness of these tensions, and the novel application of methodologies, through which qualitative research grows and breaks the cycle of traditional “zombie” methods that restrict rather than inform (Plummer, 2005, p. 358).

Thus, this project uses multiple methods of data collection to triangulate the coding structure and findings. One source is of course the in-depth interviews with co-constructed
coding, and the other source was time spent in the social milieu to document modification cultures. This involved attending suspension events, a Fakir piercing intensive, spending time at a tattoo shop (admittedly as the individual getting tattooed), and social events such as dinners or parties where the members of these interviews were present. It should be said at the outset that “body modification culture” is used as a convenient umbrella term as that is not an actual reality outside of the internet and BMEzine—a prominent internet magazine on the topic of body modification. The suspension group in this area is its own entity. Tattooing and piercing is a diffuse marker of counter culture identity and not something that is a unified culture unless one is in a shop or in the profession. The situation with piercing is similar however it has a formal professional structure thanks to the Association of Professional Piercers and nonprofits such as the Bay Area Piercers Group. As such there are many modification subcultures or scenes, but it is generally used as a marker of status in counter culture worlds.

This process is also complemented by my own, aka ‘the researcher’s’ experiences with body modification, and living as a modified individual, thus crossing certain knowledge barriers other researchers could not. Because modification is an individual and physical experience, focus on the perspective of those that have undergone it takes precedence and is most closely represented in a narrative of key thematic points that participants discussed about their experience. Approaches that merely draw upon “sound bites” of experience or employ a more detaching analytical framework add layers of distance from the actual phenomena. With the researcher and researched having shared experiences in varying forms, access to understanding of this practice is increased. Kay Inckle (2010) refers to this as “the position of embodiment” which allows for the researcher to experience “truths” that defy easy categorization,
understanding, and the “practical and moral concerns of representation.” More importantly, this provided a common touchstone in interviews where our stories were relatable. It was an important feature of their disclosure to also know what I had on my body and my associated story. As such there were both benefits and limitations to this: they would both reveal more to someone they felt shared their position, and also fall back on statements such as “You know how it is” or “You know what I am talking about” and therefore have to be prompted to be explicit for the purposed of the interview since it was assumed I could understand having lived through similar experiences.

Questions were of an ethnographic and phenomenological nature focusing on description, analysis and interpretation (appendix 1). While they were designed to be open-ended questions tailored to evoke a narrative response regarding subjective understandings of the cultures, and the participant’s experience, very few participants could actually provide a linear narrative. As a result all narratives that are described are summations from the interview experience with quotes that support major themes and findings. The content of interview questions focused on 1) personal background, 2) a life course personal narrative of all modifications and their social and emotional context 3) followed by questions of social status and discrimination by authority figures in mental health, medical, and legal situations and 5) larger theoretical discussion regarding the differences between mutilation vs modification and the implied legalities around the practice. Major thematic codes provided a structure through which to understand the important aspects of individual stories, and will therefore be highlighted in individual cases.
Recruitment

Recruitment was through a snowball sample method wherein potential interviewees were garnered through existing social contacts and networks. These individuals were then very generous and provided introductions to individuals who could possibly assist in the research process by providing interviews. An interesting aspect of this was that several participants vetted me, the researcher, through my personal social networks to see if I was worthy of hearing their story. As the modification community has been the subject of some written material on the part of academics there is an initial distrust of authors due to the strong negative effects they can have on legal battles. Academics are sometimes distanced, biased, furthering personal agendas, and ultimately dangerous should they not have a respect for the practices at hand. Equally, an academic author could benefit the community by showing these individuals as human and individuals’ rich in personal experience all from a legitimated stance of authority as vested by the institution that is academia. This is particularly salient in light of legalities that are contested over these practices. Personally, I have been in tattoo parlors and heard comments regarding the literature such as, “It had too much of a feminist agenda,” from a female tattoo artist. Additionally, I have heard “That person had no clue what they were talking about! They clearly aren’t part of the community, “or “Their work didn’t entirely make me want to retch.” This community is undoubtedly well read on what others have written on them. Hence, there was much vetting to be sure that I was not an outsider, and that I did not view these practices as a symptom of some form of pathology. There is no doubt that this project and the recruitment process was an expression of individual social capital and personal reputation. One participant went so far as to say that she never agreed to do TV shows and hated doing interviews, but solely
because it was me asking she would do it.

**Consent process**

Key informants were identified during the ethnographic immersion phase and from a “naturalist” ethnographic approach where existing membership and social networks were utilized to identify possible interviewees. Anyone who agreed to more formal participation vis-à-vis an interview was given an informed consent document to review and sign (Appendix 2). Should they decide at any time they no longer want to participate in the study they are free to request such status and will not contacted again. Additionally, at any time should an individual decide after agreeing to participate that this is not in their best interest they can request to not have any information regarding them used in the final results, and moreover that any records pertaining to them be destroyed.

**Safety measures**

Certain safety measures were in place regarding issues of mental health. Should an individual have indicated that they are a danger to themselves or others, a sheet containing mental health resources was available for the participant (Appendix 3). This information was taken directly from the Mental Health Association of San Francisco and was made available for participants to hand out if needed. At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded that questions are regarding their modification history, and any questions regarding their own behavior are asking about **PAST** events. Recordings were kept on a digital player that was then downloaded to a computer with password protection. Interview recordings were kept only on password protected computer, and transcripts had all identifying data removed (including some tattoo descriptions). All signed consent forms were kept in a locked storage space.
ANALYSIS

Codes

Of the total codes there were 59 that were substantively meaningful and the number of times it is used, and then the number of interviews it is found in, is listed in parenthesis after respectively:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Sub)cultural affiliation</td>
<td>(54; 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of modification</td>
<td>(48; 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addict/criminal stigma</td>
<td>(10; 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency/self-actualized/coming into your own</td>
<td>(42; 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altered state from mod</td>
<td>(27; 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchoring</td>
<td>(65; 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient-legitimating/cultural appropriation or dissemination</td>
<td>(31; 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDSM</td>
<td>(15; 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>(38; 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a &quot;badass&quot;</td>
<td>(30; 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break from cultural tradition/religion/family</td>
<td>(11; 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break up/divorce</td>
<td>(28; 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathartic/therapeutic</td>
<td>(50; 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claiming of sexuality</td>
<td>(25; 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claiming the body</td>
<td>(50; 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming of age</td>
<td>(45; 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemorative mod/loss</td>
<td>(38; 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>(14; 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>(40; 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defying societal assumptions of modified individuals</td>
<td>(17; 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment restrictions</td>
<td>(52; 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employerment/strength/confidence</td>
<td>(64; 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General stigma and judgment</td>
<td>(69; 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounding of self emotionally</td>
<td>(10; 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>(27; 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
<td>(16; 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legalities-rights to the body</td>
<td>(29; 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting go</td>
<td>(12; 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the physical self match the mental self</td>
<td>(26; 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marker of masculine power</td>
<td>(12; 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking closure</td>
<td>(10; 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modification as accomplishment</td>
<td>(22; 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modification community</td>
<td>(63; 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified career/earning mods</td>
<td>(31; 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutilation/self-harm</td>
<td>(30; 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal vs deviant/other/outsider</td>
<td>(93; 19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>(90; 20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pair or group bonding (73; 18)  
Partner stigma/judgment (2; 2)  
Passing vs. being visibly modified (21; 9)  
Peer pressure (5; 2)  
Protection (7; 5)  
Rejecting being a "real" adult (18; 9)  
Rite of passage (15; 9)  
Ritual (18; 7)  
Self-done mods (19; 11)  
Self-worth (10; 6)  
Social capital (54; 16)  
Spirituality/religious mod (24; 12)  
Stigma-legal (13; 9)  
Stigma-legal provider (19; 13)  
Stigma-medical provider (19; 13)  
Stigma-mental health related (11; 4)  
Testing boundaries (physically and socially) (30; 11)  
Time stamp (11; 7)  
Transcendence (8; 2)  
Trauma/abuse (27; 14)  
Whole/becoming unbroken/healing (49; 15)  

Codes were assessed for co-occurrence and none co-occurred at a rate that would indicated that they were capturing the same data. However, this is not to say that several codes didn’t seem to cluster together into a larger family.

Stigma:  
Addict/criminal stigma  
General stigma and judgment  
Partner stigma/judgment  
Sexual stigma (loose woman, sti’s, sexual deviant)  
Stigma-legal  
Stigma-medical provider  
Stigma-mental health related  
Normal vs deviant/other/outsider

Growth and emotional regulation:  
Agency/self-actualized/coming into your own  
Cathartic/therapeutic  
Empowerment/strength/confidence  
Whole/becoming unbroken/healing  
Testing boundaries (physically and socially)  
Self-worth  
Grounding of self emotionally
Passing vs. being visibly modified

Some of these codes are big enough on their own that they will be addressed individually. However, many codes have a strong relationship. For instance, “control” and “self-actualizing” are closely related where one is more of an internal sense of having agency and another is explicitly about expressing control over one’s circumstance. Many of these codes are very difficult to actually delineate and are closely related, yet not co-occurring at a high enough rate to warrant separation. Similarly “modification as accomplishment” is strongly related to “testing boundaries (physically and socially)” since sometimes that sense of accomplishment is an outcome of testing one’s boundaries and sometimes it isn’t. These are also closely related to the endurance of pain, empowerment, and “being a badass.” With so there being nearly 2000 pages of transcripts with interrelated codes, the following sections may at times seem more like a survey of the topic due to the sheer quantity of data to be reported.

Moving forward into the results I first map the social worlds of these overlapping communities, then I consider how legal and organizational structures influence their structure and is reflective of stigmatization. Then I report the ways in which some participants construct their body modification narratives as a process of healing in response to traumatizing experiences either in childhood or adulthood. After that, I present their comments on pain as a rite of passage and part of the process of modification that allows for the transitional change in status and healing. This then begs the section of what that change represents, or where it started, wherein I address the notions of social difference, “otherness,” and its role in the modification process. The final sections of this work outlines three main realms of stigma as well as a review of stigma literature. Those realms of explicit stigma inquiry were medical, mental health, and
legal based experience of stigma, with additional emergent areas on interpersonal or work related stigma. Finally, this work closes with the emergent finding of modification as beneficial social capital in counter culture worlds.

I start the results with a discussion of the modification communities as very little has been written on the formation and structure of the modification worlds in relation to one another, or how non-profit professional organizations play in their structuring. Very simply this is because most authors choose to look at one industry at a time. Thus there is a rich history of tattoos as a culture in its American Renaissance, and some from the Modern Primitives and Body Play publications about suspension and piercing communities. However few looked at these groups together and their inter-relatedness from a social worlds perspective. Other new areas of knowledge include the section of results on medical stigma for modified individuals. Clinton Sanders well covered the issues of legal stigma, and social stigma, Favazza covered psychological stigma, and Margo DeMello (in addition to Sanders) its growing acceptance outside of low socio-economic realms into an the middle class through high end custom tattoos. This is additive to those bodies of work but also opens a new field of inquiry regarding medical bias.

RESULTS

Inter-subjectivity Regarding Recruitment and Sample

Before delving into the meat of the codes and results there should be a bit of disclosure in regard to how inter-subjectivity impacted the results. The issue of inter-subjectivity is an interesting one as I am both participant and researcher. I am heavily modified in multiple ways, embedded in several counter-culture scenes, and a sociologist. I choose to write on the people
and activities of my day-to-day life, and it is arguably my primary filter of interpretation with academic training being an acquired lens. The degree of my embeddedness and closeness with my sample has yielded some expected interactions regarding disclosure. Firstly, there has been a large degree of disclosure and trust in interviews. I don’t think I would receive the quality of the data and the degree of soul-wrenching truth and disclosure if I had not been friends with interviewees first and foremost. They too had knowledge of me from outside the research experience. A select minority of this sample only came to know me through the interview process, and even then they vetted me through other social contacts. Many have cried in their interviews and talked at length about very sensitive personal matters at a level of trust that might take others weeks or months to achieve. On the flip side of this, because I am so embedded in these people’s lives I know their partners, and I know the people they delicately speak of in generalities during their interviews due to the emotional and social wreckage. One even commented he wasn’t sure if it hurt or helped that I was so close with his ex that he spoke of during his interview, however at the same time he confided after that he hadn’t spoken to anyone in such depth about the impact of that relationship ever. The limitation of this position is that I see the data from an insider position and find it difficult to take the outsider academic. I was long a member of modification and outsider communities and will likely remain a member of those social networks after the completion of this work. In contrast, my position in academia is one I acquired much later in life making it a secondary perspective, and one that has an as yet to be determined place in my future.

In particular, there is a major divide in the way academics, namely sociologists, talk about these social phenomena and the lay modification public—even a very educated
modification public. Undertaking this research has been a very concrete education in knowledge as culture. Specifically, the educated elite have the historical power of dictating truth to the masses, which does not necessarily reflect the understandings of the subjects under investigation. This research like much contemporary qualitative research, aims at reversing that directionality. This gross divide made many questions miss their mark and the issues anticipated or found important to my committee were in no way palpable or thought of by the individuals being interviewed. One participant even explicitly asked for me to “dumb down” my questions for non-academics, or “average people.” This is particularly troubling in light of the fact that the section of the modification world I was interacting with had a significant amount of university level education, if not graduate degrees. Several were anthropologists by trade, and this may also speak to disciplinary divides within academia. The very code of “social capital” was contributed by a participant, but at the same time it became clear the entire section on pain and its role in the modification practice was entirely misconstrued to get at the subjective experience of undergoing modification. Of course, the base vocabulary is different, none the less the understanding of the culture, values, or practices.

For instance, the very way in which academics think of and talk about social issues is very different from those within counter-culture. Sociology is the domain of race, class, and gender, all of which are “passé” and significantly less relevant once you have marked yourself as outside society and live in counter-culture. Hence the main theoretical realms that applied were those of deviance or outsider communities. Howard Becker of course is the most iconic of these literatures being one of the first to identify this issue wherein, “The rationales of deviant groups tend to contain a general repudiation of conventional moral rules, conventional institutions, and
the entire conventional world” (Becker, 1963, p. 39). This is also complemented by the perspective of the CCCS wherein these subcultures were more about taking space rather than reactions to larger social structures. Here by making their own values they create new social space, and many of the values are around autonomy, rights to the body, creative expression, and community. In this situation, being outside of dominant paradigm society now is a bigger feature of their narrative than other social issues, and the traditional concerns of race, class, and gender fall to a muted background noise in comparison.

Discussions of physical health status, age, race, class or gender were so rare to occur on their own that there were only two notable exceptions. These exceptions were the two chronic pain patients in the sample whose conditions are a dominant feature of their day to day lives. The minimal degree to which possible race or gender are mentioned are reported later, but not focused on heavily due to their lack of presence in the data. Generally, I would have to initiate those discussions with secondary probing questions for participants to comment on it as it was not a part of their perception—the dominant feature that was used to stigmatize them was their modified appearance, not an inherent trait. Those who had experienced racism or bias due to an inherent trait actually said that modification had just change the nature of the discrimination conversation. Instead of singling someone out because of a physical characteristic they were born with several commented that they were now singled out for how modified they were.

Lastly, I report most of the participant’s experiences without placing in a grander theoretical analysis and keep interpretation to a grounded theory and phenomenological manner. Readers are welcome to apply theories or interpretations to the data in an ‘open read,’ but to keep the understandings consistent with the participants I try to rely heavily on transcripts rather than
theorizing on them beyond the coding framework we agreed to. This is due in part to a protective instinct to not reframe their experience to suit my research needs—a disturbing trend throughout research outlined by post-colonial sociologists. Often participants provide vast information to researchers only to have it reframed into a vision that doesn’t necessarily apply at an individual level. Here, many participants had troubled pasts, which was a strong finding, however not all made it a major part of their narrative and for those their narrative is not reported as a part of the section dealing with trauma and repair. While their experience would have supported the theoretical framework that body modification can be a highly cathartic socially constructed symbol that individuals use to solidify social place and identity it would have been a distortion of their narrative to report it as a central issue when for them it is just a fact of their past that is no longer relevant. To avoid this perversion of their subjective experience most of the participant experiences are reported as raw transcripts with little explanation on my part. Their experience is theirs, and how they frame it is important; it is not something for the researcher to adjust to support a theory, particularly when that theory is about lived and social experiences. It should be evident in their words alone.

Communities

It is important to note the fact that there is no such thing as “the body modification community” as that is a social construct functioning as a convenient umbrella terms for research and internet sites BMEzine. Moreover, there are people that possess multiple modifications and not personally identify as part of the community. One participant actually commented that, “to be part of the people who do it, the people who come together to actually gather around claiming being that, it's much smaller than those who actually have body modifications.”(Michael; a full
roster of participants by pseudonym is available in Table 1) Within this sample alone, of
admittedly multiply and rather heavily modified individual, at least two people said they didn’t
identify with any form of modification community. Hence body modification is amorphous term
used to generally describe those that are modified, whereas the actually community is a smaller
subset that exists in the real world. In actual real world social interactions there are modification
communities that take shape around common personality characteristics, for instance the piercing
world attracts a different type of person than tattooing. However, the formal boundaries and
relationships of these communities are inextricable from legal, political, and organization
realities. Very broadly there is tattoo culture, piercing culture, suspension culture, scar culture,
and the underground scene of extreme or heavy modification. Most obviously there is a lot of
overlap through several of these, and at the same time each holds palpable distinction.

The nature of these worlds were topics that were asked about in interviews but also were
something I bore witness to as part of the ethnography. To which I should declare a difference in
access and entre. I had significantly more access to piercing and suspension worlds than to
almost anything else. While all of my participants were tattooed and pierced I had rather little
entree into the professional world of tattooing, unlike the professional world of piercing which
was extremely organized thanks to its formation around the APP. The formation of the APT
didn’t arrive until 1992, and by that time the history of tattoos and its culture had been long
standing in the US. Thus, the culture and professional networks of tattooing are not as influenced
by the nonprofit organization that helps legitimate them the same way the piercing community is.
Similarly, suspension and scarification/branding social groups are in the burgeoning phase of
formalizing and therefore the non-profit organization feature is still in its formative stages. Some
professionals were able to comment on the importance of these legitimating non-profits in the formation of each community:

International Suspension Alliance is starting, I guess, the conference of -- I don't know why that happened. Dallas Suscon last year was their first meeting then they met at APP and the scartists, their first meeting was at APP last year, where they got together. And they're not an organization and they're not considering doing an organization yet. It's interesting, because that is really like this is part of what community identification is now. So part of it is, from my perspective, is setting up an institution that can offer help, safety, legal contact with the greater communities, medical contact for the greater communities, so that you've got a reference point that offers a professional front. And that was another reason why the suspension, they're not necessarily professional, they don't want to make it professional, so they're structured a little bit differently. But it offers a professionalizing like a legitimate approach point for outsiders so that they're not just going to the first person they see, so it's someone that has some legitimacy. A voice. (Robert)

It would be unfair to say that this is a position held by all practitioners. Some cite the APP as a system of legitimation and control that is more of a financial concern for them than an actual marker of quality work:

And a lot of us can't afford to be APP members because of the type of remodel that would have to happen, and it's just ridiculous. And some of us just don't want to be. I don't want to be an APP member. I've got a lot of fucking years in this business and I don't need to be. That's just another form of saying I've made it to the top of the
mountain, you know what I'm saying, and you really haven't because you can be the shit -
- I know some shitty fucking piercers who are APP members. Horrible piercers who are
APP members. And it's only because of money, because they were able to afford that
shit.” (James)

As such the claim that the APP is a system that helps provide standards may not be as
accurate as saying they provide a social scaffolding for the industry to connect beyond a regional
level, and in some cases as an internal marker of financial and social status. Admittedly, the class
implications of this feature of the APP are somewhat humorous considering that piercing and
modification as an industry is rather working class and not known for high revenue. Margo
DeMello commented on the feature of class shift in tattooing, specifically that as tattooing
became more of a connoisseur art activity it became more legitimated and spread into the middle
class (DeMello, 2000). It is possible that this is an unintended consequence of the APP; the
creation of internal class lines and making a more legitimated front for middle class
dissemination of the practice much like custom fine art pieces in tattooing. It is in this latter
capacity that this same piercer commented that the APP also functioned as a force of segregation
within itself, reinforcing the notion of class disparity created by the APP. In the Bay Area, a
similar group was created called Bay Area Piercers Group wherein the organization of a non-
profit for local piercers allowed for increased communication and professional networking while
also allowing for a section of education outside of the larger APP structure without the financial
concerns. The main achievement of both is creating a social hub and community for
professionals to provide a legitimated communicative front for interaction with outside agencies
such as medical and state offices.
As suspension is at the brink of formal organization, they are also contending significantly with legal concerns that will be addressed later as those are often spearheaded by the namesake nonprofit. As such each community has tailored conventions, non-profit organizations, and iconic figures. This provides a clearer formal direction for each community. I will freely admit that while I had eight individuals who engage in scarification or branding, I had little access to its newly burgeoning structure such as the SCARCON or Scarwars. It is a rather small sector of the modification world and is on par in size with the “extreme” modification world. One individual cited heavy mod as just beyond suspension as suspension individuals were already tattooed, scarred, and pierced with many also sporting subdermal implants and split tongues more than other modification groups. I was offered entrée into heavy modification and underground surgery, but felt that it was such a small niche scene that for the purposes of this project, my current contacts were enough. Utilizing the social worlds map method popularized in grounded theory the below is a visual understanding of the relationship between these individual cultures that comprise the world of body modification (A. E. Clarke, 2005).
It is fair to say that tattooing as a practice and a culture is the largest culture surpassing in size that of piercing for popularity at this time. By the time this work is published, it is possible
that the popularity of tattooing might pass depending on the continued airing of shows such as Ink Master and LA Ink. Piercing however is the gateway into body modification, and is shown in this sample wherein 17 people were first pierced and then proceeded to tattooing, and more often than not ended with suspension when modification beyond tattooing was engaged in. This map in particular reflects the divides in social worlds as triangulated by professionals rather than consumers. Consumers rather equally partake in tattooing and piercing however the formal industries are more distinct.

**Table 1: Type of modification done and order of acquisition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Piercing</th>
<th>Tattooing</th>
<th>Scarification/Branding</th>
<th>Suspension/hook pull</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
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<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (4th)</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
<td>Yes (4th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (4th)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
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<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (4th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
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<tr>
<td>James</td>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
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<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (4th)</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Yes (2nd)</td>
<td>Yes (3rd)</td>
<td>Yes (1st)</td>
<td>Yes (4th)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Piercing and suspension share enough similarities to attract similar individuals at a professional and cultural level, while tattooing is decidedly different. This observation was outlined well by a practitioner and shop owner who employs both piercers and tattooists, and has engaged in all the practices outlined in the inclusion criteria:

[Suspension] attracts people not solely but many people are attracted to suspension that are real detailed, very detail-oriented, extremely detail-oriented, that really appreciate details and specificity and -- yeah, just really get into that. Piercing does that as well. Tattooing? The antithesis of that. And tattooing, it's like fucking pulling teeth to get people to want to learn like blood-borne pathogens or cross-contamination or universal precautions. Like a piercer, they go to sleep fantasizing about that stuff. There's a real fetishization of it... Like I said, again, to qualify, the tattooing community could care less. Just getting them to change their gloves can be an act of god. So very different. They're much more art focused and it attracts different personalities, which is -- that's where they're not the same communities. You can't talk about tattoo artists and piercers. In some ways, they're the antithesis personality-wise, especially who's attracted to it as a professional. I would say there's more similarities, personality similarities, between people that practice suspension and piercing, but there's also a lot more, like it's very rare that you will find a good piercer that becomes a good tattoo artist... It's frequent that you'll find a good piercer that is also a good hook thrower in the suspension arena. It's rare that you'll necessarily find someone who's a hook thrower who is necessarily a piercer. Like, you can be completely trained on hook throwing and not be a body piercer and not have any understanding of the anatomy or the logistics of that. But the
personalities between the two are very similar. Does that make sense? Then there's like the heavy bod-mod, which is its own thing. (Robert)

Extreme or heavy mods are a world unto themselves and are kept rather separate due to the questionable legal status for both professional and consumer. There is crossover with suspension, but those two worlds are distinct while conscious of each other as they are both contending with what rights individuals have to their own bodies. While not a category for inclusion in this project, two individuals had silicone subdermal implants that were carried out in black market settings, and two had split tongues, not to mention another practitioner who did tongue splitting on a colleague. Split tongues and subdermal implants are rapidly becoming more popular, and in some circles are not even considered an “extreme” modification while most of society would consider it as such. Nonetheless, it requires a specialized skill set that broaches surgical training and is under scrutiny for its legality. One participant commented in his interview that recent changes in Arkansas legislature were actually an outcome of his work splitting a tongue. This individual is a proponent of modification education after 20 plus years in the industry and frequently works with government agencies to help clarify legal issues around modification and said regarding the recent bill in Arkansas:

But branding's already legal in the state, so they could already do that. So what it came down to, and somehow in there tongue splitting didn't make the bill, that's how this all started. Because me, I had to split somebody's tongue in the industry, and another one in the studio got wind of it and turned it in to the health department, and then I got my hand slapped because I'm the one who helps everything over there and I can't be doing this stuff. And I was like it wasn't offered as a business, it was offered to [another
practitioner]-- yeah, it would have been claimed illegal, and I'm going to own that I did it, but I said I'm not trying to push for it to be a business and I just wanted you to know that, and they're like, ‘Don't do that no more.’ But that went up to the medical board, the medical board's the one that said all right, we need to talk about extreme body modification. However, the person who they're frowning on is the person who did it, is the person who was educating them on extreme body modification, so it's really kind of funny how that goes together. (Michael)

The inclusion of the medical board in this issue is particularly problematic as it is an expression of medical control of an act that is in no way intending to be “medicine.” This is not to insinuate this isn’t the jurisdiction of a local public health agency maintaining cleanliness. However, the inclusion of the medical board implies a contestation over restricted knowledge used in the splitting of a tongue that only those with a degree can practice, thus stigmatizing the practitioner for transgressing that knowledge boundary. However, these advanced modification are more practiced by non-medically trained providers, thus the expertise of practice is also found outside of legitimated realms.

Modification is a historically working class social venue where the presence of resources or formalized medical degrees is not common, as it is just not part of working class culture. It therefore undermines the authority and power of the medical institution if there are working class individuals utilizing restricted tools for their own means and learning how to wield them with skill—not at all in the service of medicine. This line of what a body modification practitioners can and cannot use or can or cannot say is something they are very aware of. They have to be
clear that they are not treating anyone and have to be careful of what they say to clientele for this very reason:

As long as we are not diagnosing something or trying to solve a problem with a medical issue, then we're okay. So implanting something into someone, you're not fixing an ailment of any kind. Now, if they have a problem with that implant that you put in and you try and fix that, now you're crossing that line. When people come in and have a problem with their piercing, it's infected, whatever, I have to really watch my wording. If it was my piercing, this is what I would do, or I suggest this, but I can't even say the word recommend, because again, that's something that doctors can do. Doctors can recommend prescriptions of things, stuff like that. I can't recommend someone take ibuprofen first while I'm piercing, because now I'm basically telling them here, use this medication for this ailment. I don't have that schooling and I don't have that ability and I don't have that registration with the state. So it's a real fine line on some of that stuff. (Noah)

What is made evident by this struggle is the social ownership of the body. For most of society the power to heal and address the body has been restricted to the “medical” umbrella. To have individuals outside that umbrella it pushes the boundaries of who has what right to do what to their body.

Legalities and rights to the body are issues all professionals deal with and are major political issues for the clear boundaries around different types of modification. If something is part of the tattoo world, then there are relatively few legal issues. Piercing as a practice and industry has slightly more legal issues, such as the use of sharps and whether a single point piercing is an a micro-dermal implant or not, but is still fairly set out and accepted as a
traditional modification. Scarification, branding, and suspension are just slight further out in terms of advancement and are still rife with legal issues, for instance suspension is a legal gray area depending on if it is done with a licensed piercer and in a sanctioned setting (e.g. shop). Heavy mods are of course highly problematic legally, and are considered home surgical procedures. There is no shop that offers them formally to the general public, and they are not accounted for in regulation. To have a magnetic implant, silicone implant, tongue splitting, or advanced genital modification one has to use back channels and social networks to find a practitioner. How this corresponds to the modification communities is that the legalities force a level of support and cohesion to provide a front and discursive interface. In terms of cohesion suspension is the highest, not only because they are under the highest public legal scrutiny currently, but also because it requires several people to make a suspension happen resulting in a bonding experience. Scarification and branding is a small world much like heavy mod where many people know each other but are relatively quiet and slowly becoming organized. Until they come under further legal regulation it is likely they will remain in their current slowly organizing state. One of the few benefits of this is that the modification community is becoming adept at the issues of naming and framing their practices in order to protect them from medical and state control.

Piercing has recently addressed the issues of single point piercings and delineating them from the world of heavy modification (e.g. things done with medical tools) in legal standards but illustrates the issue of naming in framing in regards to legalities:

We tried to frame that as single-point piercing like bring it under the piercing umbrella, don't do dermal punches, but all over YouTube it's dermal punches and scalpels and all
these other things. It can be done with a needle. Keep with a needle. Call it something that has a needle-friendly name, single-point piercing so you're creating this association that this is piercing, it will come under our protection, and we can make statements about it and we can minimize their fear perceptions because it's not scary. There's a difference between anchors and subdermal anchors, and that's why I say get anchors out of it. All they're hearing is anchors and they're thinking implants. Like, these are single-point piercings because they do actually operate differently. That's again where naming and framing comes from. We've already lost it because of YouTube on the anchors. They think they're like implants. Keep it something less scary for them. Single-point piercing. I ended up not really loving that name. And it will be where it will be. (Robert)

Suspension is in a constant battle with legal agencies and should be understood to be a vulnerable population. While suspension is becoming more widespread, it is still a very fringe practice and subject to unclear legal waters depending on the state in which it is practiced. For this reason they have to remain distinct from the often black market practices of heavy modification while attempting legitimization, again illustrating how legalities shape the formal boundaries of the community. For instance, without giving specifics the same individual also was part of a custody battle regarding a woman in the suspension community:

Q: So people have actually had their children taken away because they suspend?
A: That's one of the biggest character flaws they had just used against them to court. Yeah. This girl in Texas, honestly, I worked really hard on particularly this one case out of the three… They just gave her shared custodial rights in September, so the children still live with their father but she is able to see them every month, I don't remember what
time, if it's weekend or week -- I think it's a weekend. And they're going to re-push it again but not 'til March, for some reason. I don't know what that's about, if that's the soonest they could be seen or whatever. But she's trying to prove herself. However, the thing that's sad to her is that she has totally had to leave the suspension community and she's not allowed to suspend anymore. They have put rules on her to be able to see her children. So we think that's wrong. (Michael)

While not an explicitly illegal, suspension is something that is more than dubious from a mainstream perspective.

Even in California suspension is in a grey area due to whether it is done in a piercing shop or not and to oneself or another person:

In California? It's not legal or illegal. It falls in a gray area because if I'm technically doing it in an appropriate setting with a licensed piercer, then I could technically consider a hook a piece of jewelry. So in that sense, yes. However, if we're not in those situations, which we never are, almost never are, then technically it becomes a problem legally should somebody pursue, like if I wanted to sue somebody for piercing, whatever, something silly like that. In that sense, I guess it would be, if it's just black and white and if it's not legal then I guess, yeah, it would be illegal, but the -- yeah. I mean, technically it would be illegal. Yes. However, if I am performing them on myself, then it's okay.”(Samantha)

As a result of the legal grey area suspension exists within, the suspension community has a strong lent on positive presentation and cooperation with health departments and legal officials to head off any possible trouble. Partially as a response to this they are also a very close knit
group, resembling a family for each troupe, rather than participants of other modifications which are more loosely affiliated unless professionally linked. The other feature that accounts for the nature of suspension groups being very close knit is the additional feature that a performance requires not only the person suspending, but also a rigger, someone to watch for and clean up biohazards, and sometimes a gloved person just in case there is an accident and someone rips a hook and needs their whole body supported. In other words, it is the activity that bonds a group of participants meaning stronger social solidarity than someone procuring a sleeve tattoo by themselves with merely an artist working on them.

As one can see through the structure of legal rights around modification, these issues are part and parcel of community formalization. The communities form, grow more popular, then come to the attention of regulating and legitimating agencies, which then through their own claim to control of the health of the human body outline for others the lines of what they can do. As a response non-profit organizations form as a community scaffold and as a vector to interface with health and legal agencies once reaching a threshold of visibility and popularity. Theoretically this will end much like tattooing, which was once highly stigmatized and something that required social cohesion to defend against such issues, now is relatively socially acceptable and even on TV as part of the cultural zeitgeist.

Trauma and Repair

It is a regrettable fact that this sample is one that has experienced significant trauma and/or life stress. No questions were explicitly asked about trauma, but the stories were emergent and intertwined with the modifications themselves. Some stories were based around the trauma, and some the trauma was so far removed from their current personal narrative it was mentioned
as a footnote or casually after the interview. It was the mere fact that trauma was such a ubiquitous feature of these people’s lives that it soon become something I would note if it was shared. Most of the participants in this sample had some form of significant emotional hardship that was negotiated through their modification practice. To break it down numerically, which I am hesitant to do for fear of it being taken out of context, half of the participants in this study had been raised in abusive homes. This ranges from emotional, to physical, to sexual assault in their childhood. For many of these individuals, this was something that use body modification to helped heal from or repair. What was the most surprising issue of the traumatic histories is that everyone had some experience of this. Of the 20 interviews collected, the only one didn’t have obvious trauma in their life and instead had body issues due to years of problematic dental work. He had years of dental braces and his self-confidence had been shattered to such a point that he didn’t smile for most of his life and was terribly shy. As a result, his major modifications were a tongue splitting and a mouth tattoo to make that area into something he liked. On the mildest spectrum of emotional hardship a was divorce, clinical depression, and body issues with some of the most extreme being combat PTSD, serious debilitating chronic disease, death of a partner or immediate family member, childhood sexual assault or rape, and parents so violently abusive they broke bones or mutilated their own child. In no way is this to imply that clinical depression or body issues are mild by their nature. They are their own breed of psychological pain, however when compared to the stories of violent abuse and painful death that dominated this sample it was hard to put them in the same coding structure. It is out of this same complicated nature that it became apparent that the best way to illustrate the issue of trauma and more importantly its relationship to subsequent growth that those stories will be told in the context of the individual
and not in the framework of individual codes. In that regard, one might see the relationship of trauma to modifications rituals that resulted in claiming the body, empowerment, catharsis, testing of boundaries and anchoring of one’s identity that assisted in their healing process. The narratives below are not a complete catalogue of the participants’ modifications, but more frequently what they identified as their most meaningful modification. To address these issues from a broader coding structure would be too reductionistic for stories so delicate and unique. Hence, some of these examples are the stories in the words of the participant with little addition by myself, but others have more summary due to the disjointed telling of the stories during the interview.

**Sarah**

Sarah is one of the most impressive members of this sample. She is a tattoo artist of some acclaim, raised a daughter on her own all the while putting herself through undergrad and two masters degrees. She is forty years old, working class, and mixed Native American and white. In her spare time she donates her services to the Navajo reservation providing free alternative medicine. Her story is one of extremes. She was born into a large family of abject poverty; “I grew up as the sixth kid in a family of eight. I was born in a truck and my first home was a tent. And my first bed was a Kentucky Fried Chicken box.” It was par for the course for the women of her family to be single mothers and the men to end up in prison, except on the rare occasion they made it to the military. For most of her youth she was raised in a “cult” wherein she was subject to sexual abuse, as was her sister. She started being an on and off again run away at 12. When she was 14 she accidently became pregnant the first time she had intercourse, and her parents took her to have an abortion. That same year she was also on probation for a car theft, and soon
was a full time run away living on the street as a 9th grade drop out. At 17 she bore a daughter and was in a relationship with the father who was abusive physically and mentally from the pregnancy onward. At 19 she left the father. Through working up to five jobs she raised her daughter and put herself through her undergraduate degree. She proceeded to also “unschool”—a method of education focusing on student chosen activities—her daughter in a homeschool environment while also attaining her first master’s degree in cultural rhetoric and creative writing. This was followed by attaining a master’s degree in alternative medicine.

By any definition, this woman has defied odds and expectations and has achieved a higher degree of academic success than most. A key theme in this research is the use of body modification to repair psychological or emotional damage. With Sarah many of her tattoos are symbols of empowerment, and particularly female strength, and more generally functioned as a vector for articulation and expression of her identity-an important feature of repair from trauma that sometimes results in fractured identity. Much of her modification is put in a spiritual or ritual magic context utilizing systems of meaning around modification from antiquity. This is not an uncommon feature of heavily modified individuals. Ritual and spirituality oriented mods had to be a code unto themselves. Fakir Musafar was the first in the modern era to reframe modification in a spiritualist framework with Modern Primitives and even in his piercing intensives outlines the role of modifiers as “healers.” I have come to think of this spiritualistic framework as old world mental health practices. This does not mean it was a group or formal practice, and is in fact fairly individual and personal. Sarah is an example of this and explicitly links ritual and magic to her growth into body modification, but more importantly that it was a vector through which she coped and healed:
And I think in terms of my own experience, if I hadn't taken that into my own hands, my experience of being a woman starts from extremely early childhood, like pre-verbal experiences of having my body be really, really treated wrong. And these -- all these things about what it means to be a woman has always been really negative experiences, or hurtful, or painful, bad experiences, and all of this body mod stuff that I've done, while it hurts to get tattooed, it hurts to get a piercing, it hurts to go through these things, but at the same time I feel stronger and I feel more like I have -- I don't know, like some kind of agency in my body, like some kind of control over what happens to me and how I want to be and how I want to be viewed in this world. Because if I want to maintain what was originally kind of given to me, I would be basically like my oldest sister, who is a total mess. She can't even speak full sentences because she's used too many drugs her whole life. She's had all these kids. She has five kids and nine grandkids and all of her kids were molested by all her different boyfriends who then eventually tried to kill her and when he was put in prison and they were all on the stand and all this stuff came out about how he was molesting them and this is just one boyfriend of many, and her head is so fucked up, and she was actually being molested by the cult leader since she was 12 years old that's the bio dad of my little sister, and just all this shit just going and going like this could have been me. But I found some other way to deal with it. I find myself originating with the ritual magic that I'd done, did as a small child, and carrying on through with different forms of body modification and leading later into deep spirituality which has nothing to do with my body… it's almost like rape isn't a sexual experience, it's a violent experience. When guys rape somebody, it's not a sexual crime, it's a violent crime, to me, in my head,
the way that I process it. So when fucked-up shit happens to little kids and stuff, it's not as sexual […] My modifications are] more like reclaiming the physicality of my body, like reclaiming this as mine.

Modification is part of the process she used to deal with her lack of control over her situation and the deal with the trauma inflicted upon her. For this participant there were several prominent features: 1) she used modification to claim her body and express control over it, 2) beautify and empower herself, 3) anchor a sense of identity. Specifically with tattoos she was also able to “anchor” her identity and solidify a sense of who she was and moreover wanted to be (Sweetman, 1999). The symbology of her tattoos are rather blatant symbols of empowerment mostly regarding her femininity ranging from iconic myths of strong female figures (biblical women to amazons), alchemy symbols for the female states of maiden, mother, crone, and more generally to a throat tattoo showing her voice becoming manifest when as a child her voice was missing. Additionally, she anchored her sense of identity with tattoos paying homage to whatever heritage she could find for her family for both Celtic and Native American origins, as well as her current strong spiritual practice with mandalas. And lastly, she had cyborgs relating to her academic and intellectual interests along with a tattoo bonding her to a close friend. All of this started with self-done piercing, and notably were all done by herself as an expression of control and coming of age:

So the first stint was me, in my head, the way I processed it, was me trying to make a definition of a space between what is my body and what's not yours, to whoever it was, like my parents or my teachers or whatever, and just being like this is mine, this is me. And just seeing that line, I think it's definitely coming of age. It's like young teenager
time, there's that whole battle between the parents trying to control you and you trying to say no, I have ultimate control over my own body. And this was that, going through that. And finally, when I became a runaway, that's when it shifted, when I became a permanent runaway. Before I said I was living back and forth at my parents' house, and that was a different experience […] And that was kind of me claiming myself, I guess, as my own person... I wasn't thinking about looks, I wasn't thinking about cool, I wasn't thinking about social status. I was thinking about fuck you, this is mine, and I'm going to do whatever I want to do with my own body. And it was very important for me to go through that for multiple reasons, but reasons that still inform me to this day about how I feel about being a person and who I am.

This seems particularly salient in light of her physical boundaries being violated so young that in order to feel like she had some ownership of her body that she prolifically pierced from 12 to 14. She said at one point she had over 50 piercings and a shaved head. This was unique to the time she was still at home and identified the shift from claiming her body and expressing control to an effort in beautifying when she fully ran away at 14. She was clear to state that none of her body modification was done out of any forms of self-loathing, but more often than not to make herself feel better about herself and in the next phase “beautify” thus producing confidence and a sense of self-love:

And then it was like, after that shifted, it was like -- because before I didn't care if it made me like clinical ugly to society, and then I realized that I wanted to be beautiful to me. And so there was a big shift, a big shift after I ran away. Then it became like, okay, I want to have something beautiful to me, so to beautify myself, and it was more like
makeup, putting on makeup for people, or somebody getting a boob job, or something that helps you feel beautiful, makes you feel better.

As part and parcel to this sense of making herself beautiful was empowerment. The images she chose were particular mythological figures she strongly identified with that had the predominant traits of strength and femininity. All of these figures were of strong women, two tattoos in particular of a young woman from the Bible:

One of the things that I have is this, which is on my right forearm and it's an image [of a female historical figure] and she in this image is looking face to face -- which you don't see here, because I only put [her] -- face to face with [her male antagonist], who was the precursor to Jesus. And he was the prophet who was announcing the coming of [a savior]. And she is representing the old ways. Anyways, her stepfather was [a ruler] and he was married to her mom. He was also a pedophile and he had told her -- she was 16 -- he had told her that if she [had sex with him], that she could have up to half his kingdom. She could basically [have sex with] him and become his wife. And his mother was like, "No, no, no, don't do it, don't do it." And his favorite human on the whole planet was [this male antagonist] and he was coming telling of the coming of [savior]. He was foretelling this iconic all-eternal-love person. And [the ruler] was this terrible, sick person who was bloodthirsty. He welcomed this idea about this [savior] and he really loved [this male antagonist] and [she] could see something really beautiful in [him]. And she looked at him and she said, "You are the most beautiful person I have ever seen." And he thought, "You whore, I despise you, you little slut." And she was like, "Wait a minute, that's not what I was -- I'm not that. I was noticing that you're beautiful, that you're pronouncing
that love will be here. This is beautiful to me." And he's like, "No, you ugly demon." And she knew that [the ruler] was being a pedophile and she knew that he was an evil person and she knew that he adored [this male antagonist] and she was extremely pissed about the way that he misread her and the way that he didn't see what she was seeing, something beautiful. And so she [slept with the ruler] against her mother's will with [the ruler], and what she asked for -- he said you can have up to half my kingdom -- and she asked for the severed head of [the male antagonist] on a platter. And so this is like the last battle of the old ways and she's basically the main -- the only -- warrior at the last battle representing the old ways. Also I have another... there's also this one, which is her. This is one of my earliest tattoos. It's the first tattoo I tattooed on myself. This is one of my first tattoos, and it's [her] holding the severed head.

She later goes on to describe these myths as being something she called her spiritual heritage; figures she so identified with that she sees their myths as part of herself.

The aforementioned myth is only one segment of her tattoos regarding female empowerment, she similarly has an Amazonian female warrior and an alchemy symbol for the aspects of mother, maiden and crone. It is not hard to see in context of her background of childhood sexual assault and abuse and eventually fending for herself on the streets by the age of 14 that these tattoos were representations of the strength required to survive. These myths were allegories for her own stories and more importantly were inspirations for personal strength.

Another manifestation of her repair and contention with her past is a particularly meaningful and beautiful tattoo on her throat. She explained that as a part of her childhood she didn’t have a voice and literally could almost not speak. Even today she is still very soft spoken
and quiet, however as she grew she came to see the importance of the spoken word and particularly getting her voice back as a powerful thing. This tattoo was to articulate and show the importance of this movement from nearly mute to a more whole and healed individual:

A: I think that this tattoo is probably still my favorite tattoo and it's like it represents my voice.

Q: The [celestial phase]?

A: Uh-huh. It's not actually a [celestial phase]. They're all exactly the same size. They just look like they're [receding]. And this is what I was trying to go for, because it gets lighter and lighter, but that's because this is the physical. Because it starts in my physical body and it becomes ethereal as it comes out, because the power of the spoken word, releasing something into the ether, it doesn't mean it's less real just because it's ethereal. And also the power of the spoken word, I've really, in my own spirituality, have really investigated a lot in the ways that releasing a word or releasing a phrase into the ether, how much power that has and how powerful it can be, how we don't realize when we say things like "Why did I do that? I'm so stupid," that it's so devastating to our spirit and to ourselves and just trying to keep those things in line and I try to never, ever talk shit to myself because I know the power of those words. There's something magical about words or they wouldn't have -- all those cabalists wouldn't give a fuck about all that stuff if they weren't thinking about the release of the word from the physical body into the ether… this particular tattoo is directly talking about that. Bringing myself, showing my fullness of my whole self, and the fact that myself extends far beyond this physical body.
In particular she felt this tattoo articulated and gave manifestation to healing process and work she had done on herself. The tattoo in itself was never intentioned to produce anything, but to be part of the expressive process that demarcated her change in life from broken little girl to whole adult.

An interesting feature of her narrative is that she feels displaced in history. While not appearing Native American she feels she has no history or stories that were unique to her family and history. As poor dispossessed individuals of what she termed “white-ish” origin she feels that the dominant culture and namely white culture has taken what sense of place and self she would have culturally:

No. Genocide has fully taken effect. In my body, you can see the full effects of genocide. Somebody who has potentially olive skin and brown hair and brown eyes, definitely not Aryan in any way, but yet isn't accepted anywhere else. I have no stories. I have no grandparents. This is the stuff that actually I think about, and I think maybe there's something that I want to try to connect with on that level, and I think that that's actually a big part of my body modification and the reasons why I've chosen to do the things I've done, is to try to find some other connection […] I did big heritage searches and tried to figure out so I know my Celtic roots, I know my Celtic family name and stuff. I started getting Celtic knot work tattoos… So I got a big tattoo of an [bird] on my arm, a big [knot work bird].

The bird tattoos she possesses are a direct nod to Norse mythology and Odin in some attempt to find a history for herself. She noted that being born on a Navajo reservation, and even being welcomed and loved by them was qualitatively different than having a heritage with the tribe.
She would never get to be part of the rituals or learn sacred songs and her modification practices in some way try to give her something that is hers, not only a history, but stories that she can share and pass on. In this sense, she constructs a personal history and backstory to her identity that she otherwise wouldn’t have, as well as a constructed sense of herself as a beautiful and strong like the aforementioned mythological characters.

**Olivia**

Olivia is another story of resilience through hardship, as are many of the modification stories. She is a white female that is thirty two years of age who works for a creative company and is working class. Her story is one of a relatively normal upbringing. She is married with stable employment as an administrative assistant in a large tech related company. Her involvement with modification starts in her teens with piercing, wherein she had some insecurities around her body she addressed with modification. She had what she described as a certain level of body dysmorphia with certain body parts, such as her face or breasts, and felt she could make them more beautiful and increase her confidence with piercings:

The next college piercings were nipple piercings, and that was again a body-reclaiming piece but a very -- that one was a very big one for me, because all through high school, I was so displeased with my breasts that I figured I was just going to save up and get a breast lift because gravity's a bitch and I was a double-D by the end of high school and was deeply envious of all of my A-and-B-cup friends with anti-gravity tits. And I figured that someday I was just going to have to save up and get them hoisted and that maybe I would get them pierced then, because then I would like how they looked. And the decision to get them pierced with them in their natural state was a big one and I was very
unsure about it. And that one had much more of a coming of age piece for me. I was a very late sexual bloomer. And I need to put something on them that I really like in order to be even vaguely okay with them […] And it was something that felt sexy and that felt positive and I had never applied those thoughts to my body before.

However, the more important outcome of this early piercing practice was that she found modification as an attractive form of expression that provided a positive outcome on how she viewed herself. Very simply her early piercing endeavors laid the way for body modification as means to resolve internal distress.

Olivia’s main and most important modification is a large scarification piece on her chest in commemoration of her lost partner. She met her partner in their first year at college and it was actually Olivia’s first relationship. They were living together in a domestic partnership when Olivia’s partner suddenly and unexpectedly died of type I diabetes:

And then my partner died. So it was super, super unexpected. She had definitely continued to be semi-compliant with her care, not great but not terrible. She was probably taking worse care of herself than she admitted to folks, including me. She was not very forthcoming about her medical care. She liked to skip her doctors' appointments and not tell anyone. And so she died in her sleep when we were both 25 and I was the one who found her and it was really, really, really traumatic. And one of the pieces that made it so hard for the timing was that she and I had been about three months away from our seven-year anniversary and seven years had a weird special significance for me. I remembered hearing when I was younger, and I don't know if there's any actual scientific relevance to this now, but it imprinted in my head that over the course of seven years, all the cells in
your body regenerate. I remember hearing that. And I remember my mom telling me when I was younger that it was kind of a weird mystery that people didn't fully understand why scars didn't fade more. If all the cells are turning over, why is this regenerating as scar tissue and not as original tissue? And that was something that always stuck in my mind. And I really liked the idea that [my partner] and I would have been together for an entire regeneration of our physical selves, that every cell in our body would be different and we'd still chosen to be together […] And she died on November 12, 2006 and we would have made seven years on February 15, 2007. And when she died, I knew that I needed -- after I got through the initial month of drinking and smoking and being largely nonfunctional -- I knew that I needed to do something to mark it body art-wise, because the level of emotional impact that her death had caused for me was so massive and it was fucking with my head that there was no physical echo of that, that I felt so wholly changed as a person by the experience of that relationship and by the experience of her death that I needed it to be physically real on my body.

The mark she got to represent this was a scarification of a “swirly” design her partner used to draw in the margins of papers. With the aforementioned importance of scars she placed this design right over her heart such that everyone who met her could see it and it would help “keep her honest and telling her story.”

Similar to Sarah, the issue of ritual with modification as a cathartic healing process re-emerges as the setting under which this scarification was done was one of ritual with both Olivia’s two best friends present and her deceased partner’s best friends present:
I brought pictures of [my partner] and we tucked them into the ceiling tiles above the chair I was going to be laying down so I could see her face while she worked on me. And she let me sage the room and be a total hippie about the whole thing and it was really good. And the actual process of getting it done, I got more out of three hours on the table than I did out of three months of therapy. That was the first time I really cried about it because there was all of this panicky crying when [she] died. There was all of the this can't be real, kind of hyperventilating, like the tears are hardly coming, you're just -- it's just this can't be real, this can't be real, this can't be real, this can't be happening, but not the actual this has happened. I have lost this person who I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with. That part, I hadn't really let it all the way in. And so my two best friends, and also [her] two best friends, came with me to get it done… And what finally broke me was feeling that pain and the thought finally broke through in my head going, ‘Yeah, this hurts, but what hurts more is how much I miss her.’ And I remember turning my head to the woman cutting me and going, "I miss her so fucking much" and just dissolving into sobs and just crying and crying and crying. And she was really good and she didn't push me any further than that. She was like, ‘Okay, we're done. We're done for tonight. That's all we're going to do.' And my friends helped me and let me cry and I don't even smoke tobacco, and I went out and had a cigarette after that. And it was exactly what I needed. It was the physical manifestation of all that pain that I had been carrying since November.

The importance of ritual extends beyond the actual modification experience since as anyone who has ever received modification knows there is extensive aftercare rituals. Even at the
core action of washing and cleaning the wound several times a day one finds ritual punctuating the experience. She explained that every day she took two hot—to the point of almost scalding—showers a day to get the wound to stay open and scar correctly. This meant that Olivia had to care for herself in a way she otherwise wouldn’t have thought to in her grief:

A: It was I had done something and I now need to heal it. And I had something tangible to heal. I had a piece that needed my attention […] I gave myself something that I had to work with to heal. At that point, I had quit my job because I was too unstable to keep working. I was living off of money that [my partner]’s dad had given me… So I had enough money to pay the rent and buy groceries while I was way too fucked up to work. And if I hadn't had that, if I hadn't had that cutting to heal, I don't know that I would have had any reason to take a shower, to change my clothes, to wash my towels, to change the sheets. I had my cats, which was a tangible reason to get out of bed and take care of them, but taking care of myself wouldn't have been on my radar otherwise… But, yeah. Having the cutting was like this big glaring piece of self-care that I needed to get on.

Seven years later and married, the loss of her prior partner is still a major part of her personal narrative. Even at the six year mark after the death she felt it was important to mark the passage of time and growth from the event. To do this she added six single point piercings to her chest near the scar, which shortly rejected and left little bumps:

They're pretty fresh. But I think I will always have some kind of little divot, some kind of little bump where those are, and I'm glad. Six years was a really rough one for me and it was an important year to mark and it was an important year to have a ritual and it was an important -- I'm not sure I can describe it, really. It gave me something tangible. I guess
that's probably the best explanation for it, is the pieces of body art that I have that are related to [my partner]'s death or that have been related to how I'm processing healing that death as I go on in my life, is it's about making it tangible.

This particular modification also functioned to solidify understanding from future partners so they could comprehend the impact of this relationship. When she went in for this modification discussed below, she explained the motivation to the artists, yet felt she couldn’t do that with her current girlfriend,

And dealing with the impending six-year anniversary of [my prior partner]'s death and also feeling extraordinarily unsupported by the person who was supposedly my primary partner at the time, but who was, in actuality, very threatened by the memories and by the fact that I still have grief for something six years gone. And so I'm in there, talking to these piercers and telling them the story and explaining like yeah, I want these six anchors, I've got six years behind me, and this has been a hard year. And I walked out of there that day knowing that I had to break up with her, going okay, that's not how that should be. I should not be safer telling strangers at a piercing session than I am with telling my partner. That's not right and I can't keep doing that. And I broke up with her probably a week or two after that. And these anchors, the anchors are gone now. They lasted almost a year and I took them out just before the seventh anniversary of [my prior partner]'s death this year.

Ultimately this allowed her to meet her now wife who has had similar modifications for the loss of her mother to cancer. The fact that both of them had modifications around their grief and loss bonded them and are now married.
Daniel

Daniel is a thirty year old white male who is working class and a full time student. He was raised in an upper middle class household of severe dysfunction. As he put it:

My old man, he beat the ability to cry out of me at a very young age. It was about 15 years before I ever shed a fucking tear, and even then it was like a single tear here. I just couldn't make it go. I couldn't make it go. I thought there was something wrong with me. Turns out, there probably actually was something very wrong with me, if you can't fucking turn on a very basic emotion […] I'm not a kid now. But when I hit middle school, high school, and I started deferring into punk music and the culture, my old man from the Georgia military base, the altar boy, through middle school and high school the most words he ever exchanged to me usually were from behind fists being thrown at me, accompanied by him screaming faggot in my face.

Rather than address the issue of family dysfunction his parents made Daniel the ‘identified patient’ of the family and took him to therapists for his behavior problems. He was diagnosed with ADHD, and like many young children of higher socio-economic status, he was pathologized and treated with potent drugs and psychotherapy. Ultimately, this was ineffective and likely an incorrect diagnosis considering the profound amount of abuse in his family. As a result, this individual had a troubled youth wherein he had significant issues with drugs and spent a lot of time on the street while not being a formal runaway. Eventually he didn’t have to worry about getting away from his parents because they kicked him out for what they thought was drug use.
However, only weeks before getting kicked out for perceived drug related issues there had been a significant event around Daniel’s first tattoo. Daniel had experimented with body modification that was a self-done piercing and is easily seen as a coming of age activity and claiming the body from a controlling and abusive family vis-à-vis a genital piercing. Only a few years later did he get a home done tattoo he instantly regretted and knew to try to hide from his parents. It was only a matter of time before his brother spotted the tattoo he had failed to hide appropriately:

I'm sitting on the couch and he saw the tattoo. Because, you forget about them after they're there. You forget you have them. I find tattoos that I forgot about all the time. Goddamn it, why did I do that? So he goes, ‘I'm telling on you,’ because that was his big thing was snitching to get me in trouble because I was a bad kid. And I remember grabbing my little brother and being like, ‘Dude, do not tell Mom and Dad … it's not you getting me in trouble and being a dick, this is fucking bad. Do not let them know. Please, this will destroy shit.’ A couple weeks later, I'd be thrown out of the house. Not over this, but this a really interesting experience. So he tells my mom and instantly regrets telling her. And this is a very defining moment for the next several years of my relationship with my family. My mother takes me into her bathroom, was screaming bloody fucking murder. Like, by the ear and all that. She sticks my leg in her bathroom sink and she proceeds to take a fucking razor blade, the same type of box cutter that put the tattoo in, and begin to cut my fucking leg open. And she takes raw bleach and a fucking pumice stone and starts pouring raw bleach into this tattoo and scrubbing it with a pumice stone. I think we were there for about 45 minutes. And I was so fucking pissed and I was so
fucking -- thank God this is by [alias], my mom would fucking die if she knew this story was being told to anyone, but she shouldn't have done it. And I remember just the intense burning fucking hatred for my family at this point in time, which I would eventually come to grips with. But you want to talk about a rite of passage? Your mother is cutting open your stupid tattoo with a fucking razor blade and scrubbing you with bleach and a pumice stone. And I remember, I felt absolutely fucking nothing. I just stared her in the face. She couldn't look me in the eyes for about five years after that experience, probably because she felt fucking terrible. But this was when I was mastering my own fucking hatred. I remember I used to stare at her dead in the face. No reaction to anything she was doing to me. Blood and bleach. All she managed to do was turn the tattoo from black to fucking green. Didn't remove it. Didn't do anything. She sat there and raged, fucking mutilated her own fucking child, and then couldn't look me in the face for years. And I remember staring these daggers through her, just shaking my head, just kind of smiling. For me, that was a pinnacle moment in the sense that I was then disconnecting entirely from my parents. I would later be thrown out.”

It wasn't long after being thrown out and having an on and off again residence with his parents he hit rock bottom and requested assistance from a friend. What is unique about what he requested was that it wasn’t help from a legitimated agency, it was help of a personal spiritual nature to learn Reiki. It was through this practice and focus on spirituality and ritual that he came to engage in ritual piercing and suspension.

For this individual, suspension was the pinnacle of body modification and ritual. He had gone through piercing and tattooing, but suspension is an altogether different practice that for
many is contextualized in mythologies of mysticism and ancient rites. Due to his financially privileged upbringing he had been exposed to numerous cultures through travel. The iconic images of pierced and modified natives shaped his conception of modification as ritual and it was this image of suspension that was particularly important:

A: But anyhow, I guess, to sum it up, I feel it's one of our problems as a nation, it's one of our problems as a society specifically. It has nothing to do with the political end of it. It's just, I feel like, let's say like if you're Jewish in this country, you have this bar mitzvah, your bat mitzvah, and that's your coming of age, right? But for your, I don't know, agnostic or atheist-raised, fucking suburban fucking children, latch-key kids of the 'eighties, you know the drill, there is none of that. And then, even now, you see all the man children … and I still fucking play with toys and shit. Not saying I wouldn't play video games if I had a rite of passage as a child. I don't think that's the case, but I definitely feel that like taking an individual from the human perspective and going you are now a man, or you are now an adult, you are now an adult woman, I think it's key. I think it's important. I think it's been a part of society for so long. I think it's been a part of society, as far as society's concerned, a lot longer than it hasn't. That's as the world goes. And for me, seeing that image of this man on hooks and understanding that it was a ritual, it was of importance, that it was endured for a result at the end and that it was hard and that it was laborious for me. I remember being a kid, the way I'd eventually sum it up later is if my suburban whitey ass was to amount to anything, that this was the goal, that if I'm sitting here all soft and pink and privileged in the suburbs, my target for becoming
any kind of worldly, knowledgeable, experienced and worthwhile member of the human global community, that was my marker for it. If I could bring my mind and my body --

Q: When you say your marker, do you specifically mean modification or the ritual?

A: The ritual itself. Like, if I could bring myself to endure this at least once and get through it, then in my mind I'd become something that was worthwhile. I had found my ritual. I had done, I had proven to myself that the mind and body are one and separate... It was a lot of training to be able to hang on the hooks. It became my marker. If I ever find myself doing this, I've done well.

His goal was to do his first flesh hook suspension by his 25th birthday, and almost to the exact day that is what he did:

And I do my first suspension and what I will always say about it to anyone who asks, it is just slowly getting off the ground, and getting off the ground, and feeling it, kind of pulling on the hooks and being attached. The human mind is funny. So it's like getting up on my toes -- and I know, and I'm aware, that all of my weight, because I'm sliding on my toes, and my toes are clinging to the ground, like fighting for it -- all of my understanding, I know that I'm up, and that my weight is up. And the hardest thing about suspension that I learned at this point in time is my weight is up, and I'm like, "Okay, lift me up," and he goes, "Dude, you're up." I'm like, "No, pull me up." He's like, "No. You're up, dude." I look at my feet and they're just kind of sliding in a couple of inches of space and I lift up one foot and I go like one foot up and one foot down and this was, I mean, just the coolest fucking, scariest moment on earth. And it's really not that big of a deal. Deep breath and I'm up. And I'm literally off the ground. And I remember just fighting
and fighting and this anchor of human understanding of the way the world works and your body and just getting it to that point where everything fucking changes. Boom. That second toe comes up and I feel like inches above the ground and just the sensation, just every fucking possible emotion and feeling in your body that is good and is right and -- and I start swinging and I get a little push and I get to the momentum where I get my feet up on the edge of my friend's couch and I run across the back of the couch and I'm swinging through the room. I'm like fucking 10, 15 feet in the air. Fucking Godspeed You Black Emperor is playing in the background. I've got my playlist. I'm doing it. And fucking I swung around for like a half hour, just left alone and eyes closed, just feeling it, soaking in everything. And I remember breathing and just feeling the membranes separate. Just boom, my skin just going up above my head and just hanging in this bag of flesh, this feeling. I went from all this very aware pain to that separation when I just breathe and I felt the membranes separate and I dropped like in my bag of skin, which is a huge metaphor to myself. And just all the sudden the pain just spreads throughout everything and it goes from these fine points of infliction to this warm, just lovely, like no sensation at all. It's like a sunburn. Just this feeling of bleed out through the body. It's very surreal. And I swing around for a half hour and I could have stayed up longer, but it was like I needed -- I wanted to process. And so after a while we're done and they lower me down and I'm just not even on the ground yet and she lowers me down and I just get on to my stomach and I just lay flat out, as low as I could get to the ground. And my friend's like, "How was it?" And I'm like just shaking with fucking, this pure fucking bliss, and just pride and self-love. And I said to her, the first words out of my mouth after
doing my first suspension, she says, ‘How was it? How are you?’ And I smiled and I looked her in the face and I said, ‘I put back pieces of myself I never knew were missing.’ And at that moment, I realized that there is no therapy, there is no relationship, no drug, no anything that could have ever given me what I got from that moment... And this put me in my body and it put everything back together, like all the damage, like shit with my family didn't matter, like perspective of myself that had been so skewed by society was completely irrelevant. And it was the greatest day of my life. It was the first day of my life. And I spent years actually saying I am two years old, I am three years old. I am a new human being [...] I am not the person I was when I went up. I am a person that I was before life trauma. Like I said, I put back pieces I never knew were missing. I had become whole. Had I not done that, I would have never realized that I was just moving through life, that I was never whole. This void that I had been trying to fill with drugs and other relationships, it was definitely a void but it can only be filled by putting back those pieces that were missing, that childhood trauma had taken from me before I was even aware that they were there, that suburban latchkey parenting had stifled out of me, because how I was presented to the world was reflective on someone else. Getting all that back, that was definitely an accomplishment. That was everything [...] The suspension is therapy. The suspension, maybe it's become that way because of the emphasis and the importance that I put on it for so long, that I use that as a marker into my own rite of passage. Like, I can say that I am a man in society or someone's society, whoever's society, even if it doesn't exist anymore. But all in all, if I can get there, I can do anything, and that was the realization that I put back pieces I never knew were
missing, that I had become a whole human being again, and there's so much written about that, so much spoken about that in many cultures, in many thoughts, to have that experience 15 minutes down the fucking road from here in a warehouse a few years ago. It's huge.

Currently, this individual is part of a performance group that includes suspension in some of their work. Through his continued practice of suspension he noticed one additional benefit:

And I was talking about ADHD. The thing that I get from suspension is it fucking quiets everything...It turns it off. And this is the only thing that's ever done it. For about four or five months, one suspension will give me inner peace like nobody's business. And it turns off my head. It's not fucking like the prop of a fucking airplane, just constantly beating in my brain. It stops it. And the first time that happened, when I realized a couple of days later, it shut me up inside.

The actual post effects of suspension are varied such that some people have this calming effect while others have even coined the term Post Suspension Depression. One participant actually commented that she got it so routinely as a rebound from the altered state she had with suspension that she had an aftercare sequence for the days following a performance. None the less the analogy of modification as a “tool kit” or emotional tool set wherein one better learns to deal with their emotions and process their emotions was present in a minimum of five narratives. Should anyone doubt how far he has come as an individual it should be known that this person has moved well beyond his past and lives with his fiancé, is completing a degree in biochemistry, expecting their first child, and for a lot of this he credits the interplay of modification and self-discovery:
Before I started doing this, before I started modifying, I was a very shaped and broken and brainwashed individual well on my way to fucking like fucking white privileged suburban ignorance. That's real talk, real fucking talk right there. But certain key things had happened, like my exposure to New Guinea tribesmen in photographs and seeing the world. And there's something about being 10 years old and standing in line at the TM in Harari, Africa and Zimbabwe for your weekly loaf of bread at the age of fucking 10, or going to Cairo, Egypt and standing at the museum and realizing that every patch of grass you see in Egypt is gated and you cannot step on the grass and there are clumps of fucking larger grass, and you go what are those? And everyone explains to you every time that those are surface-to-air missiles and they're in the lawns of the mosques and they're in the lawns of this or you go to the pigeon market at Cairo and you're fucking 10 and a half and you see children essentially being sold and you see all kinds of shit. You see that at that young age and then you come back and you go to your house in San Ramon and you just look at the world from the outside. And you luck out, because maybe you're smarter than most. Maybe you just have a better perspective. Maybe you talk too much in your fucking head and maybe your need to disseminate information with both sides of the brain at a constant, your desire to understand how and why everything works and why that outcome is there and now how can it be affected, how can it be changed, is it fucking set in stone or is it fucking subject to change? Maybe that's why I've gotten lucky but before the mod and before a lot of those key experiences yeah, absolutely, abso-fucking-lutely, I could be sitting in the suburbs being ignorantly homophobic and slightly racist and fucking have done my college, gone and jumped on whatever fucking
shit, maybe taken my old man's fucking company when it still had money, maybe, yeah, I could have done that, but fuck that. I'm rich in knowledge and character. The modification just came with the self-discovery. It helped. It gave me fucking tools. It made me feel powerful to myself.

Jacob

Jacob is a white 34 year-old man with a successful career in the tech industry of the Bay Area. His story is one of a positive and loving family, a degree in anthropology, and stable career in the tech industry. For him body modification, while a fascination since his early teens with exposure to *Body Play*, didn’t become an active and meaningful part of his life until later. He mostly engaged in piercing and didn’t attempt more advanced practices like suspension or tattooing until his late 20’s and early 30’s, and like several others he frames modification in ritual:

> It was the beginning of, I think, that ritual process. Getting the guiche was the beginning of like okay, this is good, this is where I'm beginning my transformation into getting more involved with body modification. Before, it was kind of a here and there, sort of like a joke thing. Not joke, but a light hobby. With the guiche, I was saying I'm choosing to be more modified. This was the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

His story of meaningful modifications became prominent around his divorce, and for that year he used modification to help construct who he wanted to be.

The beginning of what he termed his ‘ritual year’ of reconstruction post-divorce started with a frenulum piercing, and ultimately ended with his first suspension.
A: And then a few years ago I broke up with my wife and as part of that, it caused a lot of soul-searching and trying to figure out who I was at the time and reconstructing kind of who I was, because at that point my whole future had this particular plan, and that was ending. I was starting to question a whole number of things about myself. And I noted to myself to realize that when I go through breakups and emotional times with that, I tend to distract myself with sex. I decided I'm not going to do that, so I went to one of Fakir's workshops. Every six, eight weeks or so he has a workshop in San Francisco where he teaches piercers how to perform various piercings and on the weekend is the practical bit. I went in with the intention of having Fakir himself perform one of the advanced piercings on me.

Q: Which piercing?

A: My frenulum. So at the end of the class, the beginning of the demonstration period, he had some volunteers come in and I was a model for him demonstrating how to perform a frenulum piercing, which was the beginning of a ritual. I wasn't fully aware of what it was at the time, but as soon as that happened I was like this explains why I was behaving in certain ways, where I was ritually removing my penis from active use because I wanted something to physically heal externally so that I could have closure on what was going on internally, and at that time that physically would heal was the bare beginning of when I felt I'd be more healed internally […] I wanted to impose upon myself a temporary celibacy, so by modifying my penis in such a way that it would not be usable for that purpose for at least a month or two gave me a very clear way to -- not have an excuse, but have a reason to not have sex with people, because I did not want to follow
the patterns of just random sexual encounters with people post-divorce as a coping mechanism or distraction. I know it's symbolic to know that given my druthers, that might have been something I would choose otherwise, so this is a conscious way to help me heal in a positive manner, have some soul-searching, have some self-reflection time. So it's a way to kind of reclaim who I am and heal in a healthy, solo context to myself [...] So as a way to recontextualize who I was after the divorce -- I mean, the whole future I had planned for the next few decades was no longer relevant -- so what do you do with that? That's a big question. So the tool set I chose to participate with and chose to help me heal was one that physically involved my body literally healing as an intentional choice to not injure myself, but to go through something that did have an invasive physical aspect as a kind of a way to -- the piercing itself was a metaphor for what I was going through. A temporary, methodical piercing is not permanent damage to myself. It's not a self-destructive aspect. But the piercing was a way to remove my penis from sexual activity that would then allow me to be a better person afterwards, because the emotional damage I was going through from the divorce, I wouldn't say I was a very happy person inside, understandably. I probably would not have been a very good boyfriend if I had a partner at that time. So I chose to make that not an issue. I am alone, I am healing in a literal and a physical sense as that whole period -- I'm rambling. I had the whole period take on a literal and symbolic aspect of healing.”

That same year when the divorce papers were finalized he did his first suspension. The above piercing was the marker of the start of that healing and the suspension was more obviously a marker of closure:
With the first suspension, it was definitely kind of a way to -- the physical pain of the suspension was there to be a metaphor. And as I was going through that physical pain, I was cleansing myself of the emotional pain that I was going through from the divorce and that was within three or so months of the separation. Three months was the frenulum piercing. So actually, [my first suspension] was a full year after the separation. It was on the anniversary, which also was when the paperwork went through. That's right. That's how the timing worked out. So the birthday, my first suspension was a year after separation, which is also right when the paperwork was finalized. So the intention when I had the first suspension was ‘it's over, it's done.’ This is going to be a new chapter, something I've wanted to accomplish for a long time with this suspension, and also marking the closing of the separation. And it was an arbitrary barrier. I mean, I'm still, a couple of years later, still not free of that life change, because I didn't want to split. Not to say I want to be with her now. That's a totally separate issue. But the change and what that meant at the time. One sub-thought, one subtext of that was with the divorce, I felt that there was a lot of my choice being removed. I didn't have control over a lot of those actions... There was a lot of points where I was out of control of the situation. I felt I was out of control. I was, actually. Control was not mine... I was in control of myself. I was not in control of the situation, because partially, with a relationship, it's a collaboration, and if it's not a parallel point then there's going to be strife and disagreements and all that. And that's kind of where we were. And I was also going through issues at my job at the same time, where I was also feeling with my employer at the time there was a similar disconnect, there was a similar amount of not being consulted, not being appraised of
changes, of kind of being taken for granted. So there's a heavy similarity between work and that relationship. They both, independent of each other, closed within six months of each other, and over that year I changed relationship status, changed work status, moved. So that year was a lot about changes. And it was the next birthday when I finally did my first suspension. So that whole point of conquering my fears, of looking at what I am doing, who am I, what can I do, what can I accomplish? That's the intention for the first. The intention for the first suspension was definitely to conquer those fears -- line them up, knock them down, talk to myself, fuck you, I'm in control of myself.

In addition to marking closure and important feature of this practice was testing his boundaries and challenging himself. Thus, by overcoming this fear of a challenging modification he created a sense of strength and power, where before he felt a lack of control and powerlessness:

The challenging of one's own fears, the sensation that you were cringing at earlier, the knowledge that oh my god, this is going to suck, and then choosing to go through it and choosing to conquer it, and then coming through the other side and saying well, hell, if I could do that, what can't I do? And that's something that I can choose to go over and over and over again, because it's still going to hurt. It's going to be the same challenge every single time. What it comes down to is more what's going on inside my head for other factors -- if I'm having a bad day, if I'm having a difficult time with work or with partners or whatever, that construct, that setting, that group of people that I'm with can make or break everything else. But for me, the knowledge, the accomplishment, the personal victories that I've gone through with my choice of body modifications, I think, are speaking to kind of that question that you have of the sense of self, the changing. If
anything, I think of my thirties as finally coming around to acting on those, because through my teens, through my twenties, there was a bit of that where I was saying I want to try suspension, but it scares me too much. It's oh my god, I don't know if I could. And finally, in my thirties, post-divorce, I'm like you know what? Fuck that. I'm going to do it. Threw down the gauntlet myself. Personal challenge. Personal way to prove to myself that, you know what? It's going to hurt. That's fine. But you know what? I'm going to do it. So the sense of accomplishment, the sense of personal victory. Nothing marked. Nothing paradigm-shifting. It's not like I have a different personality after playing with suspensions and piercing and tattooing. It's more of my reasons to not do it don't apply anymore because I've chosen to address whatever it was that was causing me that fear and I definitely feel happier with the knowledge that I can do that, that I can challenge myself like that.

Jessie

Jessie is a married white 33 year-old female completing her master’s degree in social work. In her past she was subject to much family dysfunction and emotional abuse. She was very lucky to evade any physical abuse, but the significant psychological abuse was enough that to this very day she fears any interaction from her step-father. She has gone to great lengths to get him out of her life. As a teen she was one of the three in this sample that admitted to cutting prior to engaging in modification:

When I was a teenager I had a lot of pain, I had a lot of suffering, and I was not really allowed to express it. And so the way that I coped with it for years was that I would hurt myself. I would cut myself. And when I did that, I would remember each injury and what
it was connected with. And it was significant for me because I could take that map of scars and tell somebody about each person that each scar was connected with and how I had been hurt, and that each one of those scars was a reminder about how I did not want to be hurt the same way again. And so the [medical symbol tattoo] had kind of a similar flavor to it. It was really like hey, you know what? Don't do this to yourself anymore. Don't let this happen again. And I stopped cutting after maybe my second or third tattoo, but I never really used tattooing in quite the same way. Even though it was cathartic in a sort of similar way, I never went out and felt the need to get tattooing or piercing done in the heat of the moment when I was upset the way that I had done when I was a cutter… in the past when I claimed my body, I claimed my body a lot against my stepdad… And the way that I used that was that he hurt me. He hurt me. And my claiming of my body at that time, and for years through high school and college, was no matter how much you hurt me, I can always hurt myself more. And that was how I claimed my body. And the tattoos were less -- the tattoos and piercings were not so much about that. They were claiming my body but they weren't claiming my body to hurt him. I had other behaviors that were directed that way. And a lot of that was around sex and my behaviors with that and smoking cigarettes and other things that I knew were bad for me. I never really felt like tattoos and piercings were bad for me. They didn't seem self-destructive to me. They were more decorative. And I claimed my body when I did them, but it was in a more loving way than a lot of the other behaviors that I used to claim my body. And so being willing to claim my body again in a loving way and to have self-acceptance of this body
in the shape that it's in now instead of the shape that I feel it should be, that is very much about self-acceptance for me.

Once Jessie was free of her family of origin it wasn’t long until her mother passed. Her mother was a central figure in her life who amongst the abuse and dysfunction she felt was her protector. Therefore, when she passed in Jessie’s 20’s it was a difficult space for her and one of her earliest tattoos was a tribute to her mother, but also a way to cope with the loss and loneliness:

So it's funny, I haven't thought about this for a long time, but I remember that the reason I chose a [this mythological creature] was I felt like it was protective. And I think that with my mom gone, I felt like I needed a protector, and that was what was significant about it. It was the biggest tattoo I had gotten to date and it was with an artist who I had complete confidence in and I felt like this was going to -- I don't know. I felt like having [this mythological creature] on me to protect me, as superstitious as it may have been, seems like something I needed at the time, that he was my companion and I could trust him. That was significant for me because at that point I had lost my mom, there was nobody in my life I trusted to the same extent as my mother, everybody else I could trust to varying degrees but there were always going to be some kind of strings attached or there were certain things I couldn't trust them with. And then I hadn't yet met my future husband, so I was in this period of transition where I really felt like I was alone and it was like me versus the world. So I guess in some ways that was sort of emotionally and spiritually feeling that I had been forced out of the nest entirely, completely an adult because I no longer had a mommy to run back to when I was feeling hurt or scared or needed support.
I mean, I think that when you lose a parent young, you end up taking on more responsibility for yourself than you otherwise would. In this case, at that time, I did have a relationship with my dad but we weren't close. He was very wrapped up in his new family with his second wife and their kids and he offered me support financially but that was most of it at that point. And in some sense it was, I felt, like guilt money for him not really doing what he needed to do for me when I was younger, so I wasn't really sure where that relationship was going to go. And my stepdad had been so traumatizing to me that I really was wrestling with whether or not I could keep him in my life at all with my mom gone, because he was just such a toxic person to me. And so in that sense I felt very adrift from my family. It wasn't just that I had come of age and become an adult, it was that I had really reached this point sort of prematurely where I couldn't rely on my family anymore because they were either gone or not trustworthy. And that, I think, for a lot of people doesn't come until later in their adulthood when they lose their parents and don't feel like they have as much support from their family, maybe their marriage has dissolved or whatever, and then they start to feel really alone. And I think that I have rebounded from that because I did meet the man who became my husband and we did develop a relationship and I did learn how to trust again, but during that period of time, those couple years in between, I felt very, very alone. Very, very afraid and unable to trust other people and really kind of nervous about trusting myself and wasn't really sure where my life was going to go and how it was going to look and if I was actually going to be okay. And I think that having that sense of a protector to walk through that with me was really important at the time, and I think it also provides some context for why this
most recent tattoo is so significant, because I have completely moved out of that fear now.

This more recent tattoo Jessie references is her most significant and her first visible tattoo: a C.S. Lewis quote around her wrist. In particular she got it because she felt it represented a marker of her growth in life, namely that “all the suffering” she had experienced was not meaningless, but actually something that really crafted her to be a better in her chosen profession of social work. The tattoo represents the ability to make peace with her past and see it for something she grew from:

I had been experiencing some memories of some of the traumas I experienced in my childhood, like a lot of emotional abuse and a lot of anxiety and drama between my family members. And I had this moment of clarity that everything that I have experienced gives me -- it has meaning. It allows me to do what I need to do in my own life now, going forward. And I ran across a quote that really seemed to encapsulate that and I felt like it was really important for me to be able to see that every day and remind myself that even the bad things that happen in my life have purpose and it's not meaningless suffering […] I'd say that every experience has shaped me and the shaping isn't necessarily for good or for bad, and that in some sense perhaps these negative experiences were necessary for me to understand the extent of human suffering so that I can be more effective in my chosen career, so that I am able to better empathize with people who are experiencing things that are difficult and emotionally painful, and so that I am able to explain what it is like to experience these things to people who have never had to experience them, so that they understand how important and powerful those experiences
can really be in shaping somebody's life[…] The tattoo really was to clarify that those experiences were not random, they were not meaningless, that it was all part of the path that I'm going to follow. And prior to that, I had not really felt that way. I felt as if I was just really unlucky. I was just really unlucky and bad things happened to me that I couldn't control that were not my fault, that were not my responsibility. People hurt me who I trusted, that I should have been able to trust, and up until just before I had this tattoo, I carried that weight with me. And now I can see that even though it was really unpleasant, it serves a purpose […] I think it was really a renewed, or maybe a brand new, sense of self-confidence that I had never had before, that before I always had doubt that I would be able to achieve what I wanted. I had doubt that people really genuinely meant the things that they said to me that were complimentary. And I had doubt that I would ever achieve things in my life that others would consider success. And what changed for me was that I had a new clarity that I was on the right path for me, that the choices I was making were going to take me not just where I wanted to go, but where I needed to go, and that the experiences that I've had in the past are going to be the bridge by which I get there. And so in some ways it was almost like emerging from a chrysalis and being a different version of myself, one that had absolute self-assurance that things are unfolding as they should, and a sense of self that was really confident in a way that had never been before.

Emily

Emily is a white 36 year-old lower middle class accountant and artist. She has several major tattoo pieces ranging from one bonding her to her father which she eventually covered
with a piece more relevant to her sense of self, to a large commemorative back piece for the loss of what she terms “the love of her life,” to several smaller grounding tattoos in a precursor language to Croatian — where her family emigrated from. She grew up in the United States as what she considered immigrant class with a father who disappeared when she was in her late teens. Her mother was an abusive alcoholic. Her most meaningful tattoo is a full back piece in response to the loss of her partner to a heroin overdose, and to this day she still cares for him deeply. However, the tattoo was part of her process for dealing with that loss:

A: So the [deceased partner] tattoo. So that's the big [insect]. When we, let's see, the first year we went out, a year and a half after ... yeah, so '99, we started going out probably, was it my birthday? Probably February of 2000. Maybe winter of 2000, in January, 2000. Coachella happened October of 2000. So that was like nine months beyond your super infatuation, crazy, but still madly insane for each other. And we went to Coachella, did a fair amount of hallucinogens [...] And I was sitting, I wanted some water, and then this huge like quite literally probably five-and-a-half-inch-long fluorescent green [insect] landed on my hand. Like just sat there -- to the point where I'm asking people around me if I am tripping or if this actually is happening. And it's sitting there and just chilling. And he's looking at it and I'm looking at it. All the like little raver kids next to me are like, "Whoa, oh my god, it's big." I was like, "Shut up, it's not all that magical but it's pretty cool." Right? And it's sitting there and it's just chilling, and I'm just like wow, and it was just chilling. So that was a super-impactful, visual memory with him and all of that. And then he dies. Yeah. Cut to he dies.

Q: Cut from the magical memorable to...
A: Cut from magical memorable to the heroin addict and all these other dramas that happened in the relationship with that. So -- like I had never bonded with anybody that much. I still haven't bonded with anybody that much.

Q: Would you say your tattoo still bonds you to him?

A: Absolutely. Like, I'm about to cry right now ... Yeah. So the [insect] is essentially because in my over-achieving naiveté of trying to negotiate with loss, I guess, as you put it, I started getting work on it done. [...] And it was a whole process. I had my CD Discman, because it was before the iPod happened, and I had a CD that I burned with a playlist. That was pretty much all the like [partner’s] tunes, and yeah, I played that every single time I got tattooed for a year and a half, which happened to have a lot of Tool[...]It had a lot of Tool and a lot of A Perfect Circle just because he listened to all that and stuff. Well, I introduced him to that, which is really funny. And then some other thrown in there Swans and some Christian Death because that's really morose. And so I was getting it and in an attempt to kind of be -- the way that [these insects] are, in that they're nymphs in the water for a really long time, like nymphs can stay in the water for like four years and then they just kind of bust out into a [full adult] and then fly around for like a week, and then they die, right? And it was all like realizing that that whole death and that whole experience completely threw my world upside down and I would never be the same, and so it would be like I was changing and kind of trying to molt who I was into something else, which doesn't really work, I don't think.

Not only was this tattoo giving voice to the death of her lost partner it also, much like in the case of Jacob, was an expression of control over a chaotic situation:
Shit, there was a lot of change going on then anyway. But yeah, I mean, that was -- I don't know. I can't say it's coincidental, because obviously it's not. But I think it was -- it was an attempt to get control over it. You know what I mean? An attempt to get control and identify what was happening with me internally and, yeah, it's pretty heavy. It is pretty heavy.

David

David is a white 33 year-old middle class civil engineer. He is in a committed relationship of seven years and recently lost his brother in a car crash. His modifications range from piercings to multiple tattoos including a full sleeve. However, the most important one to him is the one in commemoration of his lost brother that is shared with a supporting community:

A: I got this one a few months ago. So my brother was killed in a car crash back in June and this, [is a childhood note about love]. He wrote this when he was just learning to read and write, so he was about two or three ... So this is his handwriting, copied exactly, about one-to-one scale... And my mom had saved that from when he was a little kid, two or three, definitely under five. And we were sitting around like the day after he was killed.

Q: When you say killed, this wasn’t like a car accident, right?

A: It was a car accident.

Q: But that implies that there was some sort of malfeasance.

A: Oh, killed?

Q: Yeah.
A: It was a very bizarre car wreck. He somehow crossed over the median on the I-5 in the middle of nowhere, which is about a 60-foot-wide median, and went into oncoming traffic, and he was killed instantly, and a couple other people in the other car. He was by himself and three people in the other car were killed as well. And we still don't know why he crossed over the median. So it's very bizarre. And, yeah. So I got this just a few days after he was killed. And I'd say about 20 to 30 other people, maybe more, have this exact same tattoo from the same artist, they all took the same stencil, my partner included. And he basically, just the cost of the ink and any needles that he went through, so it was like twenty dollars just to get a quick little five-minute line tattoo. And yeah, a bunch of old high school friends, people that were close to him all got this, which was probably about 20 or 30 people, after my mom pulled out this scrap of paper that she had saved from our childhood.

In particular, this piece was one that helped bond him with others and in its commemorative nature alleviated some of the fears of loss:

A: And he -- yeah, so I had a really intense fear of forgetting him. The fear has kind of subsided, but I wanted to get something that -- I don't know. It just fit perfectly. Like, I'm not into really getting people's faces on me. It's just kind of personal style. But his handwriting from something he had done when he was a little kid just -- obviously, to me it's obvious that it struck a chord with a lot of people and that it was immediate. It seemed like everybody closed in, was like yeah, I want that. [...] So it's definitely commemorative. I don't -- I couldn't begin to tell you, like to quantify the closure that I got from it, because it's still -- the wound is still open. So yeah, probably, yeah, gosh, I
don't know. I think it's kind of -- and it's also kind of opened a door to the spirit world for me. I'm very left-brained and mathematically and scientifically minded and have largely considered myself agnostic/atheist and been very skeptical so that losing him and having strange spiritual connections since his death, I think, kind of feeds into the love never ends part, that being so intensely afraid of forgetting him or forgetting him so vividly, or not being able to vividly recall him and his presence and the way he feels and the way he sounds, I think not only is it his handwriting, but it's very simply love never ends, which kind of signifies for me kind of a metamorphosis of our relationship, that just because he's dead doesn't mean I don't have a relationship with him, my relationship has just changed. Whether it's toward the spiritual or just the memories that I have of him and that I've lost a lot, but I also have a lot of good memories of him, and this just kind of encapsulates a lot of that. So it's, for me, perhaps it is cathartic in helping me kind of bridge the gap from when he was alive, to now living with him -- living without his corporeal presence.

Part of the process of getting the tattoo was the role his partner played in the grieving process. Ultimately being able to share this experience with her bonded them closer together provided a system of support:

A: Yeah. And it's actually kind of bonded me to my partner in a deeper way. My brother kind of considered her a sister and actually when she talks about him, she refers to him as her brother-in-law. So us having the same tattoo kind of solidifies the history that we have all had as a family. Even though we're not married, we're still all family without the ceremony. So it's intensified or solidified -- it strengthened the bond with my partner and
me by going through this experience and having a tattoo to aid in the catharsis, add some closure, kind of mark it --

Q: I'm suspicious of the closure, because it's so not.

A: No, it's not. And any closure that it has given me is small compared to the overall process. But yeah, this process has been very trying on my partner and me and the tattoos have popped into my mind a lot as a bit ceremonious, that even though we're not married, but we're engaged, we're ring shopping, we will be married, and we've still been together for a long time and are very bonded. That kind of processing our relationship through this trauma that tends to be a symbol of our bond. Not having rings and marriage and all the traditional stuff, well, there's this extra piece of our bond that -- in the times that I've been like I don't know if we're going to last through this, that that's kind of, in some cases, in my kind of late-night kind of processing or kind of letting my mind kind of spin out, that's kind of the one thing that's been a bit of a lighthouse for me in some ways, to kind of come back to that and go no, we have this shared experience, we have shared markings that tie us together through him, because he was such -- he was a lot more gregarious than I am, more outgoing. I think he was still kind of introverted in his own way but he was a performer, he had a lot of friends, he touched a lot of people, and that's just another way that he kind of helped bond my partner and me. And the tattoos, for me, kind of, I don't know, carry deep symbology in that regard as well.

An extension of this tattoo that bonds him with his partner and the community at large also presents itself as a as source of strength in the grieving process:
We all went out and got tattoos. So, I don't know, I'm sure there's some connection to those somewhere. So I don't know. I don't know where I was exactly going with that, except that it's -- I don't know. It's kind of helped me stay sane. When I kind of feel like -- when I feel more despondent in that it's changed me and my life is going to be very different from here on out, having this reminds me that I got to have that experience with my brother, that he touched so many people, that he was so warm and accepting of my partner, that he was so warm and accepting of a lot of people, that we had such a good relationship. It's a reminder of all of that, that even though I don't get to be an uncle to his kids, I don't get to grow old with him, I also don't have to transition into my life without him having regrets, that I can unequivocally say that with him, love never ends, that I have no regrets about the way we conducted our relationship, that even though we'd moved away and we didn't talk as much as we used to at one point, that aside from a few sniggling things like yeah, I didn't get down there as much, I didn't text quite as often, that there was no unfinished business between us. To kind of cement it on my body is -- I don't know. [...] It's given me strength.

Noah

Noah is a 38 year-old white male of Hispanic descent with a piercing career. He has worked at several prominent shops around the Bay Area and loves his chosen profession. His early interest in it started in his teens and was actually an important factor in getting out of a problematic and sometimes abusive family situation:

Well, I guess the beginning of body modification for me, it wasn't on my own, but it was doing those piercings in high school, or junior high. I was really into skateboarding, I was
really into punk rock, and I was one of like six kids in my school that were like that. And these were very in-your-face things and it's just all about not conforming and being a rebel and just teenage angst and Nirvana. When I decided I was going to get my ears pierced, I will admit, home life was not fun. My mom and stepdad were just an alcoholic nightmare and they were fighting and going home wasn't fun because I knew it was going to be arguments and yelling and holes punched in the wall and all that other good stuff.

And I felt like getting my ears pierced was going to put me in a group that I wanted to be in and keep me away from where I was. Especially with the fact, the rule was if you're going to live under my house you cannot have tattoos and piercings, and I was like well, if I get my ears pierced, I can't go back to that. I have to be gone. And I think that really stuck with me.

His early engagement with piercing and tattooing became a lifelong fascination. And as part of his career he is one of the most heavily modified individuals in the sample. Therefore, it wasn’t a foreign thought to him to memorialize certain hard learned life lessons in his skin such as to not make those mistakes again:

That's a matching tattoo with my wife, or my ex-wife. We had a moment where it was a bad fight and she decided to get physical about it. And it was almost the end. This is before we were married. That was like a game-ender right there. If I'm not allowed to do that, you're not allowed to do that. What the hell? And so we got something piercing related, because it's not only my profession but also something that was painful related ... Because, I mean, when you go through that kind of a fight, it hurts your heart. And we wanted to kind of solidify that and we wanted to get that so we could look down and
when someone got mad and see that, remember that moment, okay, we almost ended this because of this, that's not the road we want to go down. And we never did go down that road like that again. We definitely split up for different reasons, but that was a nice reminder. But now we're not together, that's the first time I've told that story in a very long time. Nobody knows that that's what that's about. Now it's just like oh, well, of course you have [that]. You're a piercer. And so then people just take it from that. I'm like yeah, that's what it is. That's what it is. This is my memory.

Other tattoos are reminders of personal growth through hardship, much in the same manner as the above:

A: Yeah, but, I mean, again, I would not be who I am now had I not gone through that. So I learned a lot about myself during the divorce and learned some shit I didn't want to see about myself, of course, things that I hate in other people but oh well, you're that guy, too. Why don't you knock that shit off kind of thing. So I definitely miss her but I'm a whole new person, so I like the way I am now way more than that guy was […] like this one right here. I tell people it's because I hate the rain. I don't like the rain. I got that because my wife left me. Self-explanatory at that point.[…] that's going to be the powerful one about the divorce because nobody wants to learn that they're an asshole, because nobody thinks they're an asshole. People say "Ah, I'm an asshole," but when someone really is just thinking for themselves and not paying attention to the world around them and just being self-centered and only doing things for what they want, they're an asshole. And not everybody realizes that they're doing that, and my divorce taught me what kind of an asshole I was and how I wasn't paying attention to the right
things. And so at first it was poor me, how dare she leave me, this is totally -- and then it took, over time, really kind of looking at things and seeing like no, you were the problem. So I got this as a poor me, ya know, I am so sad, and now I look at it, again, I don't like who that guy was. I like who this new person is a lot and I've become really accepting to a lot of the things around me that weren't there before. I appreciate the people around me so much more than I did before. I used to tell people, I love my friends, but now I love my friends. I have genuine love for them and I know the reasons why. It's not just because they're there. Oh, yeah, you've been in my life for 10 years, obviously I love you, you're my friend. No. You're in my life because I need you here, I need your support, I need your attention, I need your camaraderie. Without you, I am nothing. You know? So looking back on it now, it's also a reminder of hey, stop being selfish. It's not all about you. More often than not, it's not about you. It's going to be about everything around you that you're going to encounter. And as much as I did not want the divorce, I wouldn't be who I am now without it. I still miss her terribly. I still dream about her. I still go to try to talk to her about something. But yeah, I mean, I can't say I wish it didn't happen. I can say I wish I learned about this person beforehand so that I could have who I am with her and I could be awesome for her and have her be awesome back, but it just wasn't going to work that way.

Q: So that experience made you more whole?
A: Yeah.

Q: And you marked that and that's kind of a reminder of that now?
A: Kind of. I mean, I didn't mark it with that intention. I marked it with a poor me I'm depressed intention. I wanted something sad on me. If you want to be sad, you're going to find sad, but if you want to be happy, you're not going to find it very easily. It's going to be a hard road to get there. And now when I look at it, it's -- things have been worse. You're fine. You're not that selfish person anymore. Remember that. It's not easy. And just pay attention to your relationships. Don't take them for granted. Don't just assume that they're just going to be there because they've always been there. You have to work to keep these people that you love in your life. And I wished that I wouldn't learn it so late in life. It would have been nice if I'd learned it in my teenage years, but I guess that's not the path I'm supposed to have.

Here the modification is one of living memory for the individual such that they can grow from their experience. Clearly the way individuals contextualize their modifications and the meanings they have in relation to growth are varied. In this case it is about learning from past mistakes and moving forward from a negative home environment. For the others it varied across the board from empowerment to testing boundaries to exerting control to catharsis in grief. Hence even though some of these stories are shorter than others the common thread is that something challenging and impactful happened that was partly dealt with through the modification process.

The issue of trauma or helping through rough times is actually well known and acknowledged in the modification industry. Even at this last year’s Association of Professional Piercers conference there were speakers on “Bedside Manner and Grounding: Making the Most of the Moment” and “Healing or Harm? Our Responsibility as Body Piercers” (APP, 2014).

Several modification professionals in this sample joked that their job was one part artist and one
part therapist since some clients did sincerely want to work through hardships through modification:

I look at it just the opposite and I'm grateful that I'm able to find this path in my life to be one of the providers for it and to work with others to try to provide that in the safest and healthiest way possible, and for those who do want to go down the path of energy and grounding and do actually have something to share deeper, like I just lost a loved one and want to acknowledge that with a piercing or a tattoo or something, then we can share and relate and metaphorically hold hands on that, and then, yeah, I'm very grateful to be able to be on that side of the fence. And so beneficial, yeah, and it's trying, too, because you also have to learn, what happens if you have a whole day of that? Kind of relate it with, I guess, in a weird roundabout way a priest who gets a whole day of somebody coming to them looking for some comfort. (Michael)

Another went so far as to make herself available as a general intervention for someone who would otherwise self-harm:

I had a client, she was a cutter. She would also bang her head and all these different kinds of self-mutilation type of things. And I was on call with her and she would call me when she was getting ready to fuck herself up and she would already have the tattoo that she wanted planned out, and I would come and I would meet her at the tattoo shop where I was working, and I would tattoo her. It could be any hour of the day, but it was this agreement that we had, because she would otherwise hurt herself. And so in her sense, maybe there is, maybe it is some type of harm or something. She was changing it so that she wouldn't be mutilating her body. (Sarah)
In this sample, there was one tattoo artist and 5 that worked professionally in suspension or piercing shops. After several of these occurrences it became inevitable the topic would arise in the interview with professionals:

Q: I’ve also heard, I've interviewed several professionals, and they say that their job is half body artist, half therapist.

A: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I've heard some stories from people that I know they don't tell their therapists. People will just open up to me for some reason or another. Sometimes it's really hard to deal with. There are some people out there that, to coin a phrase that my friend had, are psychic vampires. They will suck the life out of you with their stories and you just, when you're done, you're like I gotta go home. I can't deal with this anymore. And then there's some that -- I mean, they'll break you down as a human and then kind of re-change who you are and what you think about things. I've had so many people cry, and not from pain. (Noah)

All of the professionals acknowledged that they loved the richness this imparted to their career as they felt they were making positive changes in people’s lives. However, it was equally draining to them to have to be so emotionally present for their patrons. One compared it to being a bartender, which has the clichéd image of being the blue collar confidant:

It's funny. Bartenders can tell you the same thing, you know? And people are going to go drink for whatever reason that they're going to do it, but that person they're turning onto one on one with, they're going to turn to the bartender way more deeply than the person sitting next to them or whatever. But yeah, the stories I get from people. I used to hate
people. I mean, I still say I love dogs more than people, but when I have those people tell me their stories, the human race is an amazing thing. (Noah)

The general consensus was for those that chose to use modification as a cathartic or healing activity it was a highly powerful system of meaning. For some this meant it was contextualized through ritual or rites of passage, and for others this was as simple as testing one’s boundaries, (re)claiming one’s body, or expressing a life change in a physical manner that was more profound than verbal interactions could allow. Not all modifications are of this ilk, and not all practitioners approach it this way, but this was definitely a prominent feature for this sample.

The most obvious undercurrent of these narratives is that modification can be a highly cathartic personal experience to begin healing, claim bodily subjectivity, and further cement one’s identity. In particular the framework of ritual became and emergent feature through which issues from troubling events could be formally addressed and healing allowed. Not all used the framework of ritual however it was a recurrent theme around life stress and trauma. Individuals could create a space that was sacred for them and safe to process emotions. Some consciously did it to help heal, such as Sarah or Olivia, while others like Daniel found the healing power of ritual after his first suspension. For those that didn’t expressly use ritual the nature of their modifications were still productive of the same effect. With modifications in place to either express the pain, and/or allow them the remembrance of loved ones past they could move on to the next stage of their life. Some others used modification more expressly as reclaiming and grounding in a way that reestablished their own physical and personal boundaries after they had been horribly violated. Most obviously, for events that these individuals had not control over modification provided a means to take control of the situation symbolically, such as in the case
of Emily. The malleable nature of body modification to express personal meaning also provides numerous avenues through which it can also be used to facilitate healing and deal with emotional distress. The most common of these were through catharsis, memorialization, reclaiming, and control, sometimes framed within ritual and sometimes without.

**Pain, Rites of Passage, and Being a “Badass”**

Pain is an interesting phenomena in the modification experience since one of the old narratives around tattoos was the notion of being “badass” for enduring the tattoo process. That is why historically across other cultures modification has been used as a rite of passage as the mastering of one’s fears, and the physical ability to endure, were both prominent features. In this sample there were codes for “being a badass,” testing boundaries, altered mental state from modification, mod as accomplishment, and transcendence. All of these danced around the social constructs of what enduring pain symbolizes socially. For the tattoo traditions this was historically masculinity, and for others it was adulthood or a rite of passage. However, when asked directly about pain individuals responded not thinking what part it played in their process, but how they dealt with it to get through the modification experience. In other words, there was very little direct social thought on the issue of pain, but on pain management in the process. They acknowledged that the pain of modification is part and parcel to the experience of it, yet the codes around testing of boundaries, accomplishment, and being a badass were only elaborated on once they explained how to avoid the pain through certain meditation or self-care practices (e.g. eating a meal, getting a good night sleep, etc.). No respondent in this sample said they went into the modification experience for the pain itself, but that it was the price one pays and could in some other situations have merits:
From that fucking Dee Snider movie, "Strangeland," one of my favorite quotes is "short is the pain, long is the ornament." I've always loved that one. If people ask, here's the thing about it. Did that hurt? Did that hurt? Did that hurt? Did that hurt? Did that hurt? Yes and no. Yeah, it all fucking hurts, but to this degree. It's like define fucking pain. If you cut my fucking arm off, that's going to hurt a lot more than hanging me on hooks. (Daniel)

Yeah. I feel like I -- I enjoy pain, but I don't assign it pleasure when I'm getting tattooed. I think of other aspects of my life, I'm like, yeah, a little pain is great. A lot of pain is great. But when I'm getting tattooed, I just kind of -- it's a ritual of like this is what happens when you get tattooed. This is what comes with it. Kind of like when I'm sick. This is what happens when you're sick. This is what comes with it. You just deal with it. I'm asking for the tattoo, I'm not asking for the pain. It's different. And I think when you are engaged in pain for pleasure in sex, you do it because you want it and you're doing it specifically for the pain, whereas when you're getting body modification, for me, when I'm getting a tattoo, I'm doing it for the tattoo, I'm not doing it for the pain. (Ava)

For some there was an overlap with the practice of BDSM and trying to explore one’s relationship with pain, but that wasn’t delved into for this study due to BDSM being a very rich and diverse field of inquiry. The corollary was that the pain of modification was described as a relationship, particularly a relationship with the self of endurance and testing boundaries, and that how one approached the pain changed its nature (i.e. for play vs as an unwanted part of the modification process). Thus, how one approached modification meant more than just the
modification itself. For many being able to overcome the fear of hanging on hooks translated to
other areas of their life, just like being able to endure the pain of tattooing also provided a sense
of resilience for others:

Specifically looking at tattooing here, and so I can talk about that as tattooing. It's hard,
because what's interesting is -- and I wouldn't say that you can't. Like, if you were to ask
me the question what are your thoughts around pain and tattooing, and how were they in
the past and how are they now, so pain in tattooing now is it's that thing that sucks but
you endure it. And this is that whole thing diachronically, like it means something totally
different to me now. So now it's something you have to endure. And where it translates
into real-life experience for me is like oh god, I don't want to climb up that mountain.
Yeah, but I know I can do this stuff. I know I can do this stuff. I can do this stuff
physically, I know I can withstand stuff, and emotionally I know I can withstand stuff. It
absolutely gives me -- it absolutely translates outside of the tattoo chair as far as my
ability to be able to withstand and to provide feedback. So it's sort of like a practice of
feedback, kind of like meditating. If I'm sitting on the cushion and I'm meditating, over
and over and over again I get to have these fucking crazy thoughts about that relationship
or god, I'm so fucked, I'm so crazy, and over and over again I keep telling myself it's just
a story, it's just a story, it's just a story. And it's like -- it's sort of like a mental
weightlifting that I'm doing. And I'm sitting there and that's why it depends on the
situation. If I'm sitting in the tattoo chair and I'm getting tattooed over and over and over
again, make this fucking stop. I can't stand it another moment, but I do stand it another
moment, and I do keep doing it. You know, I think I've got fucking five minutes left in
me. Like I'm going through all this stuff. But I don't, and I just keep sitting with it. So it provides this feedback over and over again. (Robert)

Well, there's something about body modification, if you choose to do it, can really help you transmute pain and maybe it's something as simple as knowing you can take the pain of a needle helps you remember that you can take other kinds of pain that are a little less tangible. I definitely feel a deeper sense of resilience and endurance overall because I've done certain things like suspension. I know what I'm capable of handling. And it was never predicated on proving anything to myself. It was more like testing. (Matt)

This was something that was particularly evident with suspension that is noteworthy for how visually impactful and fear inducing it can be. All of the below are individuals who engaged in suspension and as a result felt like it has implications for greater strength, power, or coming of age:

  With tattooing and piercing -- with piercing, the pain is just so pretty brief and then fades so quickly, and the breathing techniques that they have you do, it's just kind of like, okay, part of me consciously is like this is going to suck but the pain factor on that has never really stopped me before. With tattoos, probably tattoos is one of the first things that helped me teach myself meditation because I would learn to just sit there and breathe when it got very painful. And with suspension, one of the things that [my friend] told me when I was telling him I was scared about the pain and things like that, and I was having some trouble going up, he told me to stop thinking about it as a pain and start thinking about it as just a really odd tension that your brain doesn't know how to process. And I
kind of just have always done that when it comes to suspension, just breathing through it and thinking of it as a tugging. But I also, it's like -- there is still, I want to say, power in it, of being able to crest through the pain and being able to test yourself on that. (Isabella)

Which another part of it, I think, with body modification in general and with suspension in particular because it's so visceral. And it's just that word, literally. The challenging of one's own fears, the sensation that you were cringing at earlier, the knowledge that oh my god, this is going to suck, and then choosing to go through it and choosing to conquer it, and then coming through the other side and saying well, hell, if I could do that, what can't I do? (Jacob)

A rite of passage, essentially, one that I'd chosen for myself, one that is being exposed to the images of suspension at a very young age, whatever else was going on in my head at that time in my understanding of our society and other societies and we were discussing a lack of rite of passage in essentially Western culture, specifically American Western culture. And I still believe they're very important, and that was one that I'd chosen for myself, and it was more or less a -- I remember the conversation in my head going now, that right there, that's the line. That's going to be me going off and being a man and wandering out into the woods with a spear and coming back with a bear cape. If I can do [suspension] I can do anything. (Daniel)
I just remember going okay, you really were able to do that. That was pure mind over matter. So I was really proud of that from sort of a -- I think it was kind of a warrior's ordeal sort of deal kind of thing for me. It was challenging at all stages. I kind of -- I'm not scared of getting tattooed. I'm not scared of getting pierced. Suspension is viscerally confronting to me even now because it's so -- potentially so much can go wrong and yet when it's really controlled and done with intention, it can be really beautiful and interesting too, within and without. And that's pretty -- I keep coming back to the word visceral, but suspension as an art form has a lot of texture to it, physically and conceptually. It's just, it gets you in a lot of different places at once. Some people take one look at somebody hanging from hooks and they run. Some people take one look and they start walking towards it and go "How are you doing this?" For me, I think part of what I've learned from body modification is that so many of the boundaries we set for ourselves are basically (a) not that solid and (b) probably nowhere near where our real boundaries lie. Certainly in terms of confronting pain, like with suspension, it looks like it should hurt a whole lot and it's a couple of quick pricks, then some pulley tension, and that's it. And then some soreness. (Matt)

Yeah. It did build up my confidence, once I got up there. I was not worried about my shirt being off. I wasn't worried about people seeing me. I wasn't worried about any of the stupid little things that I was worried about until that point. It was all washed away after that. And it was a big step.[…] Like you don't get the full experience without the pain. (Mason)
I lay that out all ahead of time and then when it comes to the moment of doing it, that's where the self-confidence part comes in, because I'm like oh my god, I'm going in front of all these people. It's a challenge for me. I've performed on stage in front of tons of people, but regardless of that I'm terrified of being in front of people. So the fact that I do this in public is my own challenge to be in front of people. Because I'm that person that like the teacher calls on in class and I turn beet red and I start shaking and I don't know the answer, even though I do. I am terrified of being singled out like that. I don't like being put on a pedestal. I don't like being singled out because of my issues with self-confidence. I feel like everybody else is much stronger than me and it's just like we all do this. We all beat ourselves up and I'm good at accepting my flaws and it's difficult for me to accept my strengths, and so something like suspension, when it gets down to it and we're getting ready to pierce, I'm like, oh my god, what am I doing? This hurts. This is gonna suck. And I just suck it up and I'm like no, you know that you can do this. You know you have the skill, the strength, the artistic ability. Stop trying to sabotage who I am and who I know I am with insecurities. And so when it comes to suspension and the shows that I do, for example, it's -- I mean, physically, on a simple level, physically I love being in the air so I'm just giddy and silly and happy. But psychologically, every time I do it, even though I've done it many times, it's relieving because I'm like I am that strong person that I should always believe that I am and not let my insecurities get in the way of that, and I can complete things if I put my mind to it. (Samantha)
Suspension is also particularly unique because it is a much more social activity than other types of modification. It requires a piercer, rigger, guide, and is therefore conducive to a group experience. Most of the individuals in this sample engage in suspension with one of two social groups that practice it, and both contextualize suspension as a ritual. For some, this meant the group interaction was part of the pain experience such that the pain was transformed from something to endure to something shared:

Yeah. That suspension group, they are more traditionally known to be on the spiritual side of things, which I absolutely love and appreciate and I think it has a very powerful position using suspension for spiritual reasons. I think it's absolutely amazing and if you compare it to other cultures, that's probably the number one reason why people do suspension, or even cuttings and everything, and it's kind of a rite of passage. It's all very spiritual. It's very intimate but in a group setting so that you have that -- you know, spiritual things can be a really difficult place to be and very where you almost feel weak and you need the support of maybe spiritual guidance or support of other people and having a group that does that is very empowering and very -- it can take an event and make it extremely personal and positive. Again, it's about making, transitioning from negative and pain and hurt to something beautiful, cherished and shared. (Samantha)

Overcoming or enduring pain for the reward of certain modifications were therefore seen as a life accomplishment and a marker of adulthood. Several people said their most meaningful modification was the remaining scar from the suspension experience because it was such an accomplishment to overcome the fear of pain and therefore have the strength it imparted:
Well, they see it as like -- there's no -- I think they're like ancient societies like you became a man when you started hunting for people, or you started providing for your family. It was like a step that you had to go through to become a man and be considered like a man in the group. Where like people now, there's not a big step other than getting a tattoo. If you didn't get that, your big step would be like I graduated high school, or I graduated college. It would be something like that would make you like a man because you've accomplished something. So I think people are just using it as a way to show that they're a grownup now. Like you get your first tattoo and it's like I'm a grownup. This is my step into adulthood. And it really is, because you're legally 18, so it's literal and figurative that you're a man. Or a woman. I keep on saying man but, you know, you're a woman, too. I think men are more just macho about it. Like they want to show off more so than women. This just is me thinking. Women want to look pretty. Women want to look pretty but men want to, like, "I accomplished this, I did this, I overcame this." And it's probably a feeling in females as well, but I think men are just more vocal about it, that we beat this, we did this. (Mason)

But for me, the knowledge, the accomplishment, the personal victories that I've gone through with my choice of body modifications, I think, are speaking to kind of that question that you have of the sense of self, the changing. If anything, I think of my thirties as finally coming around to acting on those, because through my teens, through my twenties, there was a bit of that where I was saying I want to try suspension, but it scares me too much. It's oh my god, I don't know if I could. And finally, in my thirties,
post-divorce, I'm like you know what? Fuck that. I'm going to do it. Threw down the gauntlet myself. Personal challenge. Personal way to prove to myself that, you know what? It's going to hurt. That's fine. But you know what? I'm going to do it. So the sense of accomplishment, the sense of personal victory. (Jacob)

Others had a similar sense of accomplishment with modifications such as tattooing:

A: I just hated them but I dreaded re-doing them. And people say why? Well, why do you have fucking kids? Do you love being pregnant and childbirth so much? No. It's just like -- and I call that a maturity to pain, or a pain capacity, where you've got this relationship, you understand it. It's pain. It's like it's there.

Q: It's interesting you relate it to kids, because kids feel like there's this sense of status or accomplishment.

A: Same thing with tattooing.

Q: But it's interesting that you put it in terms of kids. Traditionally, for heteronormative society, a growth point, an accomplishment.

A: What do I live with? Who am I talking to? Who am I deviant to? Who am I an outsider to? So I put it in terms that hopefully they can understand.

(Robert)

I tell people this jokingly, but I am serious about it. It is a lifetime investment. It's one of the best investments, in my mind. Yeah, it's expensive, but it's on me forever. It's not going away. Your car is breaking down. That fifty thousand dollars you spent, that's
going to go away some day. I've spent five thousand dollars at most and it's not going away. (Laura)

The notion of accomplishment or investment also relates to the notion of being a badass for being able to endure the pain of extensive modifications. For others this was likely expressed as pride at their accomplishment, such as with suspension and the feeling of accomplishment, but for tattooing there has long been held the icon of the tough, aka “badass,” tattooed individual:

Okay. Well, it hurts. I don't care what anybody says, tattoos hurt, and I think that in my mind I was like I'm going to be such a badass, it's not going to hurt me, but it definitely did. […] Like I said, I have different stages in my life, my left sleeve being like a fucking moment of I'm a badass and I'm super modified now. (Laura)

I remember my first girlfriend in my twenties, she told me years later that one of the first things she was attracted to was I was this badass with tattoos, which I thought sounded very parochial to me. Is that all it takes to be a badass? What is this, Happy Days? It's kind of funny to me, but for some people that is a real thing. (Matt)

And also, you're talking about the whole badass thing, the whole point is that it hurts. The whole point is that it's a challenge. (Jacob)

Yeah. Being a badass, marker of masculine power. As much as I do defy gender norms I think more than kind of your average American male, at least to my perspective -- I'm still white, male, have a beard which is very masculine, I still fall very much in line with
heteronormative masculinity. And tattoos, I think, go along with that. Like tattoos, broken bones from falling off my bike, all that stuff kind of -- they're all like badges that I've gained through pain. (David)

Of course, some participants did point out that this system of thought is antiquated and reflective of a bygone era only relevant to tattooing, while at the same time not realizing that the sentiment remained but the modern vernacular was around overcoming challenges, achievement, and gaining social status through overcoming pain. Hence there was a degree of cognitive dissonance between those that were self-professed members of the modification world wherein they would talk about overcoming fears, and accomplishment, yet only use the antiquated colloquialism of “badass” while talking derogatorily about hipsters:

Like sailors. I saw a guy the other day, he was in his fifties, he had an anchor and a snake around it on his forearm, a very Popeye-like tattoo. That's a man I would not want to mess with because in his generation, getting a forearm tattoo was a sign like that. Same with in the 'seventies and 'eighties, even, you had biker tattoos. It was like oh, what a badass. Holy shit. These days, you go to Starbucks, the guy behind the counter making your latte, he's got full-sleeve tattoos, and he's not a badass, he's just a hipster in art school. (Jacob)

Daniel similarly commented on the appropriation of the tattooing symbol by “hipsters” in Oakland and identified it as a defensive mechanism as white individuals come to gentrify and take over traditionally dangerous and low socio-economic neighborhoods.

What's funny is you go to New York and they all look and dress the same, but they're not as heavily tattooed over there. But over here, and this comes from conversation with a lot
of people, it's like the hipster's the thing, but they're heavily tattooed here because I think it makes them feel safer. They're going for the badass thing in Oakland, I think. [...] The body mod community, you see hipsters with neck tattoos, and you see tattoo artists, people go, "That used to be for badasses." And that's the modification community clowning this other subsector. "Oh, it's trendy to have tattoos now." You know? That's just the way people are. It doesn't matter what it's over. (Daniel)

The increased use of tattooing to create any sort of “bad ass” image problematically makes the symbol of tattooing more diffuse and distant from its origins through its overuse. It moves it progressively father from its origins in low socio-economic and criminalized communities due to continued middle class use in gentrifying communities. Most importantly, the connotations of strength and achievement through overcoming pain are devoid when modifiers are talking about the respective social other, hipsters. Instead it is contextualized as a defensive mechanism, which is worthwhile only as long as the symbol of modification is one of strength, power and the “badass” that was initially an achievement from overcoming pain—a universal feature of the process no matter the sector of society one is from.

Thus the use of modification as a marker of the “bad ass” has now transitioned to contemporary vernacular of achievement and empowerment. This empowerment, growth in confidence and perceived personal strength, is derived from the experience of enduring or transcending pain. Even bearing witness to another going through the process is described as a “viscerally confronting.” Coming through to the other side of this experience, or rite of passage, is therefore something one can take pride in and feel a sense of accomplishment, or as if they have invested in themselves. Each marking and scar is a badge of courage to the self, and an
identifier of their new social difference. However, this different self can have deeper roots far preceding the actual marking.

**Marked Difference**

Whether difference is the outcome of modification in the form of a new social status, or something that is existent prior to modification is a difficult issue. These two perspectives of achieving and changing social status, and a feeling of a priori difference, appear mutually exclusive while being found in almost all participants. It is difficult to reconcile, but both experiences are true and probably synergistic. Most of the individuals in this sample talked about feeling different from others; that they had always felt that way and they were merely making it visible through modification. However, making this difference visible also made them feel accomplished and stronger, in a sense owning, embracing, and transforming a sometimes difficult difference into one they saw as positive. This, a priori difference was expressed as manifesting an internal image of themselves that was somehow “other” or “different:”

With that first tattoo and the social context that I described about it, I definitely chose it specifically because I am different. I choose to be weird. I choose to be nonstandard. […] Body modification is a way of externalizing some of that otherness. (Jacob)

But I kind of look at [my tattoos] at this point and, hey, listen it was never not going to happen. It was just the way it was -- I get closer and closer to how I look in my head. I guess. (Daniel)
I feel like I'm actually reaching where I should have been a long time ago, how my child thought I should be... Yeah. I've known that I was supposed to look like this -- not look like this, but I knew I was supposed to resemble what I'm doing to myself for a long time. (James)

A friend of mine made a statement to me that I like a lot. She said, "When I started getting tattooed, it's because I wanted the person I see in the mirror to match the person who I see in my head when I think of myself." I haven't totally unpacked that, but I think it's pretty accurate for a lot of people. When I picture myself in the dream world, I'm not just nebulously floating around with no clothes on. I'm floating around in like all-black clothing and boots. There's a sort of printed identity that's hiding around our super-consciousness, consciousness, and mine happens to have tattoos. (Matt)

I already felt as though somehow me of myself -- no piercings, no tattoos -- was, in essence, a deviant in that aspect. I felt it and up to being a kid, society was other children. So I already always felt different. And I was told I was different. And when I first observed that being tattooed and being pierced and having body modifications, the definition of being different was this unique thing, I immediately connected with it in that way. […] I don't know why, but I always felt different and in essence, getting my tattoos and my piercings, that kind of validated that feeling that I felt but in a new way. (Sophia)

To simplify the feeling of difference was a priori and its means of expression could have been something other than modification, but the cultural framework for expression of difference
for this sample is modification. More importantly, this notion of being inherently different from an early age imparted a sense of self and individuality; a place in the world and a more solid identity. Therefore, there were rather long discussions of feeling like an outsider, different, or deviant from the vast majority of hetero-normative dominant paradigm society, and how that impacted them both at the level of identity and social place. One can speculate that this sensation of difference might have been due to trauma, a common feature of this sample, or issues of race, body size, sexuality, or disability to name a few of the intersecting social statuses found in this sample. Only once they joined their counter culture or outsider community, through which they gained entre, status, and social capital vis-a-vis modification, did they feel normal and reconnected with humanity at large. A rather cliché statement that most have heard is, “If they are trying to be different why do they all do it in the exact the same way?” And the very obvious answer is that the goal is not to be an entirely unique, but to mark a separation and difference from dominant culture to then join a highly social alternative lifestyle. The finding of insider status through marked difference is seemingly a response to the aforementioned sensation of ‘always feeling different’ as one participant put it, “For whatever their reasons are or why that happens to congregate into that community, I don't know. Maybe because it's more forgiving on the way we look or maybe it's because -- I like to think of it as we were all the geeks and outsiders and freaks and we just decided to band together as adults.” (Isabella) This is a key feature that was neglected in the early days of research around body modification; wherein it wasn’t an expression of psychologically anti-social behavior but a want to associate with a different cultural paradigm. This is exactly what Howard Becker showed with musicians and the use of labels such as “square” to allow one to position themselves socially through its acceptance
or rejection. Here acceptance of the label “different” and “outsider” is pervasive, and usually one that is something they have “always” felt. As such the acceptance of the label is something they chose to manifest in a very literal sense, and secondarily reconstruct the meaning of the label. As one participants said:

I always felt different, sitting on the side of the football [field]... yeah, I've always felt different and outside. So you could say in some ways it helped provide connection like in subcultures. And it helped me celebrate. That's what it did. It helped me celebrate my outsidedness. When I was like 8 or 9 and outside, it was just like stranded and alone, and now it's like oh yeah, like you're the suckers. (Robert)

A salient example of this is Sarah. Much of the loss of her identity was through a loss of cultural background as she was partly Native American and partly white. Her home was abusive and she was on the street by fourteen. Hence, she tried to place herself in the world with her modifications, showing her cultural heritage, her spiritual and intellectual beliefs, etc. A natural outcome of trying to create an identity and backstory that is specific to this person also meant a sense of individualism and social difference. Part of her sense of self is not only to connect with larger cultural mythologies but ironically show herself as different, separate, and a part from what would commonly be referred to as normal:

So, yeah. I mean, the earliest stage of my modification that people could see besides the small piercings at the earliest stages of the tattooing that was like actual tattoos and not just like cuttings with ink spread or whatever was like yeah, social deviance. Definitely. And then when the woman at the store asked me, "Why do you look like that?" I was like "So I don't get confused for being someone like you." I was trying to separate myself in a
lot of ways. And I think to this day I still, a little bit, am. Like I said, I'm happy again because people look at my tattoo and they're like, "Why did you do that?" They're kind of horrified. Instead of like, "Oh my god, I love it." I like that it's not normative. Yeah. But, at the same time, it's also beautiful to me and so it also has some -- one of them is non-normative and one of them is like seeking to find some connection to something that's really beautiful to me. It looks ugly to some people but the people that it looks ugly to are already really ugly to me. (Sarah)

In this same spirit, one of her more brilliant comments after the interview was that some people prize and look for sameness and some people look for difference, and it is only in that difference that we discover our place and sameness with others (i.e., the reconstruction of the applied label):

And this is the same exact thing I was trying to deal with at that point in my life is the same thing that I'm talking about right now at this moment, of just trying to find a place of where do I fit, how do I see things, where do I fit in? Why do I feel like I'm different from other people? What is it that makes me the same? How can I -- where am I going from here? Where did I come from? Why is this happening? All of these questions. It's the reason why I put it in my flesh the way that I do, the same reason why I pick flowers and bury them, or write letters to people and burn them. You know? […] And that's why I was saying, the separation is almost the same thing as the connection. It's like we all need to have both of those aspects of ourselves. We all need to feel like there's somewhere where we belong or we have stories where we know where our place is. And there's also a part of us that needs to explore, not have a place where we're supposed to be and not
have these confinements of who we're supposed to be, how we're supposed to be and why
we have to be like this, but somewhere to just explore and just be bigger. (Sarah)

Much like Sarah, Jacob also accepts the label of outsider or different from a very young age and
chooses to visibly manifest this feeling in his modifications. He focuses on uniqueness and
individuality while also affiliating with a larger cultural heritage, thus through accepting the label
of outsider he actually is able to reconstruct that into a social position of insider within his
heritage:

I feel that getting the mods didn't change who I am, per se. If anything, it was an
exploration into who I felt I wanted to be, if anything, and even then it was a kind of a
minor thing. Even as a kid, eight or ten years old, I always knew I'd have a tattoo, and I
was raised with a Celtic background, very British/Scottish/English/Irish kind of
acknowledgment and I actually wanted to get a Celtic knot tattoo. And then the 'nineties
happened and then everyone was getting Celtic knotwork tattoos. And I said, "Oh. Well,
there goes that idea." I didn't want to be like everyone else. I wanted my tattoos to be
unique. I wanted them to be special. I wanted them to kind of not feel like hipster, and
popular, but not different from that, either. So I guess my personal path with body
modification and tattooing and such was I've always kind of felt like the other. Like most
of our friends, I was never the popular kid in high school. So I've always been defined as
the other, as the weirdo and I wanted my body modifications to be unique and special.
Like my first tattoo, I don't know anyone else -- I've seen a few online -- that have what I
have there, and this definitely speaks to my cultural heritage. (Jacob)
This concept is of course not limited to cultural heritage examples but to any social group the person identifies with and wants further inclusion. Many of the participants in this sample identified with “punk rock” or “artist” or some other subcultural identity:

In my particular art community, I remember specifically thinking that one or two of the tattoos that I got were almost like a statement to myself that I'm stepping into this world for good, and they were kind of qualifiers in a way. I guess I thought of them a little bit as like tribal markings, like all right, once you reach a certain developmental plateau you're kind of qualified to get, say, a big old tattoo on your back or your ribs or whatever. And, for me, I remember thinking that I was -- I did that with two particular tattoos, where I said these are very much about me being in my art, and I designed them in a manner that I knew nobody was ever going to have anything identical to it. There was something about a permanent statement of individuality that was one of the themes in getting a couple of the tattoos that I got. (Matt)

Once someone is a member of these sorts of communities, there are the secondary concerns of being marked as socially different, which predominantly include managing stigma. Rather unsurprisingly, and as is presumably common with any stigmatized or minority community, their social status is redefined as normal in their community:

I feel normal within my community. Do I think my community is normal? No. I don't think we're normal. I don't know if you do, but I feel like we are strange in society. I think that maybe in 15 years, maybe we won't be anymore, but we are not seen as -- and even the Bay Area itself is strange for the whole country, and that's something. (Laura)
It depends on the social scene. I run with a lot of different groups and for many of them, I'm totally par for the course and everything that I've done is very standard. Nobody looks at me weird for showing up with another tattoo or another hole in my face. Amongst other social scenes that I'm involved in, I'm the outlier for sure. I'm the most heavily modified person at my job, especially out of people working with kids[...] I mean, part of having "enough" modifications that some people see you and give you your deserved or undeserved social standing for that, there's an equal amount of stigma. I've had parents, not while working but while walking around -- I once saw a mom grab her little girl that was looking at me and kind of pull her away. "You don't want to grow up to look like that guy." Or something like that. Or grow up to be like that guy. I think I said something snarky about being an employed, self-sufficient college graduate. Something along those lines. But, I mean, sure. There's definitely been a social stigma. Things get real weird when I'm on tour in the South. (Ethan)

This then also presents the interesting phenomena of interacting with members of dominant society wherein one must manage their stigmatized identity and one finds the exact same language as in race and sexuality: “passing.” Much like the historical example of those who would try to pass for white or straight, here there are those who are able to cover up, hide in plain sight, and pass for “normal” by hiding their perceived difference due to continued stigma:

I can pass. I can pass for normal. As normal as they need in Wisconsin. Because that's my litmus test. Would I be able to pass in Wisconsin if I really needed to? Because that's about the most boring state I can think of, Wisconsin or Nebraska. Stereotypical, but it's my litmus test [...] I would think that if I went and -- what I have now doesn't push the
social norms too badly as far as labeling me as a gang member or anything like that, but I think if I tattooed my neck or anything below my wrists, I think that that could potentially get me into a little bit of hot water. And we have some friends who have done that and I wonder how much, how well they're going to fare should they find themselves in water that doesn't necessarily concern them. I think that they'll probably get themselves labeled inappropriately, or incorrectly. So I don't think -- I've made it so that I can exist in society by covering myself up fairly easily. (Lisa)

I personally choose to have a split, where I could pass as not altered, save for these, or I can choose to roll the sleeves up and show the tattoo. But it's that three-quarters length that I've chosen to stop at that. (Jacob)

I'm not -- I think I could kid myself I pass, but I could never pass. (Robert).

This issue of passing was only present for those that were academics or in corporate professions. This was a minority of the sample since the use of the sign of modification was to show social difference and mark themselves as separate, even at the cost of their careers, medical care, legal interactions, and sometimes work with mental health practitioners. The colloquial use of the term “job stoppers” in the modification community has been applied to hand and neck tattoos in particular. Until the early 2000’s, the paradigm of thought by both the modification community and heteronormative dominant society around hand and neck tattoos was that they were affiliated with gangs or were markers of lifetime and very permanent outsider status. Only recently have
neophyte modifiers been appropriating those symbols to garner instant status in counter culture and inverting the signification:

So it used to be that you would start off getting tattoos that were private or tattoos that you could cover and you had power over the reveal. Somewhere around the early-to-mid 2000s it switched, and people started getting extremely public tattoos as their first tattoos, and that's when you saw tattooing of hands. Like the sociological implications? This is wild. So people have immediately tons of status. They're outsiders that have only seen people that have tons of status so they're showing high signification, don't realize that oh no, what's going on, that's like the last of it. But they're starting there. And they're afforded that status, so it creates this incredible feedback. But it's completely part of the process that had always been there before and turned it on its head. So now you have people that are like children, really, that never, 15 years ago, ever -- and it's not a matter of it just being a trend. It completely changed the sign symbol. (Robert)

The old system of thought was that one had to earn their hand and neck tattoo, yet even though this is dissipating it is still a salient concern for this sample due to stigma outside counter culture:

No. There's definitely a path that you should be taking. Everybody has the right to do whatever the hell they want as long as you're not hurting others and someone can ask me to do a heavy modification on their face and I have that choice of yes or no. Do I want to do this? No. No. I know what you're going to go through and I don't want to be a part of that. You'll find someone to do it, that's for sure, but as far as I'm concerned, no. If I'm going to be a part of it, I want both of us to really know what's happening. Do I do that on every piercing? Absolutely not. If you want to get your nose pierced, you can get your
nose pierced. But there's a new trend now for kids to get their necks and hands tattooed before anything. (Noah)

I was touching on this before, about the whole basically paying your dues kind of thing. And my feelings on -- I'm not saying you can't get a tattoo on your hand because you don't have other tattoos and that's just the rules. Do I think that it's smart to have other tattoos if you're trying to get your hands tattooed? Yes. Why? Because you kind of have this understanding of how people will treat you differently, and you will be treated differently, and that's something, I think it's something you work your way towards. I have my own personal sense of I had to pay my dues before I did certain tattoos. (Laura)

And then I look at another social group of people and I'm like oh, you guys are doing this because you're 18 and you're already more heavily modified than I am, and I'm 41? Like, that's a little bit -- I waited. [...]Like I'm on the second layer on my arms and I understand that like I didn't do my hands and I didn't do my face until after I'd already been in the industry 20 years. So that 20-year mark was like, that's a show. I'm going to actually stay here. But there's kids like in San Diego, this kid that used to be from San Jose, he's in San Diego now, he's fucking 22 years old and he has his eyeballs tattooed, he's fucking completely fucking -- he'll never go anywhere but this community. (James)

The end result of the process of marking difference is one of both social acceptance and social limitation. The varying degrees of stigma and social capital are equally determined by the visibility and severity of one’s marks. Those with face, neck and hand tattoos must contend with
being highly limited in traditional professional work forces but retain high social capital in alternative work forces, e.g. tattooing or piercing. Both stigma and social capital are important outcomes of the modification process, and one of the most contentious areas of stigma is found in the world of medicine and psychiatry with the term “mutilation” or non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI).

**Mutilation**

The most visible discourse regarding mutilation and body modification is found in two popular publications: Armando Favazza’s *Bodies Under Siege* and Marilee Strong’s *A Bright Red Scream*. They are pieces of popular literature particularly problematic for the simple fact that they class body modification and self-harm together; they explicitly define modification as mutilation and/or non-suicidal self injury (NSSI). There is a plethora of more general academic literature that will be addressed separately, but these two full length texts reflected the major and problematic area of stigma such that each participant in this study was asked “How do you distinguish body modification from ‘mutilation,’ ‘harm,’ and ‘violence?’” For starters, Strong defines self-mutilation as, “the deliberate, direct, non-suicidal destruction or alteration of one’s body tissue.”(Strong, 1998) This is very similar to Favazza’s definition (the destruction of healthy tissue) and one can see the two works as mirrors of each other. Both works throughout their many editions still reduce any change in the nature of the body to some form of NSSI or mutilation. Favazza is a psychiatrist with a clinical focus on (NSSI) or mutilation, and addresses body modification on this spectrum while even in his latest edition of Favazza’s work acknowledges that “for the majority of persons who engage in body modification there is no link with pathological self-injury”(Favazza, 2011, p. 208). One might say the crux of this definition
of mutilation or NSSI is the destruction or alteration of healthy tissue, which misses the point that modification is a socially defined activity. Very little evidence is given by Favazza or Strong other than reviews of psychiatric cases for Favazza and reviews of popular media for Strong. There are no population studies or paired interviews with modifiers and self-harmers, and instead a focus on compulsive self-injury. Injury implicitly requires physical harm which I am willing to contend is not to be defined or measured by a clinical objective gaze but by the subjective state of the individual. Hence, if someone chooses to define their modifications as causing physical harm then it might be mutilation or NSSI, however this is not a finding in this sample as most consider it a constructive improvement in their physical state:

And I saw the [split] tongue as something that I'd still want to have done, even like down the line. Because it is still pretty to me. It's still part of the whole beautifying your body. Like piercing is like beautifying your body. [Split] tongue is just a giant leap of beautifying your body. (Mason)

I don't know. I mean, it makes me feel -- it always makes me feel really pretty and sexy [...] I really love how I look after. I feel so much more comfortable. I think, honestly, to be shallow -- I just think I'm prettier with tattoos, and it's not even in a sexy way, it's just like I look at all those things and I'm like I know why I got these, I know what I had to go through to get them. And those are things that change how you perceive yourself. I look at old photos of myself where I had no tattoos or no visible ones and I'm just like you look so, not naïve, but so weak in a way. And I feel so much stronger with my tattoos because they're a symbol of all the things, all the hardships I had to go through. All the hardships, all the pain, both emotionally, mentally and physically from my [chronic]
illness. It just changes who you are. And when you've lived with -- I've had them for so long. I could never imagine my body without tattoos. (Ava)

I think it's beautiful. That's like saying why do you think that curling your hair with a curling iron is -- like, it's beautiful to me, so it's beautifying the body. It's maybe like -- I don't know. People don't typically think of breast implants as being severely violent, but that is way invasive compared to the level, the skin level of piercing and tattooing. I mean, unless you're doing really deep piercing, breast augmentation is really, really invasive compared to that. But people don't think of that as violent. (Sarah)

Part of what is interesting in both Favazza and Strong is a complete lack of discussion of plastic surgery, presumably as it holds the position of most socially legitimated body modification. In the hierarchy of legitimated modification one respondent went so far as to compare surgeons to royalty, “surgery is the most established in body modification. They're so legitimized that they're not even considered. I mean, they're like -- they're royalty. They're not even human beings anymore, they're royalty. So they don't -- they've created this illusion that they don't even do body modification.”(Robert) Maybe the more important feature of this legitimation is that it is under the hand of a licensed medical practitioner. If the problem of legitimation is that the modification must be done at the hands of a trained or medically licensed practitioner it seems odd that tattooing, piercing, and scarification would come under this scrutiny as the vast majority are done under the watchful eye of professionals in health department approved shops. This illuminates the power of medicine as an institution to decry what is acceptable and what is not, but more accurately that all intervention with bodies is their domain and anything outside is suspect and pathologized such that it can come under medical
control once again. Part of the very nature of body modification is the claiming of bodies. Thus, the extension of control through the medical vector is an issue, and should body modification be considered a form of non-suicidal self-injury that is culturally legitimized, so should plastic surgery. The issue of the definition of NSSI is problematic as it has been referred to as “harm” and in more extreme cases “mutilation,” however regular people engage in unhealthy and harmful behaviors that are not addressed under the broad stigmatizing efforts of psychiatry. In fact one participant highlighted this issue as well when asked the difference between mutilation and self-harm:

And, you know, it's funny because as you asked the question, I've got to be honest, in 20 years in hanging out in this culture I have yet to come across anybody who I think is really in danger of hurting themselves specifically because of tattoos, piercings, brandings or suspension. I think this one performer that I know has really pushed her boundaries, but I also know a contortionist who has got spinal problems and she's very deliberately hurting herself to do her job, but no one would ever look at her and say to themselves "That's not healthy. What is she doing?" I think that would be uncommon. We elect to do lots of things that are intrinsically damaging all the time and we give each other a pass on it in so many ways. Cigarettes are a prime example. Alcohol to me is a ruthless killer. So I'm really struggling to come up with an example where I think okay, here's somebody who got this piercing or this tattoo or whatever, and this is really, really damaging and bad. (Matt)

Favazza and Strong particularly go out of their way to show culturally based ritual as NSSI that is socially sanctioned. What is problematic here is by expanding the reach of this term
to all these practices it A) collects so many social actions under one umbrella it is an effectively useless descriptor and B) reduces the social importance and meaning of modification practices to an afterthought. More importantly, because Favazza’s and Strong’s entire focus is self-harm the discussion of “body modification” is either historical examples, anecdotes, or public figures which is then supplemented with stories from clinical subjects, and in the case of Favazza his subjects would easily qualify as needing clinical care. In other words, there was no recruitment from a sample that was not experiencing subjective psychological distress over what they considered self-harm, nor in the case of Strong individuals who didn’t self-harm due to trauma. This is a narrow vision of anyone who does body modification and an even narrower definition of the practice. Not a single person in this sample envisions their current practice as in any way negative, self-harm or mutilation. For the three “cutters” in this sample they were very clear to distinguish the practice from modification. Cutting they termed unhealthy, problematic, something they didn’t feel accomplished anything, and wasn’t a positive experience. The other action was qualitatively define as part of “self-love” or “beautification”:

I think that that really comes down to intent. I think that as somebody who has self-harmed, the intent is very different. While it's still in some respects like claiming of the body and sometimes marking significant events that you want to remember, those things might be similar, I do think that the intent is quite different, for me. I don't know that that's true for everybody else. For me, the intent with self-harm was to hurt myself more than somebody else could hurt me, to claim my body as my own, to measure my emotional pain as physical pain in a way that I could better grasp it, and as a way to express feelings that I was not allowed to express in any other way. And that is not at all
the experience that I have with piercing and tattoos, because it's not impulsive. It's thought out. I choose to do it. I choose something that I think is beautiful and then I plan it and I make a decision to have it put on my body. And I think about where I want it to go and what it means to me. Even though there are a couple things that are kind of similar, the intent is not at all the same because with the tattoo, it's something that I want to see and enjoy for the rest of my life, and that was definitely not the intent that I had with self-harm […] I feel like the self-harm was compulsive, it was impulsive, it was completely based out of emotion, it was very much rooted in a sense of frustration and anger and a sense of unworthiness or damagedness and need to self-punish and punish others, and those are not feelings that I have around my body modifications. (Jessie)

While modification efforts may be motivated by resolving previous wounds, the wound is not the defining feature of the activity (Favazza referenced this as resolving neurosis through NSSI). The defining feature is the use of body modification is psychological resilience, rather than evidencing weakness, pathology, or self-harm. In this sample it was a way to increase strength and rebound, and it is to be contextualized in clinical terms it is likely more at home with work on “post-traumatic growth” or “resilience.” Even if the behavior of changing the body is the same, e.g. cutting with a scalpel, the end result is widely different when done for scarification, surgery, or self-harm. Thus, saying they are all NSSI because they all cut, or alter/damage/change the body, would be as outrageous as classing pregnancy as “body modification” (which is no doubt a major body modification if one were to be so pedantic).

Body modification is akin to Durkheim’s Churinga, an inert act that is inscribed with meaning by the user. For the people in this sample when asked about the issue of “mutilation” vs
modification they responded more commonly with the issues of intent and consent, and secondary to that a binary reduction of “good” and “bad:”

Intent. I keep trying to find words to use aside from sanity, which, again, that safe/sane/consensual thing being a really good building block, it's hard to kind of parse that out without the using the word sanity. I don't like the word sanity because it implies that there's some level of insanity or mental instability that can be attributed to this, and I really don't like that implication. Cognizance, maybe. When you are truly cognizant of the effect of your actions and you are sober and can truly consent to what you're doing to your body, when you know all of the facts and the risks involved, when you know the health and safety regulations and procedures that need to be followed, I don't know that any of it can really be attributed to violence or mutilation or harm. When you know what you're doing to yourself and it's being done in a manner that is as safe as possible, I don't think that removing a finger is any more harmful, any less sane or any weirder than breast implants. You know? You take silicone and stick it underneath your chest so it's bigger? Cool, if that's where you get your rocks off. If that, at the end of the day, is what makes you feel a little more whole, a little more calm, a little more in control, then do it, absolutely. But if removing a piece of your own finger does that too, do it. You're not doing it to somebody else. And it is a slippery slope because then, what about suicide? What about mutilation? Again, if you know what you're doing, really what you're doing to yourself -- I don't approve of suicide, but I also don't have any major religiously-influenced moral qualms with it. My issues on that are very much in the way of what about your friends and family? Dude, come on.” (Ethan)
Intention. I know a lot of people who have cut because there's something going on that they don't know how to communicate [...] So talking about mutilation, there might be intention there but it tends to be self-destructive, where -- I'm not a psychiatrist, I'm not qualified really to speak on mental illness, but my understanding of it is self-destructive, not self-constructive kind of scenario[...] But with part of my body modification, I'm enacting on my body something to change my body to match however I want to be.

There's an intention behind it. (Jacob)

This sample’s social conception is that mutilation or NSSI is by definition something not done out of self-love, that it is done without thoughtful intent (e.g. it is compulsive or the outcome of some altered state including depression or drugs), and that it is done without consent (it should be noted that by this ethos one participant explicitly cited his circumcision as mutilation, but all other activities where he had agency and consent as modification). Much of this ideology is born from the modern BDSM movement where pain and harm are redefined as services and acts that are done with consent and intention in a loving dynamic. As such, as long as someone isn’t experiencing subjective distress and they have consented in an informed manner to the intentional painful activity then whatever action is entirely fine. The more that academics who look at behavior can be open to ideologies that are not an expression of Judeo-Christian mores under the guise of the Western Medical-Industrial context the better we might be, as one piercer turned anthropologist articulated:

I think some of it is subjective. It depends on whose viewpoint and what their ideas are on mutilation, modification, whatever. Some people, if you talk to Europeans, circumcising babies is mutilation. Male babies. If you talk to the World Health
Organization, do whatever you want to the male foreskin but god, keep your hands off the women if they're over ‘there.’ If they're in these 28 countries. And it's only these 28 countries, and the people that used to live in those 28 countries, that mutilate. Oh, and many of them are Islamic, but that's another thing. (Robert).

**Institutionalized Bias**

The field of psychology and psychiatry is sanctioning and legitimating behavior in a world where one’s value as a citizen is measured by their “health.” Religion, spiritual, and ritual practices are a more old world framing of similar behaviors and equally valid. In one context, a person “mutilating” their body is a stigmatizing and negative activity, whereas in another it may be the only way to socially advance in hierarchy and achieve adult status (i.e., coming of age rites). Participants themselves reflected several different systems of thought that I have broadly classed as social thought, emotional/psychological thought, and spiritualistic/religious, or ritual thought. By allowing a domination of the topic of body modification by a mental health perspective, and by extension criminality and legal implications, the practice opens itself up to great stigmatization. In Western society there is little room for behavior that isn’t sanctioned by some legitimating agency—most notably psychiatry and the legal system. It is well known there is gender, racial, and class bias in both of these systems. To put it in a rather reductionist framework: if you are white and of middle to upper socio-economic status your unusual behavior will likely be pathologized, and should you be a person of color or of low socio-economic status your behavior will likely be criminalized—all in an effort to control and regulate society’s denizens.
This level of institutionalized bias comes from research publications that make blanket associations without any social context for their findings. The history of this practice starts in the 1950’s with association studies between personality disorders, drug abuse, and criminality with tattoos (Table 2).

**Table 2: Publication short list from before 2000:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Modification Association</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Buhrich, 1983)</td>
<td>Tattoos associated with social instability and deprived background. Only looked at tattoos in methadone using sample.</td>
<td>Drug addicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Earls &amp; Hester, 1967)</td>
<td>Tattoos affiliated with psychiatric disorders.</td>
<td>Sailors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ferguson-Rayport, Griffith, &amp; Straus, 1955)</td>
<td>Examination of tattoos within a psychiatric ward. Tattoos distinguishing of psychopathology between schizophrenics and personality disorders.</td>
<td>Psychiatric patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Fried, 1983)</td>
<td>Tattoos represent subconscious feelings particularly aggression and sexuality. Tattoos worthy of concern by physicians treating pediatric patients.</td>
<td>Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Gittleson, Wallen, &amp; Dawson-Butterworth, 1969)</td>
<td>Tattoos associated with personality disorders</td>
<td>Psychiatric patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Goldstein, 1979)</td>
<td>&quot;Most tattooed persons are simpleminded and most designs are banal&quot; Also reaffirms tattoos are associated with psychiatric disorders</td>
<td>Hospitalized military psychiatric patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Grumet, 1983)</td>
<td>Tattoos marker of sexuality, personality disorders, and criminality.</td>
<td>Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Houghton, Durkin, Parry, Turbett, &amp; Odgers, 1996)</td>
<td>Amateur tattoos affiliated with problem behavior in schools</td>
<td>High School Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Howell, Payne, &amp; Roe, 1971)</td>
<td>“Tattooed inmates scored significantly higher on dimensions of psychic pain, family discord, self-degradation, social deviancy, impulsiveness, hostility, and depression.”</td>
<td>Prisoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Hamburger &amp; Lacovara, 1963)</td>
<td>Tattoos a sign of criminality</td>
<td>Prisoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Raspa &amp; Cusack, 1990)</td>
<td>Reaffirms the association of tattoos with personality disorders</td>
<td>Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Virkkunen, 1976)</td>
<td>Prisoners that resorted to &quot;slashing&quot; were more often tattooed, which is referred to as self-destructive</td>
<td>Prisoners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The articles in Table 2 predominantly start with populations that are already considered problematic—namely prisoners, psychiatric patients, and troubled youth—or review that literature thus reifying the associations. In the above, tattooing is studied almost exclusively within these rare populations rather than framing it within the general populace. The a priori framing therefore presents negative associations without looking at large social trends. Some of this is attributable to the era of the papers and the rarity of tattooing at the time.

After 2000 there is a decline in this type of article and a shift to studying modification in broader populations. However, the framework from the preceding era still exists producing an investigative focus on these behaviors as markers of risk, drug use, or early mortality. Specifically, a recent study correlated tattoos with early mortality, suggesting that it was because tattooed individuals were more likely to die of drug overdose or violent death (Carson, 2014). This publication is problematic because it ignores the social context of modification, which for some is related to trauma and more globally lower socio-economic status. One would not published a correlation study of early mortality for African-Americans and identify the cause as gunshot wounds while ignoring institutionalized racism. Body modification is predominantly a
working class activity, partially because of its expression of counter culture values and identity that restrict members to lower income careers. Modification aside, being working or lower middle class as the majority of the current sample is, has fewer resources in economic hardship and poorer access to health care, including mental health care. Therefore, it is not the modification, but the socio-economic status correlated with it that has poor outcomes including problems with the law, drugs, mental health, and problems with hindrance in normative measures of success like stable relationships, income, and academic achievement. As tattoos in particular are becoming more of a middle class activity, according to Margo DeMello, this correlation will either increase across socio-economic class or disappear entirely depending on larger socio-economic changes (DeMello, 2000). This sample is more heavily modified in more ways but the class shift in tattoos will have ramifications for the place of modification globally in society. Even within this sample the most visible, and therefore socially interactive, of the modifications were tattoos and piercings.

Another study of adolescents showed a correlation with drug, sexual risk taking, and other problem behaviors including suicide and violence (Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts, & Myhre, 2002). However, this study doesn’t address any issues of possible trauma as a causative agent, nor does it address issues of socio-economic status—factors which are crucial considering their sample is military affiliated and drawn “on military beneficiaries aged 12 to 22 years old attending the Adolescent Clinic, Naval Medical Center, San Diego.” The closest they came to a marker for class was whether or not the tattoos were done professionally or by a scratcher. Most importantly, it misses the entire meaning of adolescent modification: it isn’t a problem, but instead a coming of age rite and way to claim the body as one’s own. Hence it would also
probably be associated with sexual activity. When looking at the co-occurrence of claiming the body codes and coming of age in this small sample there is a correlation, but not with enough power to provide statistics (Laura, Daniel, Sarah, Olivia, Robert all had explicit associations with claiming their body and burgeoning sexuality in their adolescence and/or early adulthood).

However, other research has started to separate from these continuing negative frameworks, and instead shown modification as having positive social meanings. In a sample of college age students researchers associated the presence of tattooing and body piercing with openness to new experiences more than traditional conscientiousness (Tate & Shelton, 2008). Clearly there is an important lesson on the sample regarding social meaning. Here the meaning of the symbol, e.g. body modification, changes in context from the psychiatric patient to the college student, and investigations into broader samples affords broader meanings and interpretations of the practice. In one case it is a sign of negative psychopathology and another a sign of openness. In this sample, it can function as both a mechanism for coping with trauma and a statement of social place. The shifting nature of this symbol is a readily obvious fact to any social scientist, but something that has slowly been included in academic research on the topic due to the focus on psychiatric patients, criminals, and similar populations. Hence, the following section on stigma focuses primarily on medical, legal, mental health stigma, and general social stigma which were more emergent topics than the conflation of mutilation, NSSI, and body modification. It should also be stated that due to the vast majority of academic literature being an examination of modification as destructive, a sign of psychopathology, or a marker of risk taking there is a general aversion by modified individual to the notion of academic writing on the topic. As mentioned in the sample section this was part of the vetting of this project before individuals
would agree to an interview. More directly in the writing of this text it has served as a lesson to not make strong generalizing statements about modifiers or the community in general due to the numerous intersectionalities for which those statements may not hold true. A discussion of mutilation and prior academic literature is relevant to introduce the issues of social biases and why they were focused on. As much of the literature focused on self-harm or psychopathology an investigation of mental health interactions was necessary. Similarly, much of the prior literature was on tattoos being affiliated with criminality, and hence some of the next section is on legal interactions. Some of the pediatricians that wrote publications on modification as a sign of behavior problems in adolescents and worthy of physician concern, and therefore there is also a focus on medical interactions.

**Mental Health Stigma**

Social stigma is a consistent theme in this sample and is defined as a marker or characteristic that individuals perceive as having negative connotations or affiliations. Here the literal marker is body modification, and it has negative connotations around it regarding criminality, sexual promiscuity, poor mental health, self-harm, and drug abuse. Areas that were expressly asked about in the interview were legal concerns, medical and mental health interactions, and employment restrictions, but participants also offered separate examples of general social stigma and sexual stigma that were emergent.

Mental health stigma—the assumption that modified individuals suffer from some form of psychopathology or questionable behavior—is the most readily obvious as it has a documented history in formal systems as illuminated above by behavioral studies and works such as Favazza and Strong. For this sample, participants stated that they were aware of mental
health stigma at a larger social level but very few had experienced it at a personal level partially because individuals avoided mental health care providers. For those that sought mental help and experienced this stigma they resolved this issue by merely finding a different provider, thus reducing their exposure:

I've had direct exposure [to a mental health provider] a few times. When my mom got sick, I sought a psychologist to help me try to bring focus back into my life, because I completely fell apart. I stopped eating, stopped sleeping. I literally would just lay and stare at the wall and cry for weeks on end. That's not okay. And I felt very alone and I felt very conflicted because you make all these realizations like all these things that you would -- it's like oh, my mom will be at my wedding. No, she'll never be there. Stuff like that was just like -- all of these things that you expect to happen are just gone forever, and that's harsh. So I sought attention to help me focus my thoughts, and the first person that I dealt with, who should not be a therapist, was extremely judgmental and instantaneously classified what I was doing as far as suspension or practices of fasting and body cleanses and stuff like that, he instantly categorized that as self-harm and so it took us like three sessions to where I was like I can't work with you because you can't respect me as a person. You simply want to categorize me according to the [DSM]. (Samantha)

Several individuals in this sample have sought professional help for grief, PTSD or other serious mental health concerns. However, most participants didn’t seek assistance due to their concerns of adverse perceptions of their activities, and instead sought support through the modification community. One participant commented in his follow-up meeting that he had experienced stigma from a therapist at the VA for his combat PTSD but merely refused to work with them and
instead found a therapist inside the modification community to work with. Similarly, another participant said that for his medical needs regarding modification he sought help at TASHRA as it was a center already equipped to deal with alternative sexualities, including BDSM, and therefore was quite helpful in dealing with modified individuals. In general, there has been a long history of alternative sexuality and body modification coming together due to its popularization in the queer communities of San Francisco and LA throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, and as a result some of the stigma is overlapped between the two:

Unfortunately, I think a lot of those practices are still tied to the nineteenth century in how they externalized certain aspects of humanity and chose to stigmatize them to the point of making them not healthy. It was only in the past couple of decades that homosexuality was taken off the DSM-IV, and even then I think it's still under contention in certain communities. I think the innate reaction people have to pain equals bad and anybody who chooses pain must be bad is overly simplistic and needs some substantial revision to properly understand what it means to be human. That there's a lot of things people choose that are perfectly normal, perfectly healthy. With my personal choices in body modification, there's a lot of -- the whole DSM and the mental health view of that is part and parcel, in some ways, with laws and regulations around who can perform what kind of practices and what kind of training you need to have, and finding laws around certain practices. Not too dissimilar from how abortion is being regulated in certain ways and saying you need to have a doctorate to do certain things, you need to be in a hospital to do certain things. They're trying to pass laws around only doctors can use scalpels sort
of thing. Only doctors can buy certain materials that a lot of patient practitioners use.

(Jacob)

Due to this stigma being more at a conceptual level, and something the participants felt they could get away from if necessary, it was not something they directly observed or reported on much. A more prevalent experience was stigma from medical providers which participants had more frequent interactions with due to their perceived necessity for physical ailments.

Medical Stigma

Stigma from medical providers was expressed as a moral judgment of patients. Rather than viewing them as mentally ill, they were viewed as somehow sexually promiscuous, a drug user, unconcerned for their health, or irresponsible. One female respondent while in college had fallen particularly ill and was already visibly modified (even by 24 she is extremely modified) and had issues due to the intersection of her sex and modification:

I do remember when I was 19 years old, I got -- well, I didn't know I had mono, but at the time I'd gotten mono. I was super-ridiculously sick and couldn't figure out what was wrong. I went to the doctor on campus because I was so sick that I didn't want to go any further than that. I went to the doctor on campus and the first thing they did was give me a pregnancy test, which is a strange thing when somebody's so lethargic and swollen glands, can't swallow anything -- well, they must be pregnant. So I got a pregnancy test from the get-go and then they tested me for, I think they did test me for mono, just like the prick test, and a couple other things. Nothing came up. Take some ibuprofen, you'll be fine. So a week later I wasn't better. I didn't go back to them, because fuck the student doctors, they're never good. Nobody ever goes to the student health center for a reason.
So I went to another doctor, and they're like pregnancy test again from the get-go. It's like okay, fine. Did a big STD panel. I was just like fine, okay, whatever. I get tested regularly, but do it. Did that.

Q: Are you implying that they thought that you had an STD because of [how you looked]?

A: I think so. Because I got tested for HIV and AIDS more times than any 19-year-old I know... So I had a total of 17 doctor visits and 11 blood panels done over a couple of months and was tested for HIV and AIDS. This was all from a bunch of different doctors, because nobody was ever telling me anything or doing anything for me, more than telling me to take ibuprofen which -- they were telling me my liver enzymes were triple what they should be. And they were saying it was because I was drinking. I was not drinking. I hadn't touched alcohol in months because I was so sick, I couldn't even move. I was like, "I'm not drinking." Anyway, so basically different doctors making me take pregnancy tests and STD tests.

Q: And then assumed your liver was faulty because you were drinking.

A: Uh-huh.

Q: Those associations of the loose woman with the tattooed woman were still prevalent, is what you're insinuating?

A: Exactly. I can't guarantee that that's what it was, but from multiple professionals, and the fact is that seemed -- the last doctor I went to, actually, because I also went to -- it was all men who I ended up being at. The last doctor I ended up going to was a woman. Not on purpose, just because my mom was like "go in there and tell them to give you
something right now because you are so sick." She was like, "I'll go with you," and I was, "No, Mom, I can do it myself." So I got to the doctor and I tell her I can almost guarantee I have mono. I told her all the things that they'd done, all the panels, and she's like "What? Why?" She said, "You obviously have mono." She's like, "Yes, here, take this." She's like, "I'm going to do the test anyway." She did the blood test, actually took my blood and did it, and she's like, "That's what you have, obviously."

Q: So this last female doctor was like, "This is absurd."

A: Absurd. Didn't give me a pregnancy test or any other test. Physically gave me the steroid, the three-day steroid pack. Said you have this, here's something so you can actually eat because you've lost 15 pounds in the past two months because you can't eat. You obviously have mono. I'll let you know for sure, but I know this is what it is. If you don't feel better in the next couple of days, come back, we'll get something else for you. Within a day on the steroid pack, I was feeling three hundred percent better. I hadn't felt that good in months. Like, epic. I had to medically withdraw from my classes that semester. I had to quit one of my jobs. The last doctor, one female doctor out of, I want to say it was probably like seven or eight doctors total, was the only one who didn't make me take a pregnancy test, didn't make me do an STD panel, and just immediately was like yeah, that's absolutely what you have. Because every time I'd be like "I think it's mono" and they'd be like, "Well, let's do a test and let's do this…" I got tested for vitamin D deficiency on top of it, too. Like, really? You think I'm not getting enough vitamin D. You can't believe that it's just probably mono and that it's a strange strain that you're not getting off of your prick test? Crazy. I think out of anything that was the most obvious.
And it's from men, the idea of oh you're obviously a loose woman. I wasn't dating anybody and I wasn't sleeping with anybody at the time. I actually have no idea how I got the mono, more than I probably shared a drink with a friend or something, but I wasn't … kissing. I hadn't been kissing anybody. I hadn't been sleeping with anybody. I was telling them, there's no way I'm pregnant but you can keep testing me for this. (Laura)

The feature of being sexually promiscuous as a stigma was a general theme and one women in particular commented on, but male piercers also experienced at a more general social level. However, as medical professionals it is hoped that one’s personal biases will not affect treatment even though it regrettably does. In another case this was manifested by not even treating a patient in the emergency room:

I had sinusitis and bronchitis together and I was in an emergency room and this guy just refused to treat me for hours, like eight hours. They just left me laying in the emergency room. And I felt like I was dying. And the reason why is because it was my second time in there for it and I don't go to any medical unless I have to -- I hate it -- and I literally couldn't see. Photosensitivity, all kinds of shit. I couldn't even use my phone. And this guy -- it's my own assumption, but I think it had something to do with that, because I was not a dick to him. And I even asked him, "Why are you treating me this way, just leaving me laying in here like this? I can't even see to get down the damn hallway and you haven't even helped me. The only thing I can see is that clock on the wall." And he wouldn't deal with me. But I complained formally about him. (Michael)

For another similar case there was a general lack of willingness to interact with the patient, and instead objectify him and his condition as a moral story for others:
Oh, yeah. I had an infected tattoo on my leg and that was insane. It was the worst experience I've ever had in a medical place. They were fucking dicks. Everybody wanted to take pictures of my tattoo and I was telling everybody to fuck off. The first guy even doing my intake he's like, "Can I take a picture of your tattoo to show my niece? She wants to get tattooed." And I'm like, "You can fuck off. I'm here to get my leg looked at and fucking fixed. I'm not here to have you fuck with my life." You know what I'm saying? I work in a tattoo shop. The only reason it's infected is because I let it get infected. Sitting on the thing, six or seven different nurses came and tried to take a picture of me. The doctor came in, didn't even touch me. Stood at the fucking little curtains and was like, "Oh yes, it's infected. I'll write you a prescription." Shut it and walked away. Didn't clean my leg, didn't fucking give me -- and I was at a point where I could barely walk. I'm a walk-it-off type of person. Like, I'm going to walk it off until I can't. And I couldn't anymore and they didn't even give me IV antibiotics. They didn't do anything. Didn't even give me antibiotics to take while I was there. They just looked at it, told me it was infected, and sent me on my way. Like I was fucking homeless, or like they do to the homeless. They don't really treat you, they just send you on your way. That's exactly what they did to me. This was that same area. Horrible experience. (James)

For some this has translated to not even engaging with Western medical practitioners and instead focusing on alternative or Eastern medicine wherein they perceive a more accepting environment. For Sarah, one of the aforementioned trauma stories who had severe trauma, the only time she cried in her interview was when talking about her experience with medical or
dental practitioners. She considered dentistry the one medical field of Western medicine that was still necessary:

Q: Have you had any interactions with anyone since then in Western medicine?
A: Absolutely, and it's complete discrimination. When I go to the dentist, they think that I'm a total junkie and they treat me like fucking shit. It's really hard to get treated halfway decent in any medical situation.[…] And I had to go through four different dentists to finally get one that was willing to even work in my mouth, because when I sat in the chair and when they looked inside my mouth and saw it, the dental workers, the people that were helping, would be like "oh my god" and just talk shit to me, and then the dentist would have this assumption that I was on drugs and that I don't care about my body and they'd look at me, and then they'd say things like -- because I don't like needles going in my mouth -- they would tell me, "Oh, give me a break. You don't like needles? Just look at you. You obviously love pain." And like telling me all this shit, just like really, really like every time. And I had to go to the dentist -- I just got the last filling replaced of the seven, so I've been to the dentist every two weeks for almost two months. I've been back for two months and just the other day I finally got the last one replaced. And I have an emotional breakdown every time I go. I don't let any of them see it, but like -- it's just really hard to have people treat you like shit and think that you don't care about yourself just because -- yeah, I guess there's situations where people treat you differently because of the things that I've chosen to do to my body, and it fucking sucks, because I need to take care of myself. I want to take care of myself. (Sarah)
For two of the members of this sample the issue of compromised care was particularly problematic due to their issues of chronic pain and disease. One suffers from Crohn’s disease and another from degenerative disk disease, and therefore suffer significant pain and require regular medical help. Chronic pain is an extremely trying condition and one that is susceptible to drug abuse. Therefore, negotiating the label and stigma of being a “drug seeking” patient was something both commented on:

A: I knew that people with tattoos and piercings are viewed by -- unfortunately there's this category of drug-seeking people and that there is a negative assumption on people with piercings and tattoos that if they come and they're asking for narcotics, especially in the emergency room, that they are purely drug-seeking. So I think I've taken out my facial piercings twice. I had various jewelry in. I made sure I'd wear long sleeves. That was it. Just because I knew, because I'd experienced it before.

Q: You'd experienced that directly?

A: Yeah. I'd experienced it with pain management doctors, with going to see pain management doctors and seeing I'd had a little bit of experience of what it was to have a waiting room nurse red flag a patient. Like this particular doctor's office was very bad about it. Literally, it was like a sticky note. And I watched and the more and more I went there, I paid attention to who got sticky notes, right?

Q: Sticky notes?

A: Sticky notes on their medical records and what those people looked like in the waiting room. And, you know, you sit in a waiting room long enough and you kind of learn a thing or two about how that particular doctor's office is run. And so finally one day I
asked about the sticky notes and I had this newer girl explain to me what she was told and that if it looked as though someone -- if you looked at someone and you thought that they might be faking it, or if they had a lot of tattoos, to pay attention to them for why they were coming in, because it was under the assumption that people that didn't look like they were in pain or people that didn't really look like they "should be there," people with tattoos, might be getting their medications and selling them.” (Sophia)

Ava had a similar experience in her regular treatment:

With medical providers, absolutely, they just treat you like -- well, they have this assumption that you have a drug problem or that you drink, because I've had them ask "How many alcoholic beverages do you have in a week?" and you tell them, and they're like, "That's all? Really?" And I'm like, "I'm pretty sure you're not allowed to ask questions like that." And when they don't take you seriously as a patient [...] people hold you in a different mindset. And just getting checked into the hospital, people are just like even hesitating to assign me pain medication because if I'm talking about pain, they're like, "Oh, you just want pain meds." And I'm like, "You need to check my charts because I never take your prescription for pain meds." And I've even had a doctor be like "Oh, it says here you've been prescribed but you don't ever fill them. Why are you not taking them?" "Because I don't want to have a pain med problem." He's like, "Oh, that's really smart." I'm like, "Thanks for giving me that." And so there's that, yeah, absolutely you get treated so differently. [...] So usually my best conversations are with the EMTs, who get me, and the nurses, who take care of me. And it's normally the doctors that I have the
most difficult time talking to. Like, they already have a preconceived notion of who I am, that I'm some junkie into more Tramadol and Demerol and more Vicodin. (Ava)

This stigma might be something that the medical community is actually aware of as one of the more interesting examples provided was second hand story of a nursing conference:

[My father] was at a conference and this story's hilarious. I was laughing so hard when he told us this whole thing. My brother and I were up at the house for Thanksgiving and were hanging out the next morning having coffee, and he goes, "Oh, yeah. Do you guys know who Davey Havok is?" And my brother and I just bust out laughing. Like, yeah. I personally used to sell the guy computer stuff at a previous job. He used to come to the store I was at. He's been around the Bay Area. He would go to the same clubs I was at. He's the lead singer for AFI. He is neck-to-knuckles tattooed. Pretty boy. This guy is gorgeous. I'm heterosexual. I think this man is gorgeous. Apparently at this medical conference my father was at, they put a picture of Davey Havok up on the wall and it said, "If you see this person, he's a patient of yours, what would you do?" Across the board, the nursing students, the new nurses who were probably between my brother's age and my age, early twenties to early thirties, "Oh, he's tattooed. I would follow extreme personal protective barriers because he probably has all sorts of STDs. He probably has unsafe sex. He probably uses intravenous drugs." Obviously, because this guy has lots of tattoos, he's an unsafe person and the initial judgment was definitely that he was unsafe and extra barriers because I don't want to get anything from that icky, icky person.

Meanwhile, my dad let them talk a bit, raised his hand, and said, "You don't know that. I saw that picture -- " Actually, I take it back. He didn't say who's Davey Havok, before the
conference my father showed me the picture and said, "Do you know this guy?" And my brother's all, "Yeah, this is Davey Havok," and told the story that way. And then in the conference he said, "My sons know this guy. And Davey Havok, doing some research on him, he's vegan. He's straight edge. He is probably the safest person you can handle, because he doesn't have random sex. He doesn't drink. He doesn't do drugs. He just has a lot of tattoos." And my dad, who is old enough to be the father of some of these people that were judging him initially, kind of got them a little cowed a bit. So there's definitely - - I think tattooing and piercing is getting more mainstream. It's no longer a mark of shame to be visibly tattooed. I think more these days it's changing. It's still not gone.

(Jacob)

Without being explicitly stated it is unlikely that the image of Davey Havok was used by chance. While he is famously modified he is also equally famous for his healthy straight edge lifestyle. And while this is speculation, it is likely that was used purposely to educate these new nurses on the folly of such judgment in the current era of modification. Thus, this goes to show on one hand the presence of stigma, but also hopefully the efforts to curtail it in medical practice. It should also be noted that several participants commented on the differences between nurses, EMTs, and doctors. Nurses were identified as being modified themselves and more generally understanding, as well as EMT’s. However, across the board doctors and dentists were described as judgmental and insensitive to the needs of their patients, and at best were “neutral.” This might be a greater reflection of roles, one caretaking and the other technical or diagnostic, or more generally class implications that interact with modification:
A lot of times the reactions are positive, especially among nurses and technicians who don't -- for me, it seems like the reasons there are nurses and technicians don't have to go through as much school as doctors and tend to be a lower socioeconomic class, so I think I share more socioeconomically with nurses and technicians than doctors. (David)

One participant provided a story showing the juxtaposition of these roles in her treatment after a somewhat serious suspension injury where her hook tore free from her knee:

But when it came down to going to the emergency room, my friend that helped me with the suspension and one of my best friends who was there both came and sat with me all night. We were there for nine hours because it was SF General, which is a trauma unit, so having a bunch of torn flesh versus heart attacks, stabbings, shootings, because it was also a Friday night on St. Patrick's Day. Okay, so nine hours sitting in the emergency room waiting to get like 32 stitches. Not a big deal but I wasn't capable of doing that. So we sat there and I'm going in and I'm like, "All right, here we go." I walk in. The nurse asked me what to do. She's in triage. She's like, "Okay, cool, well, it looks pretty bad. We'll take you back there. We're not going to send you in the emergency room," because it was still bleeding and everything, too. And it turned out her brother does suspension. […] So that was easy. It was kind of unreal, because my friend that went with me, like, "Oh, what's his name?" And she told him and he kind of like chuckles to himself, goes through his phone. "Is this your brother?" She's like, "Yes, that is." He's like, "I know him." So that was — […] Again, it's one of those things where I had my defense up and I'm like okay, I'm ready to go, let's go. And then that happened and I was just like, "Only in San Francisco." You know? So that was an easy intake. And then we get back to the
emergency room and unbelievable. [...] So eventually, it took forever, finally they changed shifts and this woman [doctor] comes in. By that time, we'd been there for eight hours. And she comes in and they do everything like they're supposed to. They flush it, they do all this stuff. But she's getting ready to go and start suturing me and I was like, "Um, can you put like Lidocaine or something in there?" She was like, "Well, didn't you do this to yourself? I'm sure you can handle it." I was like, "Wow." So I just very sternly looked at her. I was like, "That was a long time ago and it hurts now. It's very tender and if you're going to be putting needles in it, my knee is very hypersensitive right now because it's swollen." And so she kind of was just like, "Yeah, I'll be right back." And she went and got some and numbed it up and she sewed it up fine and everything. She was, other than that comment, she was very professional and she finished it. Because clearly she was like yeah, all you need is sutures. But the fact that she said that, I was like oh really? Could you be any more rude and inconsiderate? You're here to care for me. You're not here to judge me and tell me what you think I do wrong. So that was a very interesting experience of having our intake nurse be like oh yeah, whatever, my brother does this, no biggie, we'll take care of you, to her being like you did this, you should suck it up. I was just like wow." (Samantha)

Nurses and EMTs regularly represent a lower socio-economic class than the elite doctor or dentist, implicating class as something for further exploration in the presence of this stigma. However, whether stigma is more prevalent in legal, medical or mental health situations is still questionable. It is possible that the instances reported here are more memorable due to the
significant consequences for their mere presence—not that they are more prevalent than in society as a whole:

I think the outcome of it is more dire in those two professions than, let's say, the coffee shop. Does that make sense? I think being judged by your mod in a medical or legal situation has greater -- the scales of how that works out in play are very, it's not the same as oh, we've decided that you're not Starbucks material versus you're not going to get heard out in court, you're not going to get treated like a human being in jail, or in your holding cell, if your lawyer thinks you're whatever. If your doctor has written you off as some fucking person probably trying to get painkillers because you're tatted up, whatever the fuck. Yeah, I think that's more important how that goes than elsewhere in society. I think those are the most, the greater outcome. I cannot find the words for it. It's worse for you if your mods create some kind of social stigma in those two settings. It can have a very catastrophic or life-ruining outcome if people you are judging you over that in society, but I think it's relatively all about the same. Because people aren't their jobs, people aren't their professions, people are people. People become those things. People live like they are. But it doesn't matter what you do. If you're an asshole and you judge everyone, you're an asshole who judges everyone. It's just how much exposure do you have to -- we covered the fact that police officers, most of the people they're dealing with are criminals, so everyone they see with a tattoo is a fucking criminal, right? Therefore, if you have tattoos, you're a fucking criminal. And anyone who knows the history of it, that's always been the stigma. It's just now changing. Even in the community, like we were saying, they have issues with the neck tattoos. (Daniel)
Legal Stigma

Stigma from members of the legal system around modification is a well-known and well-documented phenomena. Clinton Sanders explored the process of living as a modified individual and the historical legal and social stigma affiliated with it in his work *Customizing the Body*. Years later the negative associations of being either part of a gangs, prison, military, or circus freaks still exists, with some new implications in the medical field. Therefore, the respondents almost laughed when asked about legal interactions as problems with law enforcement was such a well-known and prevalent feature of being modified. The result is reports of management of possible stigma for any interaction with representatives of the law as exemplified by covering up tattoos, removing piercings, and/or adjusting hairstyles:

Well, you know, it's one's perspective and it's the exposure of the police. They're dealing with criminals. So the people that are tattooed, this is a really good way to look at it--the people that they're dealing with that are tattooed are criminals, or people that they have deemed criminals. They're in scenarios, everything from the domestic violence scenario, the meth bust we just had, these bikers, all the things that make this conversation that we're having and why you're doing this paper, about -- where this really weird cusp of society. And as far as it goes, I get pulled over, I roll my sleeves down on my sweatshirt. I've even been in some situations where I felt it probably wise in certain neighborhoods, like mostly suburban neighborhoods, to pull my earrings out when the cops are coming up to the car and give them on of these [pulls mowhawk into more respectable pony tail], or throw them in the cup holder and cover my tattoos and go, "Yeah, how you doing?" rather than sitting there with my arm out the window in suburbia. Boom. What the hell is
That? It's like some nondescript black work, obviously, this gang-oriented tattoo. You have to just play it. As far as the law goes, sometimes it matters ... it don't really matter, don't blink an eye at it. Dealing with cops out here, they're probably just glad that you're not committing some horrible crime, that you're not going to try and pull a gun on them, that you're not doing anything wrong and that you're well spoken. Look, it's Oakland, it's our area. There's a lot of people walking around this part of the Bay Area with tattoos. It's more acceptable here than most places. Now, let's say if we were in, I don't know, Oklahoma somewhere, we probably would have a different experience with the cops, probably would have a very familiar experience with the cops over there. (Daniel)

This sentiment around bias from law enforcement was continuously echoed by other participants:

A: Police. Oh boy, they don't like me.
Q: Really?
A: Yeah, you get someone who's pretty heavily tattooed, the first thing they're going to ask me is what gang I'm in, especially because I have the four-leaf clover. There is a prison gang called the Aryan Brotherhood and their logo is the clover.
Q: That's right.
A: So if I ever go to prison, I have to cover that. I'll not go to prison. But, yeah, police, the first thing they'll do is they'll start asking me stuff like that -- do I know them. Even though it's supposedly illegal, profiling is a very real thing. But then it's also the police that ask me all about this and that, like how much it hurt, because they want to get really tattooed but they can't because it's part of their dress code or whatever. But I've definitely had police officers give me more grief than they should have. (Noah)
One participant had several rich examples of the continued legal stigma of visibly modified people:

Yeah, and walking down the street, the cops like to stop, and slow down and drive around and ask me where I'm going. [...] They'll drive near me, yeah. I lived in Belmont for like two years and I would still be escorted home. Like, they would drive in circles all the way out. I'd always yell, because it was up on a big hill, I'd yell at the same cop, like, "Give me a fucking ride and you'll see where I live. Give me a ride. This hill is huge. Please." But no. (James)

This same participant was pulled over and stripped to his underwear with his children in the car due to a tattoo on his neck regarding laughter (this individual is currently a fully employed member of society that also does homeless outreach in his spare time):

A: ha-ha-ha, don't take life too seriously. It's a guy that does it, the guy does a bunch of them. He's done ha-ha-has on hella people. The San Mateo County Gang Task Force thought it was a gang tattoo.

Q: Are you serious?

A: Yeah. Especially, I got pulled over on -- I used to work for a shop that was owned by Hell's Angels... and I had Hell's Angels stickers on my car. And I got pulled over and they told me I was swerving over the fog line, whatever that is. I don't know what a fucker fog line is, never heard of it.

Q: What is the fog line?

A: I don't know. Still to this day, I have no idea. I have friends who are cops and they're like, "They just wanted to pull you over." So got me out of the car. I had my daughter and
my son who had just gotten to California. [...] So, they pulled me out of the car. My son was in there. My ex-girlfriend's son was in there, who's high-level autistic. [...] So the cops pull me over and they get me out of the car. Now, I wouldn't get out of the car. At first I'm like, "What did I do?" "You were going over the fog line." I said, "No, tell me what I did and why you're pulling me over." Finally the other cop on the other side was like, "He's got a knife in his right pocket." And I'm just like, "Fuck. I'm good. You guys can actually take whatever you want. What do you want me to do?" "Reach over with your left hand, hand me the knife." So I did that. "Hand me your driver's license." I get my driver's license. They took me out of the car and I'm like, "I want to stay next to the car. I've got my 8-year-old daughter in there, I've got an autistic fucking 17-year-old, I've got a 19-year-old who had never been in California before and I've got a 16-year-old who's the only normal one in there and I think it's going to turn into chaos inside that car if I walk away from the car." "No, we need you to come over by our car." I'm like, "You're fucking crazy." "We'll leave an officer there." "Do you think an officer's going to make my children feel okay? One of them is autistic. Can he deal with that? Can you deal with this fucking autistic boy who probably fucking if he came at you would hurt you?" "He'll be fine." So they were asking me questions and blah-blah-blah. They actually stripped me down to my underwear on the side of 92 in Half Moon Bay, yeah, I was in my underwear on the side of 92 and they were taking pictures of all my tattoos and they got to the ha-ha-ha and they were like, "So, you work for a Hell's Angels tattoo shop, you've got H-A-H-A-H-A-H-A tattooed around your throat." And I just looked at them and I go, "You realize what that says, right?" He's like, "Nope, but it's a whole
bunch of HA's. That must be this new thing.” "It says hahahahaha.” And one of the cops starts cracking up. He just starts laughing. He's like, "Yep, it does.” He's like, "Why are we seeing so many of these on white people, bald white men?” "Well, for one, I'm only bald because I'm balding. We can get rid of that part of your conversation with me, is that it's not balding white men.” He's like, "We pulled --" and I'm like, "[A friend of mine} over on his motorcycle earlier today in fucking San Mateo." He's like, "How do you know? Do you know him?” I'm like, "Yeah, he's a really good friend of mine. We go to meetings together.” And he's like, "He's another balding white man.” "The only reason he is bald is because he is balding." This fucked them. They were getting really mad at me.

(James)

Many of the participants retold these stories with humor to discount the seriousness of the profiling. Another member was deeply entrenched in the politics and legalities of body modification as he was working with senators on the issue in the recent Arkansas bill SB387. During one section of his work he was running late for a meeting and didn’t have time to code switch into more formal attire and instead attempted to enter the capitol building in his regular attire:

I am dirty. I am nasty. It's been 24 hours or more that I've been traveling and not showered. I haven't shaved in a couple days. And I get a call saying we're going straight to the senator's office. And I was like, "Looking like this? This isn't a good idea." I said, "I need to go shower, I need to shave, I need to put on a suit." She goes, "We don't have time." So Misty picks me up, we go straight to the senator's office, and I love this right here, how you get treated. Every other time I've been in the Capitol, I just walk right in. I
have a suit on. I go through the thing and I walk right in. This time? We get police escorted to her office because of the way we look. And I was like, "How funny that we just got treated --." I've been here, this is my fourth time I've been in the government's building, in the Capitol, and now I'm getting escorted because I look like this. So I was like, this is funny. (Michael)

There is one very noteworthy thing about legal stigma, aside from it being expected, is that it was almost exclusively the males of this sample that commented and contributed to it as a code. One female respondent commented that it is was actually one of the benefits of gender and racial stereotyping that she actually wasn’t subject to this bias the way the males of this group were:

I know that in terms of legal matters and state stuff, having been a state employee, you deal with a lot of fucking bureaucrats and you know what their views are, it's a generational thing but it's also like a societal thing of cops are going to look at you differently. I'm just glad that as an Asian female, I probably get less attention from the cops, but say I were a young black male or a young white male with all the tattoos I have, they're probably going to think I'm more up to no good than me being up to no good. So I know that there's that weird dynamic in how people see tattoos. (Ava)

One male commented on the fact that this particular stigma of affiliating white visibly tattooed males with addicts, criminals, or prisons is actually an expression of class disparity. It is the assumption that they are blue collar, and as is common, there is the implicit assumption if someone is blue collar they are more likely to have resorted rough trades or criminality:

As I'm sure you know, it's a really different thing if you're talking men and women, the power dynamic. I'll get it sometimes on class where it's not cute. Like on class, because
I'm all tattooed and pierced, it's like I'm doing a rough trade, I'm doing the blue collar, I'm doing like the dumb mechanic. Yeah. So like there's all these assumptions that will go with it, like yeah, I'm doing the bad boy, are we out of prison? Like that mentality. They wouldn't literally ask that, but I've had people try to treat me that way, but I'm very quick to throw the brakes on that. (Robert)

This sample only had one individuals that had a criminal background, yet far more than that reported experiences where the association with modification for males was criminality or disreputable.

**General Stigma**

General stigma here refers to any stigma received from anyone who is not part or legal, mental health, or medical professions. Meaning this could include family, partners, coworkers, strangers, and would be generally described as interpersonal stigma. The most common forms of classifiable general stigma were employment restrictions or sexual harassment. For some this took the form of negative comments from family members, being asked to leave community areas, refused service, or insulted:

However, just last year, I got treated that way, too. My father asked me, "Why don't you come to Norman and open a studio?" Norman's where the University of Oklahoma is at, there's a huge alternative population there, alternative on whatever level you want to classify it. Alternative lifestyle/gay community or alternative lifestyle/punk rock-looking people, whatever. So they're all there. And that same evening I walked to, same thing, Texaco. […] But I went in there and this guy turned to me, looked at me and says, "Boy, why do you want to look like a nigger for?" I said, "Why do you want to sound like a
redneck for?" [...] It is hard for me sometimes to think oh yeah, I look like this, because I'm a father. I mean, I was in Target years ago. My two youngest daughters were with me. This had to be three years ago, knowing their age. My girls are standing next to me and this woman walks up and goes, "Oh honey, are you lost? Where's your mother?" And my oldest of the two looked at me and pointed and said, "That's my dad, he's right there." And she was like, "Oh," and turned around and walked off. And I was mean, and I shouldn't have been, but I said, "Am I not allowed to have children?" That was my comment. And I could have totally said something a little bit more tactful or whatever, but I didn't. It kind of pissed me off a little bit. (Michael)

For Noah this manifested in similar insults around sexual orientation rather than race:

I guess the real next big thing would be the stretching of the ears. That was a hard one to do and be accepted for because where I grew up, people didn't have stretched ears. And in my family, women had earrings, guys got dirty, and that's just how it was. And when I wanted to get my ears pierced, the words like "gay" and "fag" and stuff like that were definitely put out there. (Noah)

Daniel was similarly discriminated against and asked to leave a community pool with his girlfriend:

We're there and then I'm just rocking my tattoo and after, you know, "Did you know this is a community pool?" And I'm like, "Well, yeah." And they're like, "You don't live here." And I'm like, "Well, actually, who the hell are you people? I've never seen any of you before in my life." And they're, "Where do you live?" And I'm like, "You know the massive mansion-esque house down on the street?" And all these people, "Oh." Because I
hadn't been home in years. My parents were divorced. […] So we go to the community pool and after, I'd say, about an hour and a half of being up there, it came down to "Can you just leave?" And at that point I knew it was over. (Daniel)

Finally, another was refused service at a restaurant:

Yes. I definitely -- you know, when your mom says, "You're going to attract the wrong crowd," that definitely happened but I wouldn't use the term wrong crowd. It was just a different crowd. Obviously people with more body modifications talk to you more and you start getting more interactions with them. You get a lot more questions. Older generations look at you a little more disapprovingly. I actually didn't get served in a Chinese restaurant because of my tattoos. I was so -- this happened in Oakland -- I actually cried. I was with my partner and he could not believe it was happening. They wouldn't serve me because I was not the kind of Asian person they wanted in their restaurant. So they wouldn't serve me and I sat there while they blatantly ignored me. And the people next to us ordered food. We couldn't. And they just were talking about how I ruined my body and I was trashy and it was awful. It was awful. It was the most blatant display of disapproval towards my modifications that I've ever seen. (Ava)

With the regular display of many different forms of stigma against modified individuals it is likely that its association with nefarious origins is still active. However, this statement is said cautiously as there was no investigation of individuals who are biased against modification, and when this was discussed with participants they cited the issue of choice. A frequent comment that has been observed in discussion with other modified individuals is that stigmatizing
modification is acceptable because it is a “choice” in western society, and one participant did comment on that:

In respect to how people that are white, upper-middle-class folks, that essentially have all the choices in their lives to do what they want, they actually make the choice -- at times, certain sectors of the population make the choice to downgrade their state of class, and that typically only happens in the social strata where that is an option. Like, people that are from a lower class system don't necessarily make the option to denigrate themselves even lower class, if that is the way that it's perceived as denigration, and that stigma and all of that. (Emily)

The undercurrent of this thought is that through modification there has been a rejection of some form of privilege and downward social mobility, and therefore discrimination is somehow justified, unlike those that didn’t have a “choice.” This of course ignores the intersection of gender, sexuality, non-white racial groups, and low socio-economic groups that prolifically modify, as well as a more visible burgeoning white middle class as documented by DeMello. However, as Ava’s case below shows it also creates discrimination within a minority group, such that a minority identity is further oppressed. It should be questioned how much of a choice there really is when such an important feature of modification is the expression of a feeling of a priori social difference, even when sometimes that a priori difference was due to race:

And I'd say on some level my entire life, because I was always like the Asian kid out of a pretty much always white culture, I kind of always experienced some form of kind of -- well, some discrimination, but the fact that I was always the different one out of the group, the fact that I was getting piercings and tattoos, I never really got anything more
negative as a response from people than when I, the fact that I'm like the Asian kid. People would always look at me weird or talk to me weird because I was the Asian kid. So getting tattoos and piercings, people looked at me and said rude things. It wasn't any huge difference. It's just the topic was different. (Ava)

What is interesting is that in the system of discrimination the master status that is more noticeable and worthy of discrimination is modification over non-white race. Again, this is likely due to the presumption of choice, however for some it might be better to be contextualized as a choice in an expression of being inherently socially different, such as being “out,” but not a choice to be different. For some the issue of passing illustrated that while they knew they needed that internal sense of being different to be manifested they also wanted control over the reveal and subsequent stigmatizing responses. They couldn’t chose about their feeling of difference but they could control the choice to display it, and remain hidden. The only analogies that have been emergent in the interviews or community have been “remaining in the closet” for sexuality or “passing” in race, however more often once someone is visibly modified their status is irrevocably changed:

A: I remember when I got my first visible tattoos on my arms, I remember specifically going to restaurants and I used to be sat kind of up front, and then when I had those little tattoos and my ears were noticeable a lot larger we were getting set in back of the restaurants. […] And I hate pointing out this one, because it's going to be a very racist idea, but I noticed that in restaurants specifically, I went from sitting up front with all the white people to being put in back by all the brown people and it was a really weird thing to notice. Like they're actively doing this. I was sitting in back with families, with groups
with a lot of kids. I was sitting in back with ghetto people. I wasn't up front with the people that were in ties and obviously had money and this and that. It was this really weird thing to actually notice. Like I didn't think I'd ever actually see something like that.

Getting cabs.

Q: You became a second-class citizen?
A: I became a second-class citizen, yeah, absolutely. I definitely do get looked down upon because of tattooing and piercing and whatnot and there's definitely those people out there, but again, that goes along with the whole asshole filter. If they're going to look down on me because of my tattoos, then I'm probably not going to have a whole lot in common with them. (Noah)

Passing vis-à-vis covering up is the form of stigma mitigation that individuals previously mentioned, and without it individuals risk being treated like second class citizens. However, as Noah shows, the benefit of not trying to pass is that it screens out potentially poor fits in employment and social relationships.

**Sexual Stigma**

For women the stigma of being modified is a bit different as the intersection of being modified is coupled with gender oppression. Predominantly female participants provided examples of sexual stigma which consisted of the assumption that a modified person was sexually promiscuous, “loose,” or sexually deviant. For some in translates into increased boundaries being violated through inappropriate touch, or being sexually solicited, while for others it entails public shaming along the antiquated lines of being called a witch:

A: And to this moment. People at the flea market go like this to me.
Q: Okay, for the recording, to make a little cross sign.

A: They make the "stay from me, Satan" sign and they call me bruja and crazy stuff, like they're scared of me.

Q: How?

A: Specifically this has happened at the flea market in Oakland here, in the Oakland flea market at Laney College. And the guy was saying all this stuff in Spanish about me being a witch and Satan and "stay away from me, Satan" and "get back, Satan" and all this stuff, and making the go away Satan cross sign at me. And when I was in Bosnia at the flea market --

Q: This happened in Bosnia?

A: At the flea market!

Q: The flea market again?

A: Another guy did the same thing to me and my friend is Serbian and so he could tell me the guy was saying, "Stay away from me you Satan woman."

Q: So people thought you were satanic.

A: And I've had people call me devil woman and all this kind of stuff. (Sarah)

Another female participant found that as a server in the food industry she was more sexually solicited by patrons in an inappropriate and unwelcome manner:

Yesterday was pretty gross. This guy actually said to me, "Oh, you've got all those faces on your arm. I bet you I know a lot of guys whose faces want to be on you." Yeah. Gross. That happened. He said that and then he just kept going with it. He came back in there asking what food would be good to take home. The guy was like, "Oh, I bet you'd be
good to take home." [...] And these guys are like -- it's funny, because they're like in their sixties. When my co-workers were asking me who these guys were, they're at the table, three younger guys, and they go, "Those guys?" And I’m like, "No. Its those 60-something-year-old men over there." Just awful. Gross, gross, gross. So that doesn't happen that often. It happened a lot in Greensboro. I'd get a lot of people asking me if I was a SuicideGirl all the time. Like actually, at my restaurant, at work, asked me what my “other job” was, if I took naked photos, things like that. It's not all the time. Most of the time people are interested, especially up here, interested in where I got them and what they mean and everything, but in Greensboro it was a lot more of the ‘oh, so you must be a freak because you probably like things put in your butt and like naked pictures taken of you.’ All the time. I swear. I know it. Day to day, I would get at least one person implying or outright saying I was doing porn, basically. (Laura)

Public harassment or sexual solicitation is one of the less serious examples of sexual stigma females endure. Some commented on being touched unwelcomely if they were visibly modified:

Wow, yeah. Well, I'm sure there's other things, but that's the one that sticks out for me is the unwelcome touch that happens. I'm sure there's also these other stupid stigmas that go on with women being tattooed and either or whatever, they've got to be crazier in bed or something or have some sort of sexual prowess that others don't, or are complete sluts, or whatever the hell, but frankly I just kind of don't -- it so permeates society as a whole and I'm so used to that anyway [...] I don't know if it's -- I'm not quite sure what -- I guess maybe in respect to why people feel they have the right to do that is where I get into my whole patriarchal construct where the woman's body is there for the entertainment of the
male part of the species, and so they feel like they have the right to touch you, I don't know, whereas women don't do it as much. (Emily)

One woman had gotten so used to having her physical boundaries violated as a part of her tattoos that she became almost inured to it:

And so when you have body modifications, you think about how it is very much my body and it's what I choose to do with it, but some people take it as, well, you've chosen to display it in such a way, and modify it in such a way, that we can't help but notice you. So you have to take the attention that you're getting. And it's like well, visual attention is fine, but you physically putting your hands on me to see more of my tattoos is completely different than you asking or you looking from afar. Shit, even people who stare me down, I'm like well, at least you're not touching me. And it's sad that I've come to that level where I'm like well, at least you're not doing XYZ, when really I shouldn't have to think that at all. You shouldn't feel okay to just stare someone down. And especially on your chest piece. The line I get is "Well, I can't help but stare at your tits because you got a tattoo there." And I'm like, "Technically, I didn't. I got a tattoo on my sternum and right underneath my clavicle and my tits are here, so you can't use that excuse."

Q: So you would say you get unwanted sexual attention.
A: Yes. Yeah. And I think that also comes from people thinking that you're easy because you have a bunch of tattoos. I've heard that a lot.

Q: Really?
A: Yeah, and I'm like why would you ever think that? Because there's that weird societal notion that good girls don't get tattoos, so if you get them and if you get them on a place
like your chest and you get stocking [tattoos] and you get [tattoos] on your pubic bone, then you must be wanting attention there. But, again, because you don't know me you don't know that those tattoos are for me, that those tattoos have meaning, that those are the best places to get them. Not because I'm going to look for a gentleman who's like, "Do you have [a tattoo] down there? Awesome. You totally want the D." And people have a really weird sense of who they -- they think they know who you are by looking at you and your tattoos. And it probably doesn't help that I wear red lipstick, but I wear red lipstick for me because I like it. I think it looks good on me. That's my signature color. I always wear the same brand, the same color, and I think people -- when the SuicideGirls thing came out, I think that really sexually objectified a lot of women with tattoos. [...] So I think if that is your only exposure to women with tattoos is this mainstream objectification, then you're going to always see women with tattoos as objects who are having their bodies on display for you, when really, no, it's just a small percentage of women who choose to do this, for very little money, actually -- it's very little. (Ava)

Unwelcome touching was such a common issue that the women in this sample markedly noticed being touched and harassed more once they were visibly modified and for a period is was coded as “loose women” stigma prior to being reframed as a more general sexual stigma. A common social touchstone for the issue of sexual objectification of modified women was the advent of the SuicideGirls. SuicideGirls is a popular website that features pin-up photography of modified women. For many this turned the image of the modified woman into an object to be sexually coveted who purposely puts herself on display for cultural consumption by viewers. This website is at once a counter cultural expression of female empowerment, alternative bodies, and third
wave feminist ethics, but has also had the unintended consequence of increased sexual stigma through its mass consumption and decontextualized sexual image. The stigma of tattooed women as loose or sexually promiscuous is long standing; SuicideGirls merely laid the groundwork for a cultural resurgence of treating modified woman as public domain.

The exception to female oriented sexual stigma is that piercers in general found themselves sexually solicited whether female or male indicating some form of sexual stigma that actually transcends gender:

A: Because they're all jacking off to the SuicideGirls and they think that if you have tattoos you must be some sexual deviant. People automatically put it into either Satan or sex or both. Yeah. And that was a big reason why I wanted to stop piercing. And so I have been tattooing --

Q: You stopped piercing because people --

A: A big part of the reason why I stopped piercing, yeah.[…] I was just totally sick of the people being perverts to me. It was gross. I was sick of it and I was grossed out and I was like -- it wasn't just guys by any means, any long shot of the deal. People think that there's some sexual component to piercing and people at large really think that there's some deviance that's attached to the piercing that must be sexual, in a lot of people's heads. (Sarah)

It wasn’t until later in collection that male piercers talked about unwanted sexual advancement due to their choice of profession. Three commented that they had been sexually solicited, hence the presence of sexual stigma as non-gender specific. These men found it unwelcome and insulting to their status as a professional, yet commented on how this harassment was just
something they had to deal with as ‘part of the job.’ One male piercer in particular mentioned it at length as a problem, and similarly identified the issue of unwelcome touching as across genders:

Oh, touched by others on tattoos. Man, that's an annoyance right there. Yeah, when it comes to tattoos, people will come up to you and feel like it's just okay to grab your arm to look at your tattoos, or they want to touch your tattoos. Even though it's a visual thing, they want to make it a tactile thing. […] People have a tendency to think that I am a sexual freak, I guess you could say, because I'm a piercer and because I don't have a problem doing genitalia piercing. People are like, "Do you do piercing?" "Yeah." "Do you do all the stuff?" "Well, yeah. It's all skin." So when people come in for especially genital piercings, and sometimes people with nipple piercings, they feel like it's okay to kind of cross that boundary of sexuality, where like they'll say certain things, they'll ask me very personal questions that you wouldn't normally ask a person, like how's your sex life with your piercing? Whoa, hi, what's your name? You just asked me about my sex life because I'm a piercer. Where did that correlation come from? But, I mean, piercing is definitely a very intimate thing and yeah, I am touching people's naughty bits and putting needles and jewelry through them. That doesn't necessarily mean that I am going to be attracted to that person. It doesn't mean that I'm getting anything sexual from it. And yes, I do pierce very good-looking people and I'm like oh, you're hot, but the moment that the gloves and the mask go on, it's not a sexual thing whatsoever. And it can almost be traumatizing sometimes with certain people when they come in and they just -- all they want to do is talk about their sexual escapades. They want to almost be vulgar just
because they feel like that's that time that they can be. "He's a piercer. He's fine. He can deal with this. He hears this shit all the time." You know, I really don't want to hear about the intimate details of your sex life. Are you going to ask me like hey, will this piercing hurt the other person when I'm doing this, this or this? Those are cool questions. Hey, if I get this pierced is it going to make it feel better? Well, if you think it's good then you're probably going to allow yourself to feel more pleasure, but -- I just, some people just really cross the line. And more often than not, it's going to be a really skeevy gay dude. You know? But every now and then there'll be a girl that like, I've had girls ask me if I could rub their clit while I'm piercing them. I've had girls ask if I will pinch their nipples before I pierce them. I mean, I've been propositioned for sex in the piercing room several times and, I mean, I don't think that happens in other industries. You don't go up to the person that's selling you a burger and be like, "Hey, you want to do a quickie in the bathroom real quick because you're selling me a burger?" It's a very interesting world that I'm in. And there's definitely people out there that will act on that. I mean, I definitely hear tattooers doing tattoos for blow jobs in the back, piercers like, "Oh yeah, I totally fucked that chick and gave her a free piercing." Whatever. It's terrible. It's terrible and it gives our industry just a bad reputation. And it's because of that, I'm sure, why I get a lot of people who are asking but yeah, there's a good way to get jerk [me] out rather than happy [me]. The minute they try and like, "Can you do this?" "Um, no. This is a professional situation. You came in here, you're paying me money to do a thing on you, that's what we're here to do. I'm not a whore. You're not coming in giving me money so I
can play with your nipples. No." It's just weird how people cross the line like that.”

(Noah)

It’s a definite gap in the data and coding that this is one of the only transcribed examples of sexual stigma with a male, but that it appears to be across both genders of modification professional. However, due to the intersection of being female and modified it likely that females generally receive more sexualized interactions due to their modification status.

**Employment Restrictions**

Much like legal stigma, employment restrictions, was an almost laughable and expected code on the part of most participants. It is the other most common form of general stigma other than sexual stigma. For some there is a perception of bias and therefore don’t attempt to work in environments they think might be hindering and therefore self-select out of certain workforces:

   Meaning I seek out environments that are casual. I seek out environments that don't succumb to the norm in respect to -- because being in the finance field, it tends to be a very conservative field, and so if I were to work, let's say, somewhere like in downtown San Francisco I'd make an extra 15 thousand or 20 thousand dollars a year. I'd have to wear long sleeves and take the plugs out or whatever and try to be normal. Even though San Francisco's a pretty leftist culture kind of town. (Emily)

I started to worry about it so when I would go into interviews, I would take out my earrings just so it wasn't as obvious, but I kept the other metal ones in because they were little, and I really didn't want to work for a place that looked down on it, so I wanted to get hired so I took the big stuff out, but I still wanted to show them that this is going to
stay, so hire me anyways. I got turned down for one banking job. They wanted me to cut my hair and take out all my piercings. I used to have hair down to like the middle of my back. So they wanted me to do that and take out the piercings and for a moment, because the pay was so much better than the gas station, I almost considered it. And I was like, it's just a bank job. (Mason)

At least three participants commented that they merely refused to work in any environment that didn’t allow visible modifications:

I can't do a desk job. I realize that. That's a big reason, this will probably come up at some point, but why I got my hands tattooed. I was at this level of figuring out at that point when I was 22 and I'm like oh my god, do I need to get a real job? And I was not going to go below the suit line. But then it's like I got to this point. I don't know. I guess I started getting my hand tattooed about six months ago. Like okay, I don't want to have any job that isn't going to allow me to have my hand tattooed. [...] I don't think that at this point it's really pushed me away from anything that I wasn’t already pushing away from in my life anyhow, and I'm not actively looking for anything and finding doors shut in my face, so do I think they would be? Yeah, probably. No, absolutely. I know there would be a lot of doors shut in my face if I was looking in certain fields. (Laura)

However, no matter the level of profession the most obvious issue in the professional environment was covering up in order to be taken seriously:

I know for sure that when I worked for a state agency, I was an assistant to the state engineer and I reviewed plans and specs and it was already a hindrance being a woman in that field. People wrote me off as just like a secretary or someone who answered his
phones and they were like, "I want to talk to Mr. Blank -- with my last name -- and I'm like, 'Actually that's Ms. and that's me and I'm the one who reviewed your plans and I'm the one who declined to approve these plans for X, Y and Z, and I actually sent you this letter.'" And they're like, "No, no, no, I'm looking for an engineer," and I was like, "Yes, I'm not an engineer but I am the one who approves your plans." So there's already that barrier of like you're a woman so I'm just going to completely disregard you. And in the state, in the south especially, where the engineers have been these engineers for a good 40 years and they do things a certain way and I can look at their PE number and see that they've been a PE for good decades longer than I've probably been alive, and so they write you off immediately. And the minute they even see that -- I had to change. I was specifically told "You need to wear attire that covers all of your tattoos." And my boss didn't say this to me in a manner that was like I'm doing it wrong, he was saying it because he was actually very encouraging and didn't care about my tattoos, but he already knew the troubles that I was going to face dealing with our clients who are -- we're a state agency. (Ava)

Even in the San Francisco tech sector where modification is still rather accepted this was still a noticeable concern regarding advancement potential and glass ceilings:

I think in some environments, if I didn't look the way that I do, I probably would have gotten a little further. I know there are a couple of companies where I was a consultant at that there were concerns about putting me in front of clients. Back about 10 years ago, when I really started taking body modification seriously, I had a customer in the Midwest that got to know me over the phone. I always concealed my tattoos whenever I knew that
I was going to see a customer, and this customer showed up at the office unannounced, uninvited, and I didn't know that's who I was being summoned up to the reception area for. I showed up and they were a little bit surprised when they realized that the person who was professional sounding on the phone looked like I did. They never requested that I be removed off of the account, but the way that they treated me had changed a little bit after that. So I know that I'm fortunate in that I live in the Bay Area and this is an environment where people tend to be a little bit more open-minded, but I know that if I were to go to somewhere, let's say in the Midwest or somewhere where folks are less educated and less exposed to the way that I appear, I probably would not be anywhere near as professionally successful as I am. (Lisa)

Again it is noteworthy that the above comments are mostly from female participants and that females seemed to be more sensitive to employment issues. One white male with a college degree even commented that due to his other privileges the regular stigma of modification was significantly diminished for him (as compared to his racial minority female partner who was also heavily modified):

Not a whole lot of people have visible tattoos in the engineering field, even people my age, my generation. So that's kind of how it impacts me. It's definitely not an overt thing, but if I thought hard enough I could probably bring up -- it's more like on kind of a social level, people comment on them in somewhat insensitive ways, but I tend to kind of brush it off because I view it as a choice. I chose to do all this stuff to my body so it's easy for me to shrug off. I think especially as a white male, too, it's easy for me to shrug off stuff like that because I'm privileged in so many other ways. But that's about the extent of it, I
think, is just kind of -- it's small things. I don't feel like it's hampered my career or anything like that. (David)

This not to say that the concerns around employment for modified males was somehow completely ameliorated, but merely that the intersectionality between being modified and male did make the issue of employment restrictions and general stigma more complex:

I've had it affect my job and I've had it not affect my job. I've been on both ends of that. I've been a manager getting hand tattoos and sitting at the front desk and being the public face for a business, the first impression, and I've been harassed and fucked with and I've been denied work over it. Like I've gotten jobs by hiding my tattoos and then being treated differently weeks later when someone finally saw that I had them. It's just the way it goes.[…] The first thing I started to do was cover my tattoos to get work. The next thing I started to do was becoming a likeable person. That was just trial and error, just observation of the tattooed people around me having work in similar clinical settings. (Daniel)

The presence of tattoos in the work force are to this date a somewhat simplified issue: they in general do not advance your career unless you are in the modification industry.

**Social Capital and Widespread Acceptance**

For all the environments that there is stigma there are also important social situations in which it is social capital, and in some cases body capital for modification professionals where modification is an unspoken career requirement. In any counter culture environment modification is a marker of membership, wherein the more extensive markings make someone a “lifestyler” (Michael) or life member. This works in most musical and creative social worlds
wherein modification is respected as a form of artistic expression. In this sample those that worked in the modification industry obviously benefited from their modifications career wise in the most obvious manner by increasing clientele trust. For them their modifications functioned as body capital wherein the modifications in themselves translated to financial gain and career advancement:

And so it's mostly tattoo and people wouldn't trust a tattooer that wasn't tattooed. That's the main thing is you don't -- you're not supposed to trust a tattooer that's not tattooed. And so the more tattoos you have, the more trustworthy you seem as a tattooer, apparently, to most people. (Sarah)

Well, I guess the same idea like you wouldn't go to a mechanic that doesn't own a car, so I would not want to go to a piercer that doesn't have any piercings. (Noah)

You don't go into a tattoo shop expecting someone to be looking like you're walking into Google. You walk in, you expect people to be heavily tattooed. You expect your piercer to have a bunch of piercings, and if they don't I would be wary. Same is true of a tattooer who doesn't have at least a tattoo, run to another tattooer. That's just part of it. It's like if you work at a hair salon, you've got good hair. (James)

It's very beneficial for me in my career because there are people who are lifestylers, like myself, and then there are people who prefer just I want one little decoration or I need one thing that's a momentum for something or something to basically have a single
reason, not all-encompassing. So yes, in a way I guess you'd say I make a living off of it.

(Michael)

Yeah. But the only thing I would say that is changing is I'm getting more knowledgeable, I'm getting more savvy, I am gaining status, I'm gaining skillsets as a piercer, I'm becoming more elite. I am getting the results of those original intentions. I'm seeing the results of those original intentions, I'm getting the rewards, the positive feedback and I am like it fuels me on. I'm looking better, I like the way I look better. I'm making this Plain Jane wallpaper into something he likes looking at in the mirror, other people like to look at. I'm getting all kinds of attention. I've got status in the workplace. I've got international status. It was pretty fucking good. (Robert)

For artists there is a similar degree of increased respect or credence that comes with modification:

I think once I started getting bigger pieces and particularly bigger tattoos that were related to my performing career, that definitely -- I think that definitely increased my social capital in my art community (Matt)

For my chosen professions, it's been a non-issue. As a musician -- I guess I would say there's no negative impact [of my modifications]. As a musician, it certainly doesn't hurt to be pierced and tattooed.[…] It kind of depends on the situation. It kind of depends on the social setting. The people that I tend to engage with -- working class, counterculture, musicians -- generally my day-to-day interactions as far as peers are people under the age
of 40, generally mid-thirties and below, and there's either by and large no negative effects and/or like we were talking about with the kids, there's some slight buying of social status or social capital, I should say. (Ethan)

The subtext to the statements by artists and modification professionals is that their modifications gave them legitimacy and credibility in their fields. For the modification artists it was practically a career requirement, but for the performance artists it showed their commitment to a career path and was a less direct translation of social and body capital into financial gain:

It's analogous with my commitment to my path, which happens to be art, but it was more like a statement to myself that I am choosing to stand with a particular tribe of people and I'm going to wear the marks of that tribe, and that means that I get all of the things that come with that identity even though I know that I'm stepping away from certain maybe other pathways. I will probably never be a Mormon. There is a tradeoff there. My sense of self, I would say it's been mixed and very contextual. When I'm at a performance with 500 other people that are interested in the same kind of art as me and I'm walking around in that community, my tattoos to me are very much kind of a symbol of pride, a symbol of accomplishment, a symbol of, yes, status. (Matt)

One piercer who was also a performance artist was acutely aware that his modifications was part of the marketability of his image outside of his piercing career, and was the only one who could specifically outline the benefit, or lack of benefit, due to his modification status professionally:

This isn't cool but I didn't have enough tattoos. This is probably the first time I've ever said this. I can't believe I'm articulating this, but my clout was now lacking. I was not getting used for calendars, I was not appearing in magazines. All my friends were,
because they had more tattoos than I did. I was not getting flown to Paris to be in the Gaultier runway because I didn't have enough tattoos. So I was lagging behind and I needed to catch up. Isn't that horrible? It feels ridiculous to say that. (Robert)

More generally those that were not attempting to make their living through these artistic vectors found that in alternative environments they had more social capital, entrée, and status, e.g. “cool points” (David):

I think, if anything, once people realize how heavily modified I am, it's odd. Some people look down on me. Other people will actually gain respect for me. It's the oddest thing I've ever seen, and I can never predict it. I would say for me the modification has definitely positively impacted me. (Lisa)

Today I look like this and I would say 80 percent of the time I get taken care of well. I've been taken care of too well. I walk into the clothing stores and they're trying to automatically set up a dressing room for me or take me to the VIP area in restaurants, because they think I'm somebody. Or I get treated just the opposite and they don't want to come and serve the table. (Michael)

Then after I turned 22, people around me were having tattoos and I just started noticing that some of them actually looked pretty good and also there was a level of in-crowd kind of thing that I wasn't able to achieve without having tattoos. (Sarah)
I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be seen as cool. And that helped me. It helped me to feel a part of something, right? And then, of course, with time that turned into -- it became stronger. The fact that I had piercings and tattoos, I was accepted in a group of people that were doing things that I thought were cool, so I felt accepted by people that I actually wanted to accept me, right? The punks, the goths, the musicians, the skaters. The actual artists. (Sophia)

So I think it's definitely -- in some ways there is a lot of social capital. You're, I kind of want to say like the cool kid, but people just think of you differently. Cool, you have tattoos. There's, like I said, a certain badge of courage you go through for being able to sit and get all this modification done to you, but there's also a lot of unwanted attention because people feel like you got it on your body where everyone can see it, so I can stare at you however long I want. (Ava)

Participants didn’t elaborate on the levels of social entrée and status attained through modification as those benefits were more nebulous than the negative consequences of stigma. Admittedly, this may have been a failing in the construction of the questionnaire that outlined specific realms of possible stigma, but neglected to do so around social or body capital. For those that worked in modification this was such an obvious correlation with increased patronage it seemed like a rather simple statement that didn’t require further elaboration. Others thought of their tattoos as giving them entre and insider status with countercultural groups and an aspect of respect they might not otherwise have but didn’t detail exactly what it gained them access to beyond the social world, and did not link it with financial gain.
Margo DeMello well documented the appropriation of tattooing by the middle class, ultimately being the first solid and thorough documentation of social movement around the symbol of modification into larger culture (DeMello, 2000). The participants of this sample confirm her findings that as the middle class has taken to the activity of body modification with fervor and the result has been increased exposure to this activity and widespread social acceptance. This meant an entire code emerged regarding people noticing this social shift:

More mainstream people are doing it. More people that don't consider themselves deviant or damaged in any way. They do it for fun or on a lark or because they decide they want something pretty or whatever. Some times -- like I've known people that have had tattoos that were small but significant to them and that's really the only one they have, but I've also known people who just kind of got a smattering of different ones that were associated with different things and different people that they were hanging out with, or had different significance to them, and later didn't want all of them anymore because they thought some of them were stupid. But I feel like there's still a level of mainstream culture that does not look kindly on tattoos and piercings and does still consider them deviant, but I think that sort of more working-class and even some middle-class is getting a greater acceptance of them as being artistic expressions and not necessarily a sign of psychopathology. And it's also moved away from the association with other subcultures like bikers and sailors, where, in the past, those tattoos were really associated with a specific subculture and that, to some extent, has changed. More people have tattoos that look like tattoos that other people of very different subcultures have had. And so I think there are styles that are more geared toward artistic and there are styles that are geared in
different ways and people have varying reasons for getting tattoos and piercings and it's becoming more common. (Jessie)

This included increased acceptance in more middle class job environments, negating some of the perceived restrictions on employment. This particular example is in regard to tech companies wherein by allowing themselves to be more accepting they recruited better talent, and part of this may be due to tech affiliations with hackers and their particular aesthetic:

Back in the mid-'nineties, you did not get facial piercings unless you worked at Hot Topic or food service. Today it's perfectly acceptable to go work in an office environment and have a labret, which I do not have, to have eyebrow piercings, to have lip piercings. In fact, many people have the subdermal implants that have just little gemstones.[...] And I'm finding in the Valley now there's two classes of company. There's the new companies that are offering the kind of perks that my company is and there's about four of us in the Valley that are doing this, and then there's the older traditional companies and they're actually having a hard time attracting the talent and the youth because nobody wants to work in the environment that our parents did. (Lisa)

Another similarly pointed out that with the practice of modification saturating the young workforce the nature of applicants is changing ubiquitously:

Yeah, it wasn't as widely accepted, I guess, in society, whereas it might be now. There's a lot of, I think Gen-Y has really changed what the working-class person looks like. And so that's my belief, that if you're holding an interview for a position, and you're the CEO of some company, and unfortunately you get 20 people applying for the job and all of them
have tattoos and piercings, what are you going to do? So I think over time it's become more widely acceptable in the office place and in the office. (Sophia)

For others who have the ability to compare it to the status of modification in prior years it is merely the noteworthy mention of is prolific presence and less general stigma:

You will get, yes. If you're in an environment with other children, it's weird. I was in Houston and all the children loved me and the parents did too, who cared? But there was no other modified people around, so it was really odd. But, however, this was in -- where was I? This was in a suburb of Fort Worth, actually, Dallas/Fort Worth. Yeah, I don't know. But then I was just thinking, I was in -- they live in the Seattle area now. I was in a Target, the same store, with them there, but then I saw all these modified people with children. So, of course, you're the norm then. But I think it literally comes down to where you are. So overall, I think it's 50/50 still. It's acceptable but I don't get the "you're a freak, oh my god, let me get my children away from you" as often as I used to. (Michael)

Another reported a memorable compliment due to years of having to be on the defensive, the positive response was even more memorable and reflective of this global shift:

So in relation to this lady and the opposite of deviance, of what I was expecting, she comes up to me and she's very interested, very appropriately. We're in London and she's a very proper lady and she's like, "Can I just say something?" I instantly kind of tighten my chest and I'm like waiting, okay, what's it going to be this time? Make it creative at least. And she's like, "You just made my day. I think you're absolutely the most beautiful and interesting girl that I have seen in a very long time. Please never change." And it almost made me cry. And I was so ready to be on the defense that I just kind of stood there
looking retarded for a minute because I was ready to be like, "Well!" Instead, I was like, "Thanks." I was not expecting that because people, older generation usually, that I've come across have negative things to say. And even though I accept who I am, nobody wants anybody to say negative things to us. So it's still, even though I'm okay being myself, I still don't want negative comments towards me. That sucks. So she was one example of don't judge people by how they look, you don't want people to do that to you, why would you do this to this woman who just said some of the sweetest things you've ever heard? (Samantha)

The trend of acceptance of modification in widespread society is one of the more positive emergent findings of this study and worthy of being reported when so much work has been around continued stigma. In general, this was regarded as a welcome change by participants, and regarded as societal improvement even though there was still room for further changes. This will likely decrease the meaning of modification as a symbol of outsider status, and indeed drive people to new realms of modification as is being seen with Steve Haworth and implants. Adding to the issue of the nature of modification is the fact that there are varying degrees of modification quality with everything from scratchers, to self-trained artists, to artists with BFA’s in tattoo shops. Therefore, the skill and degree of modification is more reflective of class than having the modification itself, as was once the issue. Additionally, as modification becomes a widespread means for personal expression its use in emotional coping and identity construction possibly will become more evident.
CONCLUSIONS

First and foremost this project was an investigation into the lived experience of modification using anti-positivist inductive approach with a focus on emergent findings grounded in the data. As such, there were realms of inquiry outlined by the specific aims and generally guided by the following research questions:

What are the lived experiences and narratives of modified individuals?

How does the individual embrace or reject normative standards of deviance both in terms of how they conceive of their position in society and with their body?

The literature on modification is a growing body of scholarship with authors exploring its stigmatized position in society, the growth into the middle class through custom tattooing, its role in alternative and resistant subcultural identities, and its role in reclaiming the body and reconstructing a sense of self after disruptive experiences. In my opinion, the most prominent authors that contributed to this body of knowledge were Sanders, Atkinson, Pitts, Musafar, and DeMello. Additionally, there is also a large body of literature that affiliates modification with problematic psychopathology or early death representing an entire body of literature that adds to the stigma around these practices. Notable amongst these works are Favazza and Strong which impact popular notions of body modification and self-harm. As a result what is known about body modification is highly variable and sometimes in tension with other literature dependent on the framing. It is at once described as non-suicidal self-injury and correlated with increased mortality, but also is delineated by some to not be an expression of psychopathology. It is also the construction of personal identity in subaltern communities with unique value systems not
necessarily reflective or integrated with dominant paradigm systems of thinking. This perspective could be part and parcel of accepting or rejecting the label of deviant, but even that is a relative application. For some the social symbology isn’t the point of the modification and it is a much more personal act of reclaiming. Hence, what is actually known about body modification is a) subjective to the framing field of inquiry b) constantly changing with social dynamics and c) also imparted with individual meaning that sometimes is only known to the bearer of the mark.

With that said, all findings from this research must be reflected upon in the same light of as the prior literature paying close attention to disciplinary frame(s), location, historical era and the individual person. This project started as an attempt to “understand the place of body modification in one’s life narrative, and how it is reflective of major transitions and changes.” The most obvious way in which this is answered is that for some body modification is a way to negotiate feelings around significant emotional hardship and trauma. In this sample, individuals used modification at varying levels of consciousness as a healing activity around unexpected loss and abuse. It would be incorrect to claim this is the entirety of their personal narrative with modification or that all individuals with trauma understood their modifications as a part of that story. Some individuals did not couch their modifications in a trauma framework and therefore it wasn’t reported that way to avoid misconstruing their experience. For instance, one individual started piercing around thirteen years old, at this time his brother was dying and as part of this process his family had moved across the country. It wasn’t long before he was an IV drug user. It doesn’t escape notice that his initiation into modification was during a particularly troubling period, however the participant did not frame their narrative in that manner and therefore it was not reported in the trauma section. In general, this individual did not have trauma as a central
part of his modification narrative, despite it being a part of his story, partially due to the fact he is now 40 years removed from that period in his life. Hence, modification and its role in the narrative is varying in its level of consciousness, and emotional saliency depending on where they are in their life. Even when participants were unconscious of their own efforts they were still often working within a framework of healing through body modification.

A second aim of this project was to “explore [the] subjective experience around the physical and mental health, social, and identity related experiences of people who engage in body modification. This was addressed through the examination of stigma and social capital or body capital. There was a distinct focus on stigma in this work, and that capital was more emergent. Here, there is also the distinct finding that the garnering of capital in any form or stigma can be secondary to the intensely personal emotional experience behind it. This result, to some degree, then undermines historical concepts of modification as a nonverbal mode of communication to others as its predominant feature (Romanienko, 2011). In this research, the subjects express communication with the visible symbol with society but not in a sense of defiance, rather as an expression of an internal state of inherent feelings of difference. It is an expression only for the person, not necessarily meant as a constructed image to be read by others and ascribed a subsequent social positionality. This outcome of course cannot be avoided except with the use of stigma mitigation through passing.

An extension of the finding that this sample used modifications out of intensely personal motivations is that even for those that choose to keep their symbol private, the symbol is not exclusively about private activities, e.g. sex, as was previously associated in the BDSM community and the early presence of modification in the US (Myers, 1992; Romanienko, 2011).
Here the symbol is more often a very personal activity of emotional expression, namely around loss, and personal growth. As such this decenters the idea that modification is done exclusively for the purpose of communicative symbology with others, and for some can be primarily a personal and cathartic activity that secondarily has widespread social ramifications. The prolific use of the social symbol of body modification to convey numerous social statuses speaks to the fluidity of body modification as a highly relative and personalized symbol.

An additional significant conclusion is that the feeling of difference reported by the participants was a priori to the modification that made them marked and visibly different. This both resulted in social distance and stigma with certain sectors of society, but also provided a sense of place, identity, insider status, and social or body capital with another sector of society. An emergent themes was that individuals who modify were merely trying to manifest a sense of otherness, or an internal self-image, that was long preceding the actual modification. The major implication for this feature of body image is around stigma, wherein stigma is seemingly justified through the choice of modification. As a modified individual chooses to express their difference it is therefore acceptable to discriminate against them is the presumed logic. However, an important distinction around the issues of stigma and discrimination is the reconceptualization of this choice. It is a choice to become visually different, however there was no choice in the existing feelings of difference. Some of this difference might have been from abuse, bullying, or more traditional forms of discrimination around race, gender, and sexuality—more legitimated forms of otherness that have legal protections.

The third aim was to “increase the knowledge base on how this practice shapes the social experiences of individuals who elect to modify (e.g., at work, with seeking medical or mental
health care, in their peer group, with legal authorities, etc.).” Medical, mental health, and legal officials are particularly problematic for modified individuals. These are fields that are historical bastions of power and should be held to levels of depersonalization wherein the modification status of an individual does not impact their treatment. It would be naïve to believe this will ever be achieved, however improvement could be made. Hopefully, with the display of discrimination reported here there can be increased dialogues in these industries regarding appropriate behavior with modified individuals. The issue is prevalent enough that some members of this sample outright refuse medical or dental care and fear the repercussion of seeking it. Instead it is possible that these findings would support medical dialogues regarding the benefits of modification practices for some. The growth in cultural dialogue from this endeavor alone might also produce more acceptance within legitimated agencies for these practices.

The final aim was to “understand how those who engage in body modification practices negotiate the pain and how this impacted their experience.” Pain clearly holds a special place in the modification experience that is loaded with meaning. Participants described themselves as having a “relationship” with pain. One went so far as to compare his relationship with pains as something similar to going to the gym wherein one had to work to remain “fit.” Pain was also a source of empowerment or pride. Here participants found power in the modification process for dealing with loss was a sense of empowerment or pride cultivated through the challenging of one’s perceived boundaries and overcoming pain. Thus, in the face of life changing loss they redefined their individual self as someone both accomplished and strong/confident/empowered. This likely grew out of the historically known image of the “tattooed badass” and “primitive” tribesman that endured pain as a formal or informal rite of passage (dependent on the culture).
For others the presence of the pain was cathartic. It helped them deal with unresolved emotional pain, and as one participant commented the physical pain was lessened by the degree of emotional pain behind the modification. Pain therefore could span beyond physicality to engage the emotional self and spiritual self for those utilizing as such. This was particularly related to the notion of ritual in an overt manner with several of the participants. Their narratives were constructed acknowledging the power of ritual, wherein pain was both released and in some cases transformed into empowerment. Within the specific aim to further knowledge on the lived experience of modified individuals there should be an acknowledgment of the role of reclaiming in modification regarding its ability to heal. For some the power of modification was in the simple act of reclaiming their body, something that Victoria Pitts had discovered previously. This was particularly prevalent for individuals who had been violated in some way physically or generally found their bodies unsatisfactory.

Again, this symbol exists within shifting frameworks of social context and the implications of these findings will change, or be outright wrong, as proven or disproven over time. First and foremost, with the popularization of modification the symbology of it changes, and an outcome of this is the growing acceptance of modification in society at large. An implication of this is that if modification continues to be a popular form of expression then possibly the stigma affiliated with its perceived nefarious origins will be dissipated in the masses. The communities that engage in modification may grow or contract with this influx and redefinition, but the issues of legalities will continue to be breached in exciting ways as the frontier of new forms of modification are explored. Currently, the most troubling issue is that modifiers may not seek medical help due to perceived issues around legalities and stigma. An
implication for medical practice that hasn’t been addressed in the literature. This fear of repercussions regarding getting medical help is of course also tied in with the legalities that body modification, especially extreme modifications, brush up against. Magnetic implants in fingers are becoming more popular, and done outside of health department regulation or medical supervision (Norton, 2006). While that was not an area of study of for this work it is reflective of the growing acceptance of modification which will hopefully also allow for increased medical exposure to these things pushing for new acceptance by medical and mental health practitioners.

However, all of these findings and implications are entirely placed within the major limitations of this project. The largest limitation of this work is its sample. This sample is in no way representative of the modification community as a whole due to the fact that the method of recruitment was snowball sampling in the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento only. Still, the sample matched larger census data and was diverse. The method of a snowball sampling was used because the group of multiply modified individuals is hard to reach. Hence, selection of interview subjects started with known social contacts who then referred to others in their social network. Moreover, this group is also difficult to engage in information disclosure due to the stigma attached to their status, and therefore utilizing an existing social network where my relationship with these individuals extends beyond the interview process is helpful in garnering access. Due to this recruitment two biases are likely: First, because compensation was not offered to participants it is fair to say these individuals participated because they are supportive of this project and modification practices in general, and second as many were willing to give very significant disclosure about highly personal matters it is likely these people have done the work psychologically to be more comfortable with themselves and their stories so as to come
forward with a fellow member of the modification world. This second observation is due in large part to the one outright refusal that occurred just prior to recording during the informed consent process. The individual got very fearful that even with a pseudonym his mother would find the publication and deduce out his identity, and as a result she would have another psychological incident requiring hospitalization. Respecting his fears we ceased the interview process. Those that did participate possibly represent these biases as a result of the recruitment method. The result of this recruitment is that this does destroy any claims to a random or representative sample, nonetheless an unbiased perspective.

However, with a topic as subjective, individual, and socially-based as modification an unbiased and more representative perspective may not be relevant to understanding what it means to live as a modified individual. With a focus on the subjective experience it should also be stated that without the researcher having undergone the exact same experience as the participants, there will still be a knowledge barrier even if the researcher has had similar experiences. This is not to deny the value of similar modification experiences by the researcher in lessening knowledge barriers inherent in studying embodied experiences. An extension to this limitation is that all answers are in regard to past events. Due to concerns on the part of the institutional review board that these individuals might be self-harming, or that their behavior could be construed as self-harm, all questions had to be in regard to past events ultimately adding a layer of distance and reframing that might otherwise not be added should the research have been allowed to include current practices. Very likely, if those same interviews were done today their content would be different, by what degree is unknown, due to the recontextualizing of memory and experience in addition to continued interactions around modification.
The last limitation is my own positionality with these individuals. One possible issue is that information was withheld due to their knowledge that we would have a continuing relationship in the community. Equally, for those that had much closer personal connection with me, things might have been revealed that they wouldn’t have trusted others with. In two instances I was told as much directly after the interview. One individual said that because he knew we shared so many social connections and knew my personal politics (e.g. approving of modification) he trusted me in a way he wouldn’t have trusted another interviewer, and ultimately volunteered to help me get interviews with harder to reach “experts” on the subject. Thus, there are two possible slants of increased disclosure and restricted access that might have happened as a result of my social positionality. This is not to negate my own role in the construction of the interview process wherein my very role as a person who is accepting of modification changes the nature of responses from what they might be otherwise. I, the researcher, am reflected in the answers due to my various relationships with these people that may have made them feel more or less open and disclosing.

Future research on the topic could include explorations of body modification as a healing activity, possibly even a treatment, for some forms of distress. For example, does the use of positive coping mechanisms for trauma, such as body modification, mitigate the expression of problematic forms of coping such as drug use or self-harm? This is particularly important in light of the small size of this sample and its snowball recruitment. More representative research on larger samples could be highly beneficial in examining this sort of relationship. However, the first objection to this is that this would further medicalize and pathologize this activity in an unwanted manner, ultimately bringing it under institutional reigns. More importantly, this
ignores that the power of modification is only as much as it is defined and imparted by the practitioner and context. This project at once shows it as a powerful and multifaceted tool, but also one that is so personal it may be difficult to actually capture how this applies across populations. A further difficulty of doing this investigation on a larger sample in a more quantitative manner is that the trust and intimacy that is garnered through the qualitative experience is lost possibly reducing disclosure and skewing results.

Additional further research could examine the role of body modification in realms where it functions as social or body capital. This research notably focused on the role of stigma in the modification experience, and unintentionally neglected its role as both social capital and body capital. As modification grows in popularity its role as status and capital within certain cultural frameworks will also change and grow. It may also lose some of its power in counter culture environments as a signifier of membership with its wide diffusion in mainstream society.

Similarly, this research did not focus on race or gender divides within modification as it was not a representative sample, nor was it an investigative focus, thus leaving a void for future research. Others have written on the rise of the tattooed woman with feminism, but the topic hasn’t been explicitly revisited from a third wave perspective, particularly in the wake of the SuicideGirls. In regards to race, there have been discussions of how the modern primitive movement and western modification is a de facto appropriation of more tribal customs from non-white nations. Little has been written on the role of modification in modern western minority communities beyond gang profiling, therefore revisiting that topic post large scale modification diffusion into the middle class is also a possible realm for future research. In general the areas for research are wide as this practice intersects with numerous other social statuses in unique
ways, ultimately making it difficult in this work to make more generalized results beyond the
codes presented here.

Acknowledging the legal implications of future research is important. The strong
resistance that this project encountered from the institutional review board of UCSF is itself a
measurement of the stigma and legal grey area this topic exists within. The committee on human
research initially requested for the presence of a psychiatrist on the committee for fear of the
psychological ramifications, or discussion topics, which might be encountered with this project.
The main concern was that these individuals might be at risk of harming themselves. A
compromise was struck that a consulting marriage and family therapist would be available to the
project, but not active unless a participant presented themselves in manner worthy of concern.
Additionally, a psychological resources page would be available at every interview for
participants. Lastly, participants were told to only speak in past tense about all actions since
future plans might be construed as an intent to harm oneself. Most participants initially laughed
at this, and then expressed that it wasn’t unexpected, but that it was somewhat insulting. The
fascinating world of heavy or extreme modification is relatively unexplored and might be open to
research, especially with the aforementioned growth in magnet implants, but only if it is
protected from the possible punitive actions that might result from their exposure and labelling as
mutilation or self-harm. I was literally asked outright by one person to leave that community
alone to keep them safe, while another offered me access if I wanted to continue research into the
world of extreme modification. Thus, while this community represents another possible area of
future research it is currently in a precarious position that requires delicacy.
For all of the above areas of research I would also advocate avoiding existing theoretical frameworks that impart their own understanding to the modification experience, rather than letting that be defined by the sample. This is particularly true as long as body modification remains an “other” or subcultural population. It would likely behoove all research on modification to avoid disciplinary exclusion and embrace the richness that could be garnered from utilizing a multifaceted lens. The most significant feature of the topic of body modification that all readers need to be reminded of is that it is a very complex symbol. It is at once cathartic, healing, claiming, status achieving, and a source of stigma that intersects individually with other levels of privilege or disparity. It is an issue of personal psychology, social status, and cultural ritual or rite of passage, hence how the research frames the phenomena can at once be limiting and deeply penetrating depending on the disciplinary framework. This topic cries for a critical bricolage of sociology, psychology, and anthropology due to its ability to transcend all three disciplines.

REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

University of California, San Francisco
Body Modification Dissertation Research Interview Guide

I am interested in how individuals who engage in body modification understand the practice and how it has impacted their identity. I would like to understand how they see “mod” affecting personal identity, namely what it articulated about them, if it punctuated a life event, initiated a change in self-perception, or validated an existing identity transformation. I would like to hear about your experiences regarding body modification, and if applicable how you understand it in relation to “deviance.” Do not forget that all questions about your involvement in these behaviors are in regard to past events. You have the right to stop the interview or decline to answer a question should you not feel comfortable. Please feel free to provide any examples or thoughts that come to mind as we talk. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we begin?

1. To start, tell me a little bit about yourself.
   a. What sort of socio-economic background do you come from?
   b. What do you currently do for means of employment?
   c. If employed, how does modification impact your day to day affairs in the workplace? (probe for sex, employment status, income and ethnic/racial background if not mentioned, especially if they make a living with body modification practices)
   d. How does modification impact your social interactions with peers?

2. What is the first thing you think of regarding the topic of “body modification?”

3. Tell me how you came to be interested in body modification?

4. How was it you first came to engage in modification? Please, tell me about your modification(s) and the stories around them (if not mentioned probe for age when this occurred).
   a. What was it about this practice that appealed to you?
   b. If you engaged in modification, what was your first modification? (Examples include plastic surgery, tattooing, piercing, scaring, cutting, suspension, amputation, etc.)
   c. Where did you get your modification done?
   d. Can you tell me more about what this was like?
e. Can you tell me some of the differences you observed between before and after you started modifying?

5. Is your modification one that is visible?
   a. Is it permanent, semi-permanent, or temporary?
   a. If it can be covered, do you hide it from your employer, family members, or significant other?
   b. If so, why do you feel this is necessary?

6. Do you consider any one modification to be the most significant?
   a. If so, which? And why?
   b. Please explain the situation under which you were modified (Was the modification done alone, with a friend present, by a licensed practitioner or medical figure/group?)
   c. What sort of tools were used? In particular would you consider the tools part of medical technology (e.g. surgical tools)?
   d. What was your motivation behind doing this?
   e. How do you negotiate the pain involved in (tattooing/piercing/surgery/suspension/cutting/scaring)?

7. Did your modification(s) have an effect on your sense of self? If so, could you please explain how? (probe for notions of being a “deviant”)
   a. Did you feel your behavior was something that would be considered socially acceptable? If so, why or why not?
   b. Was it an immediate change or was it done in stages?
   c. How did your friends, family, and your partner (if applicable) regard your modification?
   d. What did you think the reaction would be from authority figures such as those in mental health situations?
   e. What about with medical practitioners?
   f. How was your employment affected—if at all—if others knew about your decision to modify?

8. How do you perceive the culture surrounding your body modification? Please tell me as much about it as you can.
   a. If you don’t feel there is a culture around the body modification you engaged in, is it something you did completely independently? (the classic example is of an isolationist cutter).
   b. Do you experience modification as part of what you consider a spiritual or religious practice? If so, how?
   c. Do you feel this is a practice or experience new to society and modernity or something more longstanding? Please explain.
   d. More generally, what position do you think the modifications you have engaged in play in our society? Legally? Politically?
e. How do you distinguish body modification from “mutilation,” “harm,” and “violence?”

10. Do you think there is anything important that I have missed and could include for future interviews?
11. Thank you for your participation! Is there anything regarding this study you would like to ask me?
If you know anyone else who might be from this group who might also have a story to tell, please tell them to give me a call or contact me via email (whatever is appropriate).
Appendix 2: Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Study Title: Body Modification Dissertation Research

This is a research study on body modification and the social concerns particular to it. The study researchers Howard Pinderhughes, PhD and Carolyn Keagy M.A. from the UCSF School of Nursing will explain this study to you.

Research studies include only people who choose to take part. Please take your time to make your decision about participating, and discuss your decision with your family or friends if you wish. If you have any questions, you may ask the researchers.

You are being asked to take part in this study because you have been identified by a social contact that has participated in some form of body modification and may be willing to donate their time to this research

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge base on the practice of body modifications and how it plays into the construction of identity and personal narrative. Additionally, interviews are concerned with notions of modification as a deviant activity, regulations around its practice and the ramification one encounters having engaged in this practice.

Who pays for this study?

This study is a student project and not funded by any larger agency or UCSF.

How many people will take part in this study?

This study may involve up to 20 people.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

- The researcher will interview you for up to a period of 10 hours in a mutually agreed upon location, and at mutually agreed upon times. Ideally most interviews will not take longer than one to two hours. However, should you be willing to volunteer a rich text of knowledge then the interview could take longer. The interview will be broken up into sections to accommodate the time, schedule, and patience of the volunteer if necessary. The researcher will ask you to describe your experiences with body modification. The interviewer will start by asking you a few questions about yourself (e.g., age, employment, education), your
personal experiences with body modification, and lastly how you view it in a larger social context. **Be aware that if you tell the interviewer you intend to seriously harm yourself or another, they are legally required to report this to authorities.** Please keep in mind that all questions regarding behavior are concerning **PAST** events. Please do not tell me any intentions you have for future actions. Should you feel you need support in regards to a mental health issue the interviewer will have a resource sheet you can request.

- The researcher will make a recording of your conversations. After the interview, someone will type into a computer a transcription of what’s on the tape. Each file will be assigned an id number and all names (personal and business) will be deleted from within the file.
- After this interview is coded for themes, you will be consulted to ensure accurate coding and understanding of the data.

- **Study location:** All of this will occur in a mutually agreed upon location where you feel you can safely give your responses.

**How long will I be in the study?**
Your interview will continue to be a part of the study until you request to be removed and your data destroyed, or the study is concluded. The amount of time a subject is willing to volunteer to an interview is left to their discretion with an upward boundary of 10 hours. Additional consultation at a later date to confirm that thematic coding was done accurately is estimated to be one to two hours several weeks after the interview.

**Can I stop being in the study?**
Yes. You can decide to stop at any time. Just tell the study researcher or staff person right away if you wish to stop being in the study. Also, the study researcher may stop you from taking part in this study at any time if he or she believes it is in your best interest, if you do not follow the study rules, or if the study is stopped.

**What risks can I expect from being in the study?**
Some of the questions may make you uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to leave at any time.

**Are there benefits to taking part in the study?**
There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help health professionals better understand/learn more about this body modification and its role in identity.

**What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this study?**
You are free to choose not to participate in the study. If you decide not to take part in this study, there will be no penalty to you.

**Will information about me be kept private?**

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information gathered for this study is kept private. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy. Your personal information may be given out *if required by law*. This means that if you provide information that mandates a report, e.g., give a statement that you intend to harm yourself or others, your information will be released to authorities. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

Organizations that may look at and/or copy your research records for research, quality assurance, and data analysis include:

- UCSF’s Committee on Human Research

**What are the costs of taking part in this study?**

You will not be charged, or asked to purchase anything, to take part in this study.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this study?**

No. Participation in this study is a donation of your time to Carolyn Keagy’s dissertation research.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

Taking part in this study is your choice. You may choose either to take part or not to take part in the study. If you decide to take part in this study, you may leave the study at any time. No matter what decision you make, there will be no penalty to you in any way.

**Who can answer my questions about the study?**

You can talk to the researcher(s) about any questions or concerns you have about this study. Contact the researcher(s) Carolyn Keagy at 415 713 8011 ([Carolyn.Keagy@UCSF.edu](mailto:Carolyn.Keagy@UCSF.edu) preferred contact) or Howard Pinderhughes at 415 502-5074.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about taking part in this study, first talk to the researcher (above). If for any reason you do not wish to do this, or you still have concerns after doing so, you may contact the office of the Committee on Human Research, UCSF's Institutional Review Board (a group of people who review the research to protect your rights).
You can reach the CHR office at **415-476-1814**, 8 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday. Or you may write to: Committee on Human Research, Box 0962, University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), San Francisco, CA 94143.

**CONSENT**

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You have the right to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you wish to participate in this study, you should sign below.

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Appendix 3: Mental Health Resources Sheet

Need Assistance?

Information and Referrals
Hotlines/Crisis Intervention

- Hotlines and crisis intervention services, such as those listed below, can be helpful when a troubling situation arises. Examples of such situations include attempted or anticipated suicide, bizarre or unusual behavior, inability to manage basic self-care, and presence in a potentially abusive or dangerous situation.

- If you need help, please call one of the following:
  - **Mobile Crisis Treatment Team** - tel: 355-3300
    - M-F 11AM-10PM & Weekend 12PM-7PM
  - **San Francisco General Hospital** - tel: 286-8125
    - Psychiatric Emergency Services
    - 1001 Potrero Avenue, 24/7
      - For all mental health emergencies
  - **San Francisco Suicide Prevention** - tel: 701-0500
    - 24/7 hotline
    - http://www.sfsuicide.org/index2.html
      - Suicide prevention
  - **Friendship Line for the Elderly** - tel: 752-3778
    - Center for Elderly Suicide Prevention
    - 24/7 hotline
    - http://www.granthouse.org/cesp.html
      - Counseling
  - **Child Crisis Services** - tel: 970-3000
    - 24/7 hotline
      - Specifically for children
      - Offers home visit for evaluation and treatment
  - **Westside Crisis Clinic** - tel: 355-0311 ext. 5
    - 245 11th St., Non-Friday 6-7, Saturday 9-5
      - Offers immediate help for those suffering from an emotional crisis
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