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“IT’S NOT JUST SAILORS AND BIKERS ANYMORE”:
HOW TATTOO ARTISTS’ EXPERIENCES OF STIGMA VARY BY GENDER

BY

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THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

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in
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ABSTRACT

“IT’S NOT JUST SAILORS AND BIKERS ANYMORE”: HOW TATTOO ARTISTS’ EXPERIENCES OF STIGMA VARY BY GENDER

by
Morgan Stevens
University of New Hampshire, September, 2021

Past literature has largely focused on the stigmatization of those with tattoos, but the experiences of tattoo artists themselves have largely been overlooked. It is important to focus on tattoo artists given their critical position as the subjects of stigma and their role in challenging it. Tattoo artists are privy to their own experiences with tattoo stigma, the stigma of working in a deviant occupation, and are frequent observers of the stigma others experience for similar reasons. To explore these topics and how the occupation itself is gendered, I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with tattoo artists in New Hampshire. From the interviews it was clear the experience with stigma for workers in deviant occupations can be understood through how their career is delegitimized as a job, stereotypes that have a strong hold on the entire industry, and the few people within the occupation that perpetuate misunderstandings and a bad reputation. In regards to how the occupation is gendered, for women there is extra labor that must be done in regards to how they think about how their gender is portrayed. With the changing opinions and acceptance of tattoos, and viewing tattoo artists as the artists that they are, there is more to be explored on the subject of how stigma can be changed.

INTRODUCTION

The labeling of deviance reveals societal norms, values, and group boundaries while also providing a position for challenging those same norms, values, and boundaries. The tensions between societal efforts to label deviance and how the targets of those labels respond is a source of social change. There is a gap in the literature on the specific groups that challenge social norms, and how they may do so successfully. This gap must be filled in order to gain a better understanding of how norm violation and perceived deviance can lead to a change in the stigma around a phenomenon, career, or type of outward expression. The study of tattoo artists is revealing of these dynamics, and provides critical insight into how social change has and can occur. It has not been explored enough to know how stigma is relevant to the profession of a tattoo artist and how this stigmatized group perceives their label. I plan on exploring the perspective of tattoo artists in regards to their profession, how their gender plays a role in experiences of stigma, as well as the stigma around tattoos in general. The experience of being stigmatized is important to consider when researching tattoos, or any type of body modification, because it illuminates how society has changed and whether or not it has had any large effects. To truly understand stigma, one must look deeper into how it changes over time. The previous research on tattoos and the stigma around them does not have a strong focus on the tattoo artist profession. Instead, literature on the stigmatization of body modifications and tattoos is largely focused on the general population of people who have tattoos.

A focus on the tattoo artist profession, instead of solely on those with tattoos, is important for two reasons. The first being that tattoo artists are at the center of the tattoo stigma, given that they are more often than not individuals with multiple tattoos, or at least the expectation to be. The second is that their job requires them to spend, at times lengthy, amounts of time with their

clients, who also may experience tattoo related stigma. This means that not only are tattoo artists privy to their own experiences with tattoo stigma, as well as the stigma of working in a deviant occupation, but are frequent observers of the stigma others experience for similar reasons. With that being said, the changing stigma around tattoos could have no effect on the tattoo artist profession, and that in and of itself is an important experience to understand.

In this study of tattoo artists I ask: “How do workers in deviant occupations experience stigma?” and “How is working as a tattoo artist gendered?” The first question is important to ask to gain an understanding of how those on the frontlines of stigma and the deviant label view their own experiences. The second question allows for a deeper consideration of the intersection of gender identity and deviance, experienced separately as well as together. To answer these questions, I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with tattoo artists in New Hampshire. From the data collected, I find that the stigma surrounding tattoos and the profession of the tattoo artist are changing. The profession itself is also changing with this emerging acceptance of tattoos, and different types of artists becoming popular. With this, there comes a deeper discussion around professionalism and the perceived gatekeepers of the industry. In connection with that discussion, the role of gender became evident as being a part of the changing of stigma. That is, how women view their place in an already stigmatized and male dominated industry, and the relationship they have with outsiders, such as clients.

From the thirteen interviews completed, I was able to find several patterns that showed how and why the stigma around tattoos is changing. The decline in stigma can be shown in the increase of people choosing to be tattooed. In one study, done by Ipsos in 2019, the data showed that 30% of Americans have at least one tattoo. This is a 9% increase from the number

of people tattooed in 2012 (Jackson, 2019). The patterns also showed how there is a lack of understanding around the profession and choice of body modification that persists. For the tattoo artists that were interviewed, they believed the stigma has been changing in recent years, most notably since reality TV allowed for a glimpse inside their private worlds. The legitimacy of the industry is still not fully accepted in mainstream society, as tattoos have become less stigmatized compared to the tattoo artist career. However, with the change in perceptions around tattoos has come changes in how the industry overall is viewed. There is sexism embedded within the male dominated industry of tattooing that continues to affect the client and artist relationship, despite there being a rise in female tattoo artists. The data that was collected helps to begin to address the missing pieces in the literature by analyzing the differences in experiences of stigma within groups that are already known to be stigmatized.

Researchers have focused on the stigmatization of those with tattoos, but the experiences of tattoo artists themselves have largely been overlooked. It is important to focus on tattoo artists given their critical position as the subjects of stigma and their role in challenging it. Aesthetic labor is an important piece to the overall stigma around changes to one's outward appearance. An expansion of the findings would add to existing knowledge by allowing for a deeper understanding of the tattoo artist profession, and how gender plays a role in the experience. The thirteen interviews with tattoo artists in New Hampshire provide a deeper understanding of the stigma around body modifications and its relation to community, professionalism, artistic expression, and gender. The themes that arose from the interviews aid in understanding the secretive industry of tattooing and how a change of stigma can affect an industry so deeply entrenched in it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Tattoos

Tattooing has been a type of art form and body modification that dates back centuries. Due to the transient nature of tattoo artistry it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date and time it was created, but through ancient texts and the uncovering of mummies, tattoos date as far back as the second millennium B.C (Sperry, 1991, p. 314). Depending on the culture and the time period, tattooing was a form of “embroidery” while also being a type of punishment or marker of low-status in society. Tattoos can be traced back to Ancient Greek and Roman writings and were described as “barbaric customs” and the markings of “Roman criminals and slaves for punishment” (Sperry, 1991, p. 314). This is in part because of the role religion played in the early stigmatization of tattoos. In the present day this persists, as certain religions such as Judaism forbid tattoos and will not allow you to be buried properly if you have chosen to modify your body in such a way (Sperry 1991, p. 314). Due to religions control of how tattoos were viewed, and the early foundations of them being markings of slaves and criminals, tattooing slowly became popular solely with criminals, the lower class, prostitutes, and others looked down upon by society, by the sixth century A.D (Sperry, 1991, 314). This was the case around the world, even in cultures that originally celebrated tattooing. With the stereotypes that persist today of tattoo artists or people who adorn their body with many tattoos being criminals, knowing the roots of those misconceptions can be traced back to as early as the Ancient Greek and Roman time periods shows how powerful stigma can be.

Japan first accepted tattooing back into its culture, and that spread around the 19th century. This influence was so powerful, that the Japanese tattoo style remains popular today in Europe, the United States, and many other parts of the world (Sperry, 1991, 314). This Japanese

influence over the world as it relates to tattooing is in part how tattoos became associated with sailors. They were among the majority of Europeans and Americans who were able to travel and receive these traditional Japanese tattoos, and the influence spread from there (Sperry, 1991, p. 315). Tattoos at this time had also been a part of a ritualized process for indigenous communities around the world, for both men and women (Thompson, 2015, p. 22).

Tattoos first became known in the United States through exhibits that featured some of these tattooed men and women from indigenous communities, found by sailors and missionaries as they traveled, and were the early equivalent to what is now known as the circus (Thompson, 2015, p. 23). These shows laid the groundwork for the first tattoo shops to open in the United States. The first tattoo shop documented being in New York City, opened by a German immigrant named Martin Hildebrandt in 1846 (Thompson, 2015, p. 25). This did not equate to tattoos being popular with the masses, as they were still connected with these human “oddity” exhibits as well as criminals. Sailors were among the most popular first wave of customers, as well as criminals and those who felt they were looked down upon by society (Thompson, 2015, p. 26). This eventually extended to motorcycle clubs post-World War II as well as street gang members (Thompson, 2015, p. 34). For a majority of those who went to the tattoo shops when they first opened, tattoos served as a form of separating yourself from the crowd, individualizing your body with permanent markings, and defining your identity. For those who were not among the sailor or criminal population; however, tattoos were a mark of deviance and mental illness. This claim was made popular by the criminologist Cesar Lombroso (Thompson, 2015, p. 27). The stigma was only exacerbated by the fact that many tattoo shops in the 1800s and early 1900s did not take into account safety protocols and were generally operating under unsanitary conditions despite providing a type of medical procedure (Thompson, 2015, p. 31).

Since the 1970s, Thompson (2015) describes a Tattoo Renaissance as bringing in more of a diverse population of people who enjoy tattoos. This extends to “musicians, music subcultures, and social protest movements” that promoted body modification and challenged body politics (Thompson, 2015, p. 32). This was especially powerful for women, who saw tattooing as a way to take back control of their bodies and be a part of the feminist movement that was growing. This form of “self-expression and identity politics were central to the women’s movement” (Thompson, 2015, p. 32). From the 1970s on, tattoo shops and the number of people who have tattoos has only grown. With it, the power of the tattoo stigma has fallen. As Thompson (2015) describes it: “This tension – between historic stigma and contemporary popular culture representation – is where contemporary tattooed people exist” (p. 33). The contemporary popular culture has been at the forefront of the changing stigma around tattoos. As they are becoming mainstream, so do the tattoo artists. The question of how present day tattoo artists experience and understand the current tattoo stigma is what will be explored throughout this paper.

In this section I will explore five main themes. The first theme covers deviant occupations and the stigma management that goes into being within one. It is an overview of how deviant occupations are defined, their relationships with stigma, and its connection with the tattoo artist profession. The second theme focuses on aesthetic labor and the body, and the ways in which those who must fit into an aesthetically pleasing category of presentation navigate workplace norms. The third theme concerns stigma, specifically stigma as it relates to tattoos, as well as stigma and general and its meaning to society. The fourth theme involves gender and the relationship between the tattoo community and women. The fifth theme focuses on tattoos, both as an art form and a body modification, and their meaning to those who choose to have them.

Deviant Occupations

Deviant occupations all require some level of stigma management, and an understanding of how to control the information surrounding your profession. Ritzer (1977) cited three criteria for what constitutes as a deviant occupation: if it is illegal, if it is considered immoral, and if it is, considered improper. When an occupation meets one or more of those criteria, it is considered deviant and thus workers within the profession are stigmatized. The deviant label is pervasive as well as all-consuming, and when it is tied to how one makes a living the management of it is that much more important. One of the more deviant occupations that exists is that of stripping, topless dancing, and nude dancing. Due to the high level of stigma associated with the profession, it is a necessity to use stigma management techniques to survive outside of your place of work. This connects with what Goffman (1959) terms impression management. This concept incorporates the understanding of your role and the self, and the need to present ourselves in a certain way to those around us. With being a part of a stigmatized population, comes a heightened level of impression management. While the reality of an individual who is within a stigmatized population may diverge from the perceived stereotypes, the stigma itself is strong and impression management is necessary in some way, whether it be for yourself or society (Goffman, 1959).

Thompson et al. (2003) conducted research on the profession of topless dancing and how the dancers choose to manage the stigma associated with their choice of employment. The stigma for this deviant occupation carried over to all of those employed at topless dancing clubs, such as bouncers and managers, showing the strength and reach of stigma within deviant occupations (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 553). As Goffman (1963) observed, work is so closely intertwined with your identity that when an individual is engaged with a stigmatized occupation it becomes

necessary for them to control information about their lives in order to neutralize any stigma (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 553). This can be understood through Goffman's (1959) concept of the presentation of self. How one presents themselves to the world is used in interactions with others, specifically through "clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them" (Goffman, 1959, 17). This means that a person is able to enter into an interaction with someone already having an idea of how to present themselves, based upon the first initial appearance and ways the other person acts towards them. This is also done in combination with the application of stereotypes (Goffman, 1959, 17). The presentation of self is what others rely on to attach an idea of who you are upon meeting you. The act of impression management and controlling the presentation of self was evident in the study conducted at topless dancing clubs, as multiple management techniques were used to protect their identities.

Thompson et al. (2003) divided the stigma management techniques utilized in the study by the participants into two basic categories: dividing the social world as described by Goffman (1963) and techniques of neutralization by Sykes and Matza (1957), as well as cognitive and emotive dissonance (560). For dividing the social world, Goffman (1963) proposed that it helps the stigmatized group control information as well as create a sense of group cohesion within the circle of those who are aware of the stigmatizing identity of an individual (Thompson et al, 2003, 561). Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five common techniques for neutralizing stigma associated with deviance when studying juvenile delinquents: (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of the victim, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. Thompson et al. (2003) found that the topless dancers in the study utilized three of the five of those techniques: denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to

higher loyalties (562). These five techniques of neutralization are common for those who work within deviant occupations, but they are not necessary or permanent in neutralizing the stigma experienced. Those within stigmatized occupations also commonly use a level of cognitive and emotive dissonance to protect themselves. Hochschild (1983) elaborated on how workers who are employed in jobs that produce high amounts of emotional strain develop emotive dissonance in order to regulate the emotional labor they participate in, “the difference between feeling and feigning emotions” (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 565). This allows workers within deviant occupations to disconnect from the judgments of others and the toll it potentially can take on their emotions, in order to continue working in the profession and do so without a high amount of emotional labor or strain.

While the stigma associated with the deviant professions of topless dancing or stripping has not lessened, other deviant professions such as tattoo artistry have seen a difference in the stigma associated with the type of work. Tattoos have become more mainstream, and with that the profession of being a tattoo artist has been considered less deviant than previously in history. In a study done by Ipsos in 2019, it was found that 30% of Americans have at least one tattoo, an increase from 21% in 2012 (Jackson, 2019). In just seven years, the number of Americans with tattoos increased by 9%, providing evidence of an increase in tattoo acceptability, in part because of younger generations. The literature that is on deviant occupations focuses largely on how the workers manage their identities as well as the stigmatizing aspects of their profession. Adams (2012), describes this process as “dirty work” that those within the industry of a deviant profession must engage in, even if that profession becomes more accepted in society. With the tattoo industry increasing in popularity, its roots remain physically, socially, and morally tainted and stigmatized. To gain mainstream popularity as a legitimate industry requires a level of

“active organizational impression management” (Adams, 2012, p. 152). There are two important factors in how the tattoo industry is able to engage in this successfully. The first being the changing social norms around beauty and individuality and the second is the steps that the industry took to “assert greater control and increase standardization among practitioners” (Adams, 2012, p. 152). Without those two factors, the stigma around the tattoo industry would not have changed.

The input of an apprentice system was pivotal in changing the level of professionalism within the industry. Apprenticeship facilitates the transfer of skills and techniques from mentor tattoo artists to their students, thus reproducing important skills and levels of technical knowledge while also limiting who enters the industry at an already professional level (Adams, 2012, p. 156-7). It acts as a gatekeeping function that has allowed the changing social norms to compliment the higher level of professionalism within the industry. However, the stigma around the industry that remains is the result of the improvements and increase in professionalism not being communicated to the general public and instead remaining knowledge only accessible to those within the profession (Adams, 2012, p. 158). The group cohesion formed by being within a stigmatized group and profession is one that neutralizes the stigma, while also at times not allowing for changes to be known to those outside of the group.

Tattoo artists are one of multiple professions that center around the body, including but not limited to modeling and physical training. Body work in relation to the tattoo industry and the tattooing process can represent the desire for authenticity and uniqueness, as well as embodying “the characteristics of creativity, rebelliousness, and defiance (Simpson & Pullen, 2018, 173). These multiple representations of the industry reflect a level of ambiguity in attitudes

and perceptions of the tattoo industry, and body work in general. Simpson and Pullen (2018) find that tattoo artists adhere to “notions of non-conformity, unconventional artistry and professionalism” (169). It is this balance of the multiple aspects of their line of work that allows them to both navigate outside the stigma and inside the norms of their profession.

From the varying cultural values within the industry, Simpson and Pullen (2018) argue that this forms a part of a ‘bodyscape’ that shapes the aesthetic labor and the experience of tattoo work (171). They developed the idea of ‘bodyscape’ to integrate the understanding of body work as it pertains to artifacts in the practice, the bodies of those worked on, and the various outlooks of the workers (Simpson and Pullen, 2018, p. 170, 173). Tattoos themselves serve as transformative art on the body, as well as marks of uniqueness for the person with tattoos. The tattoo artist is the individual who holds the power in creating the tattoo and potentially coming up with the actual idea for the tattoo, while also being in a position to create what a client desires that may not align with a personal preference or piece of advice. This has the potential to create tension between a sense of professionalism from the tattoo artist and the elements of the occupation (Simpson and Pullen, 2018, 181).

Aesthetic Labor and the Body

The current literature does not expand on tattoo stigma outside of the connection to the requirement of being “aesthetically pleasing” in the workplace. We know that what mainstream society considers “aesthetically pleasing” does not typically include body modifications, such as tattoos (Williams et al., 2014). In the workplace specifically it is important for many professionals to abide by the norms that fulfil the unspoken necessity to be “aesthetically pleasing.” These norms are especially important for work environments that focus on outward

appearance or the use of the body for work purposes, such as fitness training, modeling, working in the service industry, or more nonconventional professions such as sex work. Each industry, while all relating to the body, have their own norms surrounding the aesthetic labor workers are expected to take part in. For example, fitness trainers engage in aesthetic labor by fulfilling the expectation that they be physically fit. It is not enough to work in the profession, because you must be aesthetically pleasing for the industry you are in as well.

Mainstream conceptualization of what is considered “aesthetically pleasing” typically does not include visual body modifications such as piercings and tattoos; however, expectations for how employees look often shift with changing social norms (Williams et al., 2014). An important part of workplace experiences, and success, is dependent on an employee’s engagement in aesthetic labor, meaning that employees must have, or work to have, “particular embodied capacities and attributes that appeal to the senses of customers” (Warhust & Nickson, 2007). Working in an industry that requires aesthetic labor means that your outward appearance must on some level be appealing and in line with your profession, such as a makeup artist wearing polished makeup to work every day. What we know about the issue of stigmatization of tattoos comes from broader research on aesthetic labor in various workplace experiences. Scholars have explored how aesthetic labor is experienced by workers in the hospitality industry (Warhust & Nickson, 2007), personal trainers (Harvey et al., 2014), fashion models (Mears, 2011, 2014), and retail salespeople (Williams & Connell, 2010, Misra & Walters, 2016). It is important to explore these various industries, and aesthetic labor more generally, when looking at the stigmatization of tattoos because they are all interconnected. The literature on aesthetic labor and the industries where it is most prominent exemplifies the need for further exploration on its connection to tattoos and body modification.

Workplace context matters for a deeper understanding of aesthetic labor and its implications for workers (Mears, 2014). While explored in past research, there is a puzzle surrounding what the exact implications are for someone who has tattoos when it comes to having the profession of a tattoo artist or in the workplace in general. It is not enough to say that society is changing regarding social norms, and thus tattoos will eventually become fully acceptable. For tattoo artists, their profession has changed with the changing stigma around tattoos. Tattoos are more than how Lombroso characterized them in 1891 - as being a body modification only attributed with “deserters, prisoners, and sailors” (Johnson & King, 2017, p. 525). In a study conducted to measure people’s subconscious opinions of those with a range of outward appearances, it was found that the experience of negative stereotyping remains for those who have visible tattoos (Johnson & King, 2017). The study was conducted by analyzing collected data that link booking photos, criminal histories, and sentencing information for more than 1,100 convicted felony defendants. From there, a team of research assistants independently scored each defendant across a variety of appearance measures, including physical characteristics, such as visible tattoos and scars, and perceptual measures, such as impressions of dangerousness and blameworthiness (Johnson & King, 2017, p. 527). The available evidence of continued stereotyping based on appearance demonstrates that tattoos generate a range of assumed negative attributions, such as being more risk-seeking and less honest (Johnson and King, 2017, p. 525). To undo the history of stigma - how tattoos hold meaning for those who aid in their creation along with the entrenchment in various negative stereotypes and groups, such as inmate counterculture - must be further explored.

Gender

The occupation of tattooing can be comparable to blue-collar industries as it relates to the craft-oriented skill set and the historical association with the working-class. Where the main difference lies between them is in how the tattoo industry remains largely unregulated. Within the tattooing industry, there is no degree, certification or other industry requirement to begin tattooing. In combination with the stigma associated with the tattoo industry, the absence of regulation results in no formal way to combat issues that arise in the workplace such as sex discrimination (Thompson, 2015, p. 124). There is already stigmatization within the tattoo industry, and once you are within it there is further stigma experienced based on pieces of your identity. There is no communal agreement in the tattoo industry that states those within it will not stigmatize or stereotype because they themselves experience a level of stigma from working in a deviant occupation. For women who become tattoo artists, this means that there is the possibility for them to experience discrimination based upon their gender.

Gender identity and stigma intersect, with the stigma experienced being partially determined by the gender of the artist. Women tattoo artists are not the dominant gender of artist, as they only constitute 10-20% of all artists (Thompson, 2015, p. 136). Thompson (2015) argues that because of this and the old stereotypes of tattoo artists being overly masculine and deviant, discrimination against women in the tattoo industry persists (p. 136). In the present day, women tattoo artists still on average make less than their male counterparts. In a study done by Zippia (2021), where the gender breakdown in the sample was 71% men and 25% women, it was found that regardless of race or ethnicity, men make a few thousand dollars more annually than women in the tattoo artist industry. With “an increased tolerance and growing desire for women to hold a significant position in the industry” (Thompson, 2015, p. 151), comes a need for more research to be done in the area.

The different type of stigma experienced by women with tattoos can be partially understood through the theory of difference, as described by Fenstermaker and West (2002): “Doing difference renders the social arrangements based on sex category, race category and class category accountable as normal and natural, that is, as legitimate, ways of organizing social life” (p. 541). From those social categories comes patriarchy, racism, and class oppression, which are understood as responses to differences within the social order. These differences within each category are seen as fundamental and natural, therefore they allow people within them to be ordered accordingly (Fenstermaker & West, 2002, p. 541). For example, a woman with heavy tattoos who is stereotyped as “overly masculine,” is lower in the social order than a woman with no tattoos who meets the female beauty norms. Difference is fundamental for this social order with each social category, but it also perpetuates stigma against those whose differences are not rewarded.

Norms surrounding how femininity is expressed can be policed and enforced even in occupations labeled as more “deviant” or non-conventional. Historically the tattoo art world represented groups like bikers, prisoners, and street gangs (Santos, 2009, p. 91). Tattoos no longer represent the involvement with these groups, yet those who choose to be tattooed are still met with certain stereotypes. A study by Santos (2009) focused on how Chicana women express femininity, class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality in tattoo shops run by predominantly Chicano male tattoo artists. Santos (2009) found that “the Chicana body is a signifier of social agency influenced by the social context” (p. 92). The Chicano male tattoo artists in the East Los Angeles area, where this study was conducted, frequently imposed their power as both men and the artist onto the Chicana women seeking tattoos. The Chicana women chose to be tattooed predominantly as a form of challenging the status quo. They were met with the attempts by the

male artists to police their decisions of both how to use their body in general and if it should be used as a canvas. Tattoos on women were expressed as being stigmatizing for being “deviant, hypersexual, and criminal” (Santos, 2009, p. 104). Through these interactions, Chicana women were frequently accountable to Chicano male tattoo artists when attempting to be tattooed, resulting in a gendered hierarchy and power dynamics. Santos’ (2009) findings exemplify how gender identity interacts with stigma in an occupation that society already regards as deviant. Deviant occupations or groups of people are not exempt from further stigma and policing from those within them, and the tattoo industry is no different.

Gender dynamics are present in any occupation, especially in those that are predominantly viewed as masculine. In a study on identity, gender roles, and tattooing among Italian women, Castellani (2019) found that tattooing is similar to clothes in the way that it constructs and deconstructs gender and gender differences (p. 50). Marking the body in such a way speaks to a perceived difference. It is the choice to represent yourself in a way that is personal and, with tattoos, pushing societal boundaries of what is deemed acceptable for a woman’s body. It is when women are heavily tattooed, or in the tattooing profession, that the social sanctions are introduced. Castellani (2019) found that when women became heavily tattooed and went outside of the societal boundaries of acceptable “feminine” tattooing, they began to face these social sanctions as reminders that they are not acting as a woman is expected to (p. 52). “Feminine” tattooing meaning tattoos that are small in number and size, or hidden well. Women are expected to be and look feminine, and tattoos on the body that are not only visible but also high in quantity disrupts this expectation. In this way, tattooing demonstrates “a deep commitment to alternative gender definitions” (Castellani, 2019, p. 59). Women who choose to be tattooed in ways that are not stereotypically feminine are choosing to define their

gender differently. Therefore, the stigma experienced by women who have tattoos can be connected to both the tattoos themselves, as well as their gender.

Stigma

Erving Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of stigma provides a theoretical grounding for the understanding of stigma and its connection to social norms. Stigma is "a stereotype that discredits the person characterized by it" (Goffman, 1963), that is, the caricature of a person (Santos & Santos 2016, p. 3). It is important to highlight the word "discredit" in Goffman's definition, because of its relevance to the profession of tattoo artists. Due to the history of stigma surrounding tattoos (Thompson, 2015 & Sperry, 1991), the profession of tattoo artists is oftentimes discredited in general society. The stereotypes of individuals who have tattoos is only heightened when stereotyping individuals who choose to become tattoo artists. Goffman's theory thus "identifies the need for overcoming the stigma to effectively promote the social inclusion of individuals" (Santos & Santos, 2016, p. 7). The only way to reduce tattoo stigma is to adapt to the social inclusion of tattoos and tattoo artistry in mainstream society. This has already begun, as shown in reality TV shows and pop culture, but remains a discrediting aspect of one's outward appearance in the professional environment.

As it pertains to body modification, there is a process of meaning making for those who participate. An example of a type of meaning making through the body that is arguably labeled more deviant than tattoos is flesh hook pulling. From a series of interviews, Horton (2012), was able to explore the meaning people find in flesh hook pulling as a transformative and collective experience, predominantly engaged in in secret. The stories Horton (2012) was told included techniques for stigma management by focusing on the personal and spiritual experience that is

flesh hook pulling. Those interviewed found that focusing on their own enjoyment and spiritual gains made it so it was an empowering, transformative, and/or healing practice, instead of being “wrong” to engage in (Horton, 2012, p. 132). This is a more stigmatized practice than tattooing, as Horton (2012) argues that “tattoos have in the contemporary context been folded into the repertoire of middle-class behaviors” and even idolized among elite tattoo circles, suggesting that some tattooing reflects positive deviance (p. 132). Whether it is a highly secret body practice such as flesh hook pulling or a more visible body modification, the stories and narratives held by those who engage in the practices oftentimes outweigh the opinions and stereotypes of mainstream society.

The world of tattoos is made up of its own social types, and its own markers of deviance. From a study done on these main social types of those within the tattoo world, Irwin (2003) found patterns of negative and positive deviance in how the social types were created within their groups as well as with the outside world. Two social types make up the elite tattoo world, that is the tattoo world that tattooists and those who collect tattoos desire to be a part of: the elite collectors and the tattoo artists who can afford to charge a high cost for tattoos (Irwin, 2003, p. 29). These groups represent examples of how positive and negative deviance can exist simultaneously. These two main social types “combine a conflicting set of norms and values and inspire a variety of responses from others” (Irwin, 2003, p. 29). In other words, the stigma experienced by the elite tattoo collectors and the elite tattoo artists is how they experience an elite status within their groups. It is also the same stigmatizing beliefs they hold for those who only select small and innocuous tattoos in order to remain acceptable in mainstream society (Irwin, 2003, p. 30). There is negative deviance experienced by those elite tattoo collectors and elite tattoo artists from mainstream society, and positive deviance experienced in tandem because

the more that they are not a part of the mainstream the better for their social standing within their elite group. In larger society, tattoos may be viewed as deviant, but within the tattoo artist community they equate to a certain level of status.

Even with the balance of positive and negative deviance for those who are elite collectors and elite tattoo artists, Irwin (2003) argues that being a part of that social world is not without the effects of the stigma and deviant labeling they experience in mainstream society. Norm breaking remains determined by the negotiated definitions and responses of others, and those interactions can serve as positive or negative reinforcement (Irwin, 2003, p. 34, p. 36). In their everyday life, elite collectors and tattooists are still subject to disregard from others who do not “violate plain-skin appearance norms” in their everyday life. However, these negative reactions can vary based on many factors, such as a willingness to cover tattoos, social context, and gender (Irwin, 2003, p. 37). Similarly to Santos’ (2009) findings, Irwin (2003) found that women who were either elite collectors or tattooists were subject to a different type of negative reaction than men, in part due to violating conventional feminine beauty norms. In Irwin’s (2003) research these norms of women not having heavy tattooing on their body, when broken, resulted in accusations of being “masculine,” “ugly,” or “slutty” (p. 37). With that, it is evident that even within groups that experience negative deviance, or find positive deviance among themselves, the level of stigma and social sanctions experienced vary.

Tattoos

While social norms are changing, the existing literature suggests that there is still progress to be made in regards to widespread acceptance of tattoos. The stigma surrounding tattoos comes from the deviant subculture within society that is typically associated with them. Although tattoos are now more common in society, they remain a powerful symbol of deviant

groups, such as inmate counterculture or street gangs (Santos, 2009). In a study conducted to measure people's subconscious opinions of those with a range of outward appearances, it was found that negative stereotyping remains with those who have visible tattoos (Johnson & King, 2017). The available evidence of this demonstrates that tattoos generate a variety of assumed negative attributions, such as being more risk-seeking and less honest (Johnson & King, 2017, p. 525). Despite these perceived negative stereotypes associated with tattoos, the percentage of people choosing to tattoo themselves has been on the rise. Similarly to the Ipsos poll in 2019, Statista studied the change in people who choose to tattoo themselves from 2003-2015, by age group. Overall, within every age group the amount of people who tattooed themselves from 2003-2015 increased. The most substantial percentage being 30% in the 30-39 age group (Statista, 2016).

The historical stigma of tattoos is in part due to the roots of tattoo artistry being connected with prisoners and bikers (Johnson & King, 2017). These groups were stigmatized prior to being tattooed, and their association with the art form only aided in tattoos being stigmatized as well. As Kosut (2006) summarizes: "For the majority of the twentieth century tattoos were read as an embodied mark of otherness and were commonly associated with criminality, mental illness, and deviant subcultural groups" (p. 74). This level of stigmatization, no matter the changes in norms or overall societal acceptance, persists in the minds of those who both have tattoos and do not have tattoos. Late-nineteenth century criminological theory linking deviance with biological factors also influenced popular conceptions of tattoos into the twentieth century (Kosut, 2006, p. 79). Cesar Lombroso being a popular criminologist who was influenced greatly by biological criminological theories, linked tattooing to deviant behavior in his book, *Criminal Man* (Kosut, 2006, p. 79). With this deeply entrenched influence on the reputation of

the tattoo industry, it is no surprise that the public aversion to tattoos persists, even if it has lessened. However, in part, the status of tattoos has begun to rise due to the connection to art and aesthetic. Value is growing within the connection between tattoos and the world of artistry, and as that grows, the status of tattoos as an acceptable addition to the body will likely grow as well.

The belief that an individual acquires tattoos in order to gain public attention is far from the reality of reasoning behind the body modification choice. Tattooed people are aware of the social stigma around their visible tattoos, and a majority view it instead as a representation of a conscious choice made to display art on their body that is meaningful, artistically pleasing, or transformative in some way (Thompson, 2015, p. 99). In Thompson's (2015) research on tattooed people and tattoo artists, an overwhelming majority of those who were heavily tattooed rejected the notion that they enjoyed the attention given to them on behalf of their body art, and even at times felt compelled to cover up their tattoos to avoid it (p. 107). For this reason, as well as the overall powerful stigma that persists surrounding tattoos, Roberts (2012) found that clients were willing to go to great lengths, including enduring a higher amount of pain, in order to have tattoos placed in a hidden spot to maintain a presentation of self that is acceptable (p. 163). Tattoo placement provides both a greater and lesser control over the presentation of self and whether or not one is subject to stigma. It is not that those who desire tattoos are not choosing to get them due to the stigma surrounding them, but instead that a majority choose to hide the tattoos in public situations to gain the benefit of transforming their body that is true to them, while also not being subjected to societal judgement.

I seek to examine what the experiences are of the workers who are expected to look and act "deviant" in the larger culture and how they experience stigma regarding their profession and

outward appearance. Tattoo artists are on the frontlines of stigma, both with their profession working in a stigmatized industry and being individuals who have tattoos. In asking questions about their experiences, deeper answers can be found in regards to how stigma has changed, how deviant a presumed deviant culture may be, and how it may differ within a population due to factors such as gender. Answering these questions allows me to begin to uncover some of those deeper answers, while also discovering new questions or identifying areas that need further research.

METHODS

This study aims to understand how tattoo artists make sense of their work and their relationships to aesthetic labor in a male dominated industry. To illuminate these issues, I interviewed a total of thirteen tattoo artists in New Hampshire. I interviewed nine of those tattoo artists by phone and over Zoom in early 2021 and four in person and over Zoom in early spring 2020, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Fifteen interviews was the original goal, however due to both exhausting the sample pool and frequent unanswered e-mails by the last few potential participants, thirteen was the final number. The artists I interviewed were all enthusiastically involved in their work and open to discussing tattoos more generally. Due to the tattoo artist career being one that is more of a lifestyle, the topics of stigma and labeling were of extreme importance to them. When not in the process of tattooing, they are drawing or creating for a client, promoting themselves through social media, traveling to a convention or another tattoo artist event, or working on their art more generally. To be a successful tattoo artist is to adopt the tattoo artist lifestyle of always working or thinking about work in some way, and therefore the stigma around their occupation was especially personal. A criticism of their career was not solely

about their career, but their life in general. Due to this, it was clear each participant had thought about these questions before, or were topics frequently discussed within their communities.

I recruited participants by contacting tattoo studios in New Hampshire. All potential participants were contacted through email solicitation or social media, such as Facebook, and all were currently employed as tattoo artists. In total, I interviewed eight male tattoo artists and five female tattoo artists were interviewed. The University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board approved all protocols. While the original goal was to have an equal number of male and female tattoo artists participate, the reality is that there remains a significantly smaller number of female tattoo artists than male artists. That made my sample pool for female tattoo artists smaller than my sample pool for male tattoo artists. Male tattoo artists were much more likely to respond enthusiastically to a request for an interview, whereas many of the female tattoo artists contacted were hesitant or requested their privacy. I counted the overall breakdown of tattoo artists by gender using a list of Body Artists with their current licenses in New Hampshire, provided by the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. In total, there are 388 current licensed tattoo artists in the state of New Hampshire, as of May 20th 2021. The gender breakdown of those 388 tattoo artists is 241 male tattoo artists, 130 female tattoo artists, and 17 gender unknown tattoo artists. This equates to 62% of the tattoo artist population in New Hampshire identifying as male and 33.5% as female. This makes the breakdown of interviewees by gender similar to the actual breakdown of tattoo artists in New Hampshire by gender. Specifically, 61.5% of my sample was male and 38.5% female.

My role as the interviewer was to remain as objective and unbiased as possible. For my in-person interviews I attempted to dress in a neutral way to limit the interviewee's initial

assumptions about me. I did not have any visible tattoos for the interviews in the Spring of 2020, but I did have one hidden, so I made sure that was mentioned at some point in the interview to establish rapport. For the interviews in early 2021, I had one visible tattoo that I made sure was showing for Zoom interviews and was mentioned at some point in the interview for phone interviews to establish rapport. My identity as someone who has tattoos shaped my initial background knowledge of the tattoo artist profession and any preconceived notions I may have had about the stigmatization of tattoos. However, I do not believe this added any bias to my questions or analysis – it only aided in my interest around the stigmatization of tattoos and the potential gender differences within the occupation of the tattoo artist.

All interviewees were given an informed consent form to sign prior to the interview and asked if they were willing to be audio recorded. The interview lengths ranged from approximately 35 minutes to two hours, averaging around 1 hour. For the in-person interview, I sat in the chair used for individuals getting a tattoo, which increased the comfortability of the interviewees. For the Zoom interviews, I chose a place where the background was neutral and there was no chance of outside noise disturbing the interview. For the phone interviews, I also chose a place where there was no chance of outside noise disturbing the interview. All interviews were transcribed by me, and no outside services were used. I also took brief notes directly after each interview to have as reflexivity memos. All of the questions asked were original and semi-structured.

To analyze the data I collected, I used inductive, open coding (Lune, Howard, & Berg, 2017). First, I did initial coding where I wrote down themes and possible codes I noticed in the transcripts. I then solidified the general themes I felt were broad enough to organize codes under,

and read through the transcripts three times more. Those themes were: Tattoo Artist Career, Tattoos, Stigma, Clients, Professionalism, and Gender. Under each theme I was able to identify a handful of codes that stood out, and I worked on their definitions. I then went through each transcription for the answers to the questions on my interview guide line by line to establish additional codes. Once I found commonalities between codes that were supported by various quotations, I created a codebook and finished defining each theme and code within that. These codes were then used to further analyze my data. To test reliability of my main codes, I provided two independent coders with my codebook and a selection of interview transcription excerpts. The coders and I agreed 78% and 82% of the time. When we did not agree, it was around one or two sub-codes that required a refinement in their definitions and further coding on my part.

A large portion of the methodological limitations of my study were due to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in the middle of my data collection timeline. I was fortunate to conduct four interviews prior to being placed under a mandatory stay at home order, but the majority of the interviews had to be conducted in early 2021. Due to only having thirteen interviews, my data is limited in some respects and could be expanded upon in the future. Another methodological limitation of my study is that the first three interviews were conducted together, which made the interviews more of a focus group rather than solely individual perspectives. While I do not believe that COVID-19 greatly affected the overall data, it was a topic of conversation in almost every interview. Specifically, the effects the pandemic has had on many shops and tattoo artists' careers across the country, and the reflections the participants had on their careers in the industry post-pandemic.

Through these interviews, I was able to examine the experiences of a population of people at the heart of stigma, and the change of said stigma. Every artist came with their unique perspective, and unique way of entering the industry to begin with. The complexity of the art behind every tattoo created along with many of them having to act as owners of their own business, was an important focus for most interviews. The tattoo artist profession is about much more than fighting against stigma, as many of the artists did not feel affected greatly by it. The participants who noted significant experiences with stigma that did change their presentation of self or how they conducted their business were the women. I will explore later on the effect of gender on the tattoo artist profession, both in entering the industry and with clientele. There are many themes that arose from each interview that were evident throughout the coding process, and conversation was able to flow due to the semi-structured nature of each interview. This research would not be successful without each tattoo artist who participated, and if expanded upon the findings would become more rich and concrete.

THE “IN”

The world of tattoo artistry is one blanketed in mystery, misconceptions, and hidden tradition. There is an element of secrecy behind it, commonly perpetuated by those within the walls of the tattoo artist community. The roots of tattooing are in marginalized groups, such as sailors, criminals, and those who were shunned by society (Thompson, 2015). Tattooing was brought to the United States as a type of showcase of the human oddities that exist around the world (Thompson, 2015, 23). With that, the community of tattoo artists and tattooed people became closed off from general society due to the stigma surrounding them. It is not an easy community to gain access too, especially if one is not already in contact with or close to a tattoo

artist themselves. With groups that are heavily stigmatized, comes a need to remain hidden even as stigma lessens. The profession of a tattoo artist is also one connected with real art, with many artists who are now entering in coming from backgrounds as art students through some type of higher education. This has allowed for many artists to open shops or design tattoos that are different from past trends and traditions. In a community where strong stereotypes and assumptions control how mainstream society views the participants, there does not exist a singular description of a tattoo artist. Every participant was unique, and every participant entered into the world in their own unique way. The one common theme among all of them was that the entering in was not an easy task, and the education process was much harder than it looks on the outside.

I have organized this section in terms of four main themes. The first theme focuses on the role of apprenticeship for determining who can access the profession, how artists acquire their skills, and how apprenticeships shape tattoo artists' sense of identity. The second theme concerns artists' perspectives on tattoo schools, which reveal perceived threats to the industry, artists' thoughts about quality and authenticity, and how processes of change create a context for solidarity building. The third theme involves tradition, a discussion of the old school values and style of tattooing and the new school of thought that both clash and complement each other. The fourth theme uncovers the mystery and hidden nature of the industry, which is both a form of gatekeeping and protection for the tattoo artist occupation.

Apprenticeship

The business of tattooing has changed over the years, as has the stigma surrounding it (Thompson, 2015), but the tradition of mentorship has stayed the same. There are two main

avenues to becoming a tattoo artist: one more common and acceptable in the community than the other – tattoo school and an apprenticeship. Every participant interviewed held an apprenticeship, and for reasons I elaborate on below, almost all looked down upon tattoo schools as a form of tattoo education. Because none of the participants went to tattoo school, information and insight into the quality of these schools is minimal. However, there were many criticisms and discussions of their downfalls from a tattoo artists' perspective. For the apprenticeship process, all participants had many insights and reflections to share. Some had been tattooing for 20-30 years and others finished their apprenticeship a few months prior to the interview. To be hired as an apprentice for a tattoo shop, there are a few criteria that must be fulfilled. It is dependent by each state, but in New Hampshire the current requirement is that an apprenticeship must be a yearlong in order to be considered for your license (NH Office of Professional Licensure and Certification).

It is completely up to each individual who desires to be an apprentice to acquire that apprenticeship, which is no easy task. With the exception of one participant, the others indicated that gender played no role in their obtaining an apprenticeship. Respondent 11 was that one participant, as she had an experience with her gender almost stopping the process. She states that “when I first got my apprenticeship I almost didn’t get it because I was a girl.” She was not comfortable elaborating beyond that, due to now being a tattoo artist at that same shop and enjoying her work there. In discussing apprenticeships with all participants, this was the most blatant example of gender playing a role in becoming an apprentice, but other than that gender was not at the forefront of discussions on this topic. There are many different ways to acquire one - someone may be asked by another tattoo artist opening a shop, someone may already have a contact who has expressed willingness to take them on for training, or someone may have to go

door to door to see if any tattoo shops in their area are willing and available to take on an apprentice.

Once you are hired as an apprentice, you do not receive pay, and are essentially the point person for all things cleaning and assistance to the artists. For many of the interviews, I first spoke to the apprentice at the shops I contacted to schedule calls. As Respondent 1 stated when discussing his apprenticeship:

Apprenticing you're pretty much paying your dues, you're you know scrubbing the floors and sweeping them up, scrubbing needles and just setting up for the artist you know making appointments. Basically learning all of the other aspects of the job that aren't tattooing.

The safety aspect of the job is one of the more important aspects of the learning process. It is also one of the aspects of the job that is not commonly thought about among the general public.

Tattoo artists must be trained and certified in various safety protocols, especially since they are around blood and needles. Respondent 2 reflected on this when discussing the apprenticeship training:

The most important part is the sterilization process, which pretty much becomes like just memory because you're setting up stations and breaking them down for x amount of artists everyday all day long and it just becomes ingrained in your head like ok I need to take this off for you now. Cross contamination, sterilization stuff. Shit like that. Basically a shop bitch.

It was commonly noted that the difficult process of finding an apprenticeship and keeping one was on purpose, because it "is not for everybody," as Respondent 2 made clear in his discussion of his training. It is difficult because an apprentice is not able to start creating art or tattooing right away. There are intricacies to being a tattoo artist, such as the sterilization process, that must be engrained first before a person ever gets close to tattooing.

There is an initiation process that takes place during an apprenticeship that allows other artists to view you as a legitimate tattoo artist once you fulfill the requirements of an apprenticeship, as well as other functions. These include weeding out those who are less qualified or committed, establishing and reinforcing shared norms and values, provide bonding experiences, and build solidarity by creating boundaries and distinguishing in-groups from out-groups. This initiation process through intense mentorship is similar to how Goffman (1963) discusses stigma management within groups. He argued that: “the veteran stigmatized go to great lengths to instruct him in how to manage himself physically and psychically” (p. 36). This type of management is helpful for both new member and old member of the stigmatized group. There is also an economic function of limiting competition by controlling who is able to enter into the business of tattooing and work in a shop. Respondent 11 noticed a clear difference once she was a fully licensed tattoo artist: “And then once you get licensed, people respect you. It’s so different from going from an apprentice to being an actual licensed artist. Other tattoo artists respect you a lot more.” It is a difficult training process, and one that is meant to force those who are not meant to be there out of the tattoo world. However, in the present day, due to more oversight by the Health Department, changing stigma, more people interested in the tattoo artist profession, and many other factors, the apprenticeship style is different from previous decades. Respondent 5, a tattoo artist who has been in the business for over 20 years has knowledge of this change:

Being an apprentice, if we were to turn the clocks back 20 years it's slavery. It is slavery. You're going to somebody's house and you're scrubbing their floors with a toothbrush, you're washing their car every day, you're literally a slave to them. There is perks behind it, you know you want attention to detail, you want them to understand attention to detail, you want them to be punctual, you want these things done. It is a demand. Clients are demanding, they want this that or the other thing. But if you speed it up to now, the apprenticeship isn't as harsh but that's also I feel as though because we live in a narcissistic world.

There is a shift in viewpoints on all subjects, but especially the apprenticeship, between those who have been tattooing for decades and those who have been tattooing for less than 10 years. Respondent 5 noted that 20 years ago, the apprenticeship was not the same as it is today. In the present day, there are more avenues for clients or fellow tattoo artists to report individuals that are not following the correct protocols, but the overall regulation remains minimal. With minimal regulation comes people who slip through the cracks.

There are no requirements the job must adhere to when hiring an apprentice. It is up to the mentor to decide who and when they want to take someone on. This has both positive and negative effects on the apprentice hiring process, as it is an easily exploitable position.

Respondent 6 speaks specifically on the little regulation of the apprenticeship position, and how that can lead to difficulty:

It really just falls on the particular artist who is going to be the mentor to sort of decide if this person is worthy (laughs) you know? It's kind of a, you know a strange choice. So you find a lot of times in this...more of a generalization but a lot of times it's more of the lower end shops um they'll just sort of take whoever to get them in there to make money. They're trying to uh just make money off of the artist, they don't really care quality or anything or who the person is as a person or what their background is it doesn't matter.

Although the apprentice system gives tattoo artists an important gatekeeping role, they do not always make the best decisions for the community as a whole. Unfortunately, there are some tattoo artists in the mentorship role that choose to give apprenticeships to people who are not ready, not willing, or not invested in becoming a dedicated tattoo artist. However, due to the general difficulty each participant expressed in either knowing someone who could not find an apprenticeship easily or they themselves experiencing it, the tattoo artists who accept anyone as an apprentice are less common.

One of the main differences between learning how to tattoo through an apprenticeship and learning how to tattoo through a tattoo school, and why it is frowned upon to learn through a school by most within the tattoo artist community, is that through an apprenticeship you learn by first tattooing yourself. It is practicing on real skin that prepares an apprentice for tattooing others once they are licensed. Respondent 8 spoke about this part of apprenticing:

Yeah, it's kind of like an initiation type of thing. You didn't have to but, like I tattooed my thigh like during my apprenticeship just to do something. Just to get an idea of how to tattoo skin, I'm supposed to do it to myself first before I try it on somebody else.

Tattooing oneself before tattooing another was a clear unspoken rule of apprenticing. It is never required, as stated by Respondent 8, but the overall idea is that you as an artist should know the pain and should be able to trust yourself enough to first tattoo yourself. Many participants spoke about how tattooing on fruit or practice skins during an apprenticeship was nothing close to how it is to tattoo real skin, let alone a living human being. It is an initiation into the world of the tattoo artist to practice on yourself, and sometimes others, as it shows you have what it takes to follow through – even if the tattoos do not turn out well, as they often do not.

Tattoo Schools

Tattoo schools hold a different reputation in the tattoo artist community, one that shines a light on the root of tradition within the profession. Where apprenticeships limit access to the profession through mentor assessments and extensive training, one is able to enroll in a tattoo school simply by paying a fee. There is no gatekeeping for who goes to tattoo school, and that is a main reason why many tattoo artists look down upon them. As Respondent 2 states: “You earn your spot, going to a tattoo school is just like, almost like disrespectful to the trade to a degree.” The protection of the tattoo artist community by those within it is of the utmost importance to

many artists, and tattoo schools undermine that. Tattoo artists have never been a part of the mainstream acceptable culture, and so the gatekeeping that begins with an apprenticeship is important enough to where anything that goes against it is a threat. Respondent 6, an individual who was not necessarily against tattoo schools, reflected on this point:

I think you know that we've seen recently, it's been unfortunate that a few people that wanted to start something, really received death threats from people within the tattoo industry because they're so offended by the idea of somebody teaching the mass populations or something it's just like a really, really gnarly system right now.

The fear of the mass population being able to emulate tattoo artistry is one that was a theme in many, if not all interviews. This is not to say every interviewee was fearful of new waves of people coming into the tattoo artist community and opening up shops, but more so that it was a frequent reflection made. This then helps bring clarity to why those already within the industry, many for decades, do not want tattoo artist education to be easily accessible to the masses. The passion and protective instinct of the gatekeeping, as Respondent 6 stated, at times results in death threats. These are death threats specifically towards people wanting to start a tattoo school type of education for those who would like to become tattoo artists but are unable to find an apprenticeship. Many who gatekeep the industry find that the difficulty of finding and keeping an apprenticeship is what allows for the tradition and mystery behind being a tattoo artists to flourish, and the community to stay the same. However, with more tattoo artists entering the industry and opening up shops that are more geared towards their fine art backgrounds, there are more people that are accepting of better education for individuals wanting to become tattoo artists.

Tradition

An apprenticeship is seen as the traditional way of entering the tattoo artist community. It includes mentorship and fulfilling requirements from the government. It is the way someone earns a spot in the tattoo artist world, as well as earns respect. The threat of tattoo schools and more accessible education is a threat of change, and those rooted in the traditional ways of tattooing do not want that. Respondent 4 reflects on this:

I think a lot of people have been tattooing for a while, tend to get negative about that because people don't like change. You can feel like getting left behind or you can feel like you don't understand anymore what people like because people used to like what I did all the time and now they don't. I hear that from people a lot, and I think it's just fear. No one wants to feel like they're turning into the old guy or the old girl that's been tattooing for too long and should figure some shit out.

Like many industries, the tattoo industry changes with trends in art and preferences. Individuals' tattoos will always be unique, but as Respondent 4 stated, those who have a traditional way of tattooing and do not want to change are the people who are critical of more people entering the profession and different artistic styles being used. The connection of fear with the traditional old school type of tattoo artist was a common theme in discussions among some of the participants. Specifically, Respondent 6 echoed Respondent 4's reflection when discussing the repulsion of tattoo schools by those in the industry: "But the fact that it's so shunned within the industry it really just sort of shows the sort of stubbornness, the fear from a lot of the people that have sort of run the industry for so long." With any traditionally more underground and mysterious profession come these traditional gatekeepers who view change as threatening to both the secretive nature and their abilities to gatekeep.

Similar to the threat of tattoo schools making education widespread, the threat of changing artistic styles in tattooing is also difficult to accept for some. Respondent 7 is a tattoo

artist who has been working for decades, and has chosen to change with the changing artistic trends and styles, and reflects on those who find it difficult and suffer the consequences:

There are still a lot of people that are stuck in 80s style, sub-par biker work, or people that put all their eggs into the tribal basket in the late 90s and early 2000s and never were able to develop a diverse skill set...there are certain styles of tattoos that if you're sort of all in on that and it sort of goes out of fad, now you're out of your element and you're making work that isn't in your skill set in order to pay your bills or you're out of a job because nobody wants tribal arm bands anymore, you know?

While there are positive aspects to the traditional ways of tattooing, Respondent 7 highlights one of the downfalls. Being able to keep up with trends or shift in artistic styles is part of how to keep your job as a tattoo artist, but the change of artistic trends does not always align with the traditional ways of the industry. This is not to say that there are not tattoo shops or tattoo artists that still tattoo the same way as when they began decades before and are successful at it, but that overall those artists who remain in one style out of stubbornness tend to not find longevity in their career. Those aspects of the tattoo artists industry are in some ways at odds with one another. The traditional apprenticeship and ways of gaining access into the community remains strong and the main way of allowing new people to enter in; however, the traditional way of tattooing both in application and art, changes as society and people change. This is especially important when considering changes in the stigma around tattoos and the tattoo artist profession. Without change within the industry and the art, there may not have been a change in the stigma. The change in how society views tattoo artists began with changes made from within the industry. This points to the changes of stigma beginning from within stigmatized groups, not always due solely to a shift in values from society in general. However, the change beginning in the industry itself does not always allow for those traditional types to remain rooted in how they have traditionally done their job.

The old school values are an important part of the traditional way of being a tattoo artist. The persona of the tattoo artist is one that can always be successfully rooted in tradition, and is in large part how the old school tattoo artists have remained successful. Respondent 13, an old school tattoo artist himself, reflects on this:

You know, I'm old school. We have a group that I'm friends with, all local tattoo artists and all 60+. We're the old timers now, we were the young guys and now we're the old guys. And I'm not shitting on them because there are a lot of talented young artists and they do things that I'll never be able to do. (undetectable audio). They're really amazing. From what I see, a lot of them become Rockstar's and they lose the old school values as far as...just certain things. Again, I'm not shitting on them or anything they're all really, really talented, but certain things that they do that I don't know. Maybe it has to do with social media. Some of the costs, the hourly costs of tattoo artists now it's crazy. I mean, I would have never thought that a tattoo artist could make \$400 an hour...we don't even come close to that, we would never do that. And you know good for them if they can do it, I guess.

Many of the more old school tattoo artists did not have the need to create or maintain a persona when they first began tattooing. Thus, the high prices and the "Rockstar" mentality, as Respondent 13 spoke of, is not in line with the traditional ways of the industry. There are more expectations to have and uphold a persona now, as Respondent 13 spoke of, and the higher level of artistic training has caused many new tattoo artists to raise their prices. These are some examples of the ways in which the current tattoo artist industry is going against the old school version of tattooing, but it is also concurrent with the change of stigma within the industry. The popularity of tattoos with the newer generations helped reduce the stigma associated with tattoos and thus with the tattoo artist occupation. The Internet, TV shows, and celebrities embracing tattoos are all a part of the media surge that aided in this change. When TV shows about tattoos and tattoo artists first started airing, the stigma around them already had begun changing, but it was this type of widespread exposure that helped the general public view tattoos in a different light. This, along with popular celebrities, opened up a new world that made tattoos less

stigmatized and more a choice that others who are admired were making as well. However, this change in stigma and overall exposure brings in new artists, new artistic styles, and new clients that are not always in line with the traditions of the industry. This is because there is an aspect of the stigma that the old school tattoo artist community was comfortable with, and in fact made the community closer. With the threats of tattoo schools, quickly changing artistic styles, heightened social media and television representation, comes a new wave of tattoo artistry and a newfound understanding of the community by those who are not within it. It is no surprise that those who were comfortable in the previous generations of tattooing are not open to the idea of the industry becoming more acceptable and accessible.

Mystery

While many traditional aspects of the tattoo artist industry are changing with the heightened accessibility through the world of media and more people deciding to get tattoos, the mysterious aspect of the profession remains the same. Solely because a person decides to modify their body with a tattoo, or many tattoos, does not make them knowledgeable on the tattoo artist profession. In fact, the hidden aspects of the tattoo artist career have stayed constant through the many waves of change since tattoo artistry began. Respondent 4, a tattoo artist for over a decade, shared thoughts on this:

“So, I mean the more technical stuff and the more actual like mechanics of it, I don’t think people will ever really understand unless they’ve taken the time to research it or learn about it more. But they don’t have to, because that’s really our job as tattoo-ers is to focus on all of that stuff and they can just focus on the important part which is what they’re getting tattooed that time. So yeah, there will always be a little bit of mysticism to it but for the most part I think that people are pretty comfortable in walking into tattoo shops in a way they didn’t use to be. Even when I started 12 years ago it was different.”

The mystery of the tattoo artist profession and the mechanics behind tattooing are in part a traditional aspect of the job. This is evident in the gatekeeping that is so prominent through apprenticeships, the hiring process by tattoo shops, and the community of tattoo artists that is not easily penetrable by those who are not on the same career path. Respondent 4 noted that this mysticism behind tattooing is inherent and not necessary to change. The person being tattooed does not have to know how to tattoo to receive a tattoo, similarly to how a patient in a hospital does not have to know how to perform surgery in order to receive surgery. The heightened curiosity around stigmatized groups is a product of the mystery and the secrecy, but it is not necessary to change. It is a tradition of sorts to be mysterious as a tattoo artist, and the unknowns surrounding the technical and mechanical expertise is a part of the draw to receive a tattoo for many. A part of this mystery is explained by Respondent 10:

“I think the average person isn’t necessarily familiar with how you get into tattooing. It’s not an avenue where you take tattooing in college and then you’ve got a job. I mean a lot of people know there’s an apprenticeship involved, but how you get that is vague, and what you learn in an apprenticeship is vague you know so.”

There is an important distinction made in Respondent 10’s reflection on the mystery around the tattoo artist profession. An apprentice is not a tattoo artist, although they have their foot in the door and are training to become one, they are still not seen, treated, or learn the same way as a licensed tattoo artist. The vagueness and the mystery around the profession extends itself into the actual industry this way, and due to the freedom and self-regulation involved in the profession it is up to each individual and each shop to find their way. This is in part by design due to the heavy foundation of tradition within the profession, however it comes with it strong secrecy that can at times be more dangerous than protective.

While to be considered a real tattoo artist you must be licensed and in some way work in a shop with clients, there are still people who partake in tattooing without actually being professional tattoo artists. The mystery of the profession is alluring enough for some that they want to try the type of art, without going through the process of getting into the community.

Respondent 6 discussed this at length:

“It’s really sort of the system has kind of built it into itself to sort of keep people away from this knowledge, right? It’s gonna be just a handful of chosen artists that are allowed to do this but like you know these people are ignorant, the problem is you know tattooing needles, tattoo machines, tattoo inks, this shits available on Amazon and eBay all day long. That doesn’t mean it’s good equipment, it’s doesn’t mean that it’s things that you should be buying, but the stuff is available to everyone.”

Solely because the profession itself is protected by gatekeepers and lengthy education and training process, does not mean that individuals do not have access to the tools required to create body art. This does not take away from the profession itself, but speaks to the importance of education and safety training. It shines a light on the downfalls of the secretive nature of the tattoo artist community, and inaccessibility to proper education of tattooing. There are individuals giving and receiving tattoos “underground,” with cheaply made inks and machines, unaware or unacknowledging of the danger if it is not done safely. Now this does not fall on the shoulders of licensed tattoo artists to police, but is a worry and concern of some of the participants who recognize that being a mysterious community and profession is not always in the best interest of safe tattooing.

THE JOB

The tattoo artist career is one in which each individual has almost complete control over how their occupation plays a role in their life. There is immense freedom involved in what they are able to do once you have your tattoo artist license, including but not limited to where and

when you give tattoos. There are traveling tattoo artists and tattoo conventions, two examples of a lifestyle that does not involve routine or stability in the way a typical 9-5 occupation does. For many, that is part of the attraction in the first place: the freedom and self-regulation that comes from working as a tattoo artist. They are in complete control of your time and your art if you choose to be. This is in part where the stereotype of tattoo artists living transient lives comes from (Thompson, 2015). This does not extend to every tattoo artist, and certainly is not the main reason for many of the participants' choice to enter into the tattoo artist profession, but it is a real and sustainable option for many who enter into the line of work. There are other hidden aspects to the job that are not understood unless they are in the profession, such as the pressure that comes from tattooing itself and the self-regulation involved. There is also a strong community of support for many, that comes from a shared sense of passion for the art. Despite the sense of community many have within the tattoo artist career, the effects of it being a male dominated industry remain. There were frequent reflections on how that changed client interactions, as well as the overall career of women who are tattoo artists. A majority of the job is wrapped up in mystery, yet at its core it is one that people follow because of their passion and desire for freedom.

I have organized this section in terms of four themes. The first theme explores the freedom and lifestyle aspects of the tattoo artist profession, how artists can be attracted to the job because of the freedom within it but also are expected to be motivated enough to adopt it as a lifestyle. The second theme covers the self-regulation and hidden pressures of the industry, what those pressures are and how they relate to the self-regulation that must occur. The third theme involves the community aspect of the tattoo world and the passion behind the profession, both in art and in interacting with other artists. The fourth theme explores the sexism within the industry,

as well as the fact that it remains a male-dominated industry, and how that affects tattoo artists of both genders.

Freedom and Lifestyle

With the freedom of the tattoo artist profession may come a misconception of it being an “easy” job to both keep and do well in. As previously discussed, obtaining the necessary training and developing the required artistic skills with the aid of a mentor are significant challenges. Additionally, and despite the freedom associated with the profession, the job requires a lifestyle commitment that extends beyond the time spent directly serving clients. As Respondent 1 mentioned multiple times throughout his interview: “I mean it’s a difficult job. It’s not like an easy gig you know what I mean. It takes a lot of time and energy and you know thought. It’s like a lifestyle.” When you become a tattoo artist, it becomes a lifestyle. This is necessary for success, as the time you are not spent tattooing must be spent thinking of new tattoo ideas, improving your craft, or trying to market yourself either through social media or at a shop. It is not a job that can be left at the office when each day ends. Once you become a tattoo artist there is significant time that needs to be spent on maintaining the skill and occupation itself. There are many different aspects of the job that require attention, as Respondent 5 noted: “It’s not like your typical trade. You need customer service, you need to really know more about the body.” Knowing how a tattoo will lay on the skin, as well as knowing how to remain professional when tattooing or talking to a difficult client, are two aspects of the job that go unnoticed yet are a part of a tattoo artists’ everyday life. It is up to each individual to decide how they want to conduct themselves as a businessperson and an artist, but those decisions tend to bleed over into their entire lives. Freedom is a part of the lifestyle, but if you are dedicated to the lifestyle there are many factors to being successful that need to be considered at all times.

An important part of being a tattoo artist is devoting a large portion of your life to tattooing, as Respondent 11 said: “It’s a lifestyle so it’s important to make sure you really want to do it.” The freedom of it does not make it an easy occupation to have, and it requires a certain level of dedication, which Respondent 2 believes is displayed through tattoos:

So like we were saying earlier tattooing is like a lifestyle and it uh we have names for things like hands and neck tattoos. We call them the “job stoppers,” like an “everlasting job stopper.” The mentality is more like this is all you’re going to do forever because if you’re getting into tattooing it’s a passion thing. I don’t really know too many people who get into tattooing just because it’s cool. Because it honestly, in all reality, there are many great perks to it, but the job never ends. I think it’s more like that.

The tattoo artist profession is unique in the way that, as Respondent 2 described, there are expectations that you are in the profession for life. It is a part of the old school, more traditional values of the tattoo artist career to mark yourself with the “job stopper” tattoos, to in part prove your dedication to the title of tattoo artist. It is not a job or a community that can rely on individuals who do not adopt tattooing as a lifestyle, therefore tattooing parts of yourself that keep you from acquiring another job shows real commitment. As Respondent 2 stated, the job never ends. Your life in many respects must be given to the tattoo artist career, and it is not an easy career path. Respondent 9 reflected on the lifestyle aspect of being a tattoo artist similarly to Respondent 5, while also discussing the ways in which outside sources cheapen the dedication behind the work:

I think that it’s not like this thing that you just like think you want to do and then you just go to school and then you go do it. It is a lifestyle, it is a passion, like you really have to devote yourself and by proving that through following somebody and learning from somebody one on one and like proving that you’re going to be there day in and day out and go through the hard days and still want to do this job, it’s like very rewarding it’s like you worked really hard to do it and you finally get to do this thing and I think tattoo schools really cheapen that and take away that like kind of sacred part of being a tattooer.

Hard work and dedication to the craft are two important qualities in a tattoo artist, as Respondent 5 highlights in his reflections on tattoo schools. It is in the apprenticeship stage that the lifestyle is adopted. There are other occupations that could be considered a lifestyle. However, many of those do not require the passion and lifestyle dedication at the same level as tattoo artists. If a tattoo artist is not entirely dedicated to their work their entire business will not be successful, and that is a unique type of pressure. It is an industry that relies on word of mouth and overall good client relations, along with a base level of artistic skill. All of those aspects require constant attention and passion to motivate you during the periods of time that are more difficult.

There are many aspects of being a tattoo artist that contribute to the profession being a lifestyle. With art and design come many hours of outside work and modifications, as well as the upkeep and organization that comes with owning a shop. For many shops, these parts of the job factor into the prices of the actual tattoo – especially if the tattoo is large and requires significant time spent designing by the artist. This was a main focus of Respondent’s 6 reflections on the tattoo artist lifestyle:

I just wish people understood a little bit better, why tattoos cost what they cost. They’re expensive, yes tattoos are expensive, but we’re not getting paid any of the other time that we’re in this. It’s only while we’re working are we making money, so when we’re there researching for your tattoo, drawing for your tattoo, we’re not getting paid. When we’re spending late nights or early mornings in the studio, finalizing designs, also there’s like all of the supplies that we have to buy that go into a tattoo. Making sure that we have good quality equipment and it’s well maintained, a beautiful place that people can come in and be comfortable to get tattooed, that’s all things that we spend time and money on that we don’t get paid for.

The tattoo artist position is a lifestyle because of the extra work that goes into it, that oftentimes takes up more time than people who are not in the profession realize, as Respondent 6 stated.

While the tattoo artist career is a lifestyle, artists are only paid for their work once they have tattooed someone. This is an important part of the job to consider, as with such a large amount of

time spent dedicated to being successful at tattooing, the prices for those tattoos are of the utmost importance. While there is freedom in the occupation, the lifestyle of it can bring more work in being successful than other jobs. It is a requirement for many to be passionate about the work, simply because the amount of time you have to dedicate to it would result in extreme burnout if you are not fully invested.

Participants had mixed opinions on the subject of freedom within their occupation, in part because of the dedication it takes to embrace the tattoo artist lifestyle. For many it was a welcome and evident piece of their day-to-day life, but for some it reminded them of those who choose the career path for what was perceived as the wrong reasons. Respondent 13, a tattoo artist for over 30 years, spoke about this briefly when referencing the newer wave of tattoo artists: “The problem is a lot of people get into this because they don’t want to work, they don’t want a real job.” The high level of freedom attracts all different types of people to the occupation, and at times those types of people, with various work ethics, clash. This was also evidenced in Respondent 7’s reflections, another old school tattoo artist in the business for over 20 years, on the freedom aspect of the job: “I do believe a lot of artists got into it for a perceived level of freedom but maybe explored that freedom at a level that was considerably less professional. Just more selfish or whatever.” The way each artist chooses to use the freedom versus the inevitable freedom that comes with the occupation is an important distinction. It is not a question of whether or not there is freedom within the occupation, but more so how you use it. Those who choose to use it in a less structured way, with more focus on how the freedom can aid them personally rather than their chosen career and community, are the people that tattoo artists such as Respondent 13 and Respondent 7 do not align with.

While some of the participants spoke about the freedom of being a tattoo artist as a way for individuals who do not want to work to still be able to make a living, there were also participants who spoke about the positive aspects of the freedom they have found in their career.

Respondent 12 confirms that there are many positive aspects to being a tattoo artist:

I feel very fortunate I get to do what I do. I get to make my own hours, I can take on more and not take on projects that I want or don't want to do. I appreciate that I don't have to have like a 9-5 job.

The control and autonomy around decision making is an important part of the freedom found within the tattoo artist occupation. For those who do find themselves against a 9-5 type of career, and also are able to find the organization and motivation in a job solely guided by your own decision making, being a tattoo artist is a welcomed way of life. It is impossible to expect every person to be able to enjoy, be passionate about, and thrive in a 9-5 working environment. Tattoo artists are an example of a population that chooses to live a different lifestyle. Respondent 8 reflects on that important aspect of freedom:

Being able to I don't know pretty much take care of myself with it. You know what I mean? Like, I'm the only person that works at my business right now. I've been doing this for about 6 years on my own and I think that's the best thing, knowing that you can kind of pursue and try different things. You're not working in between your company or with a boss over your head telling you how to invest your money and grow.

For some, such as Respondent 8, not having a boss and being able to own their own business was a welcome relief from other types of jobs that they had previously. Not every participant owned their own tattoo shop, therefore some did work under a boss, but all shared this same sentiment.

For the most part, as a tattoo artist, no matter where you work, you are an independent artist.

There is freedom in the decisions you can make for yourself and the clients you choose to take on, and the lifestyle that comes with it can be incredibly fulfilling. Overall, it is a career that

requires a certain level of dedication and passion to sustain, and one of the more difficult aspects is the need for self-regulation.

Self-Regulation and Pressure

The tattoo artist profession is one that is unique compared to a majority of other industries. While there are requirements that must be fulfilled in order to be licensed, once that license is acquired much of the job is self-regulated. That is both in the standards of the work, set by the community and the health department, and how business is conducted. As Respondent 2 describes it: “It’s a trade, it’s an in-house kind of self-policed community really, tattooing.” As previously discussed, there are gatekeepers for entering the community as a tattoo artist. Once you are a part of the community, it is expected that you also aid in the self-policing that is done from within. This is in large part done out of necessity, as Respondent 2 notes:

Yeah, unfortunately there is no HR in the tattoo industry. It’s more of a community and its more of a lifestyle than a job, so it is mainly self-regulated and that being said there are some people that probably should never interact with other human beings and unfortunately a lot of those guys go unchecked I guess.

With no Human Resources department or much regulation after licensing, there are difficulties in ensuring those who are mistreating either clients or the community are pushed out. There is gatekeeping when entering the industry, however, it is an unspoken part of the occupation that not every artist agrees upon or participates in. Therefore, tattoo artists can use the self-regulated part of the industry to their advantage. While those types of artists do exist, the community overall has always been self-regulated and for the most part is able to grow and succeed. It allows tattoo artists from all backgrounds and life paths to enter and bring their own unique sense of artistry to the profession. Respondent 4 reflected on this positive part of the self-regulation within the industry:

Tattooing is an interesting thing because there's nothing standardized about it. Everybody gets into it, and I'm sure as you've talked to other tattoo-ers you can see there are a lot of different paths that can be taken to getting to do this job and there are a lot of different backgrounds that people have.

The lack of standardized protocols and requirements that tattoo artists have to adhere to brings a diverse group of people attracted to the profession. Respondent 4 speaks highly of that aspect of the industry, and the uniqueness of getting to work with people with a range of different life stories and ways in which they came to enter the world of tattooing. Those who take advantage of the self-regulation that the profession requires, whether that be by conducting their business in a manner that does not make clients feel comfortable or by blatantly ignoring safety protocols, are not the norm within the community. Every shop conducts business and tattoo creation differently but that is part of what makes the self-regulation within the industry an important part of its success.

With self-regulation comes a range in the type of shops, artists, and opinions on the industry. Within that range, however, there are characteristics that many artists are thought to share. In large part, it connects with the self-regulated norms within the industry, due to the fact that those norms attract a certain type of person who wants that level of freedom. Respondent 7 tried to define what these characteristics are:

I think the loose description of tattoo artist also draws a type of person, you know. For that freedom, for that you know the creativity and it's like if you can't play guitar it's like the next best thing to being a Rockstar I guess. In that sort of, again, rebellious, self-determined, creative way, and I think that in itself would probably allow for a measurable cross-section of type of people who become tattoo artists.

Rebellious, self-determined, and creative. Those are three characteristics tattoo artists are presumed to share and is evident in their draw towards an industry so unregulated by a governmental body or the like, as well as so tightly knit by the community the industry creates.

The self-regulated nature of being a tattoo artist for many equates to freedom when they first enter into the industry. With that self-regulation comes an added level of responsibility if desired, such as acquiring health insurance. It was a part of the industry that participants, such as Respondent 13, did not think much about when first becoming a tattoo artist. However, as the years pass, the lack of benefits or a retirement package is something of note. Respondent 13, a tattoo artist for over 30 years, is currently planning his exit from the industry, to no avail:

Obviously it would be nice to have benefits, I've never had a retirement. This is my retirement. I'll eventually hire someone to take over my client office space you know. I'll close my office and just work on people I'm friends with and I'll just be at the shop, that's my goal in the next 5 years or so. But it probably won't happen *laughs* I'll die with the gun in my hand.

This idea of tattooing until you die was a common sentiment shared among a few of the participants because retirement is not guaranteed within the profession. So, while the self-regulation of the job allows for a certain level of freedom and control over your work and life, once it comes time to exit your career it is difficult to do so. The expectation that you must be heavily tattooed as well as not having a clear retirement plan in the industry makes it difficult to exit the profession, if that is a desire. Once you are a tattoo artist, it is assumed you are one for life. While this was a concern for some, it was not one that warranted a change in careers or even a real concrete plan to be made. The job of a tattoo artist allows individuals to have a certain level of autonomy and choice of how to conduct business. This is an important aspect of the career for many, one that outweighs the safety net of a retirement plan.

The self-regulation that occurs within each tattoo shop, as well as with every tattoo artist, spills over into client interaction and customer service. Most importantly, tattoo artists have more control over who they choose to tattoo, how they choose to tattoo, and so on. The tattoo artist does hold a certain level of power when in a position of being able to turn away clients and make

decisions that are right for them and their business. Respondent 4 spoke about this revelation he had a few years into his career:

When I first started it took me a number of years to realize that I could say no to stuff. Because when you're working in a shop a lot of times it's like get in and out do everything as fast as you can and as clean as you can, and you don't really learn that you've got the power to control what you're doing you just kind of feel like you gotta do it because that's how we do it and that's how we do it and that's kind of the more old school cut throat kind of attitude in tattoo shops, which you'll still see certain places, but I'm happy to not be working like that anymore.

The control and power you have over how you conduct your business are not learned in the apprenticeship stage of training. It is something that grows as you grow as an artist, and is a part of the self-regulation that the job requires. As Respondent 4 stated, it is a more old school type of business method to tattoo everyone who comes in, and do it as fast as possible. The more new school way is to prioritize the artistic expression that goes into each tattoo, and take time through the process. Neither way of tattooing is right or wrong, but it exemplifies the self-regulation that is at the core of the profession. This is especially true when choosing to turn away clients or tattoos. Respondent 12 also mentioned this as being an important lesson:

I guess you know it's important for people to know that I can refuse service, I do not have to tattoo certain things or people or certain body parts you know I'm not obligated to do anything for you just because you're paying me *laughs* I have encountered that before where people are like "well why won't you I'm going to pay you?" And I'm like nope. If it's against what I believe in, or it's a body part that I refuse to touch or you know. People need to know that we do not have to do anything we're not comfortable with just because you're throwing money at us doesn't mean we have to do it.

The freedom to refuse service is one that is not common among other industries. For tattoo artists, while regulation is desired in some areas, the ability to refuse to tattoo a person or a body part once you are somewhat established in your career is a huge benefit to their occupation. This is especially true when it comes to situations they wish not to be involved in, because there is already enough pressure experienced in their day to day lives.

With self-regulation, and the tattoo business in general, comes an element of pressure. Whether it be dealing with various types of people, learning how to tattoo or to improve your tattoo style, or running a successful business. There is a social aspect to the job, and it depends on each artist whether that is an enjoyable part of the day-to-day minutiae for them. As previously noted by participants, every tattoo artist comes from a different background and chose to be a tattoo artist for various reasons. Due to this, the socialization that comes with the industry is both liked and disliked. Respondent 4 discusses this duality within the occupation:

I really like the social interaction of it, but sometimes that's also the worst part of it too. It can depend on who you are dealing with, but to me that keeps things interesting and exciting and you get to meet a lot of different types of people and get to work within those different people's parameters. I like that, I like having to play by other people's rules in certain ways as far as designing and interacting.

The pressure involved with the constant social interactions is one that is not learned in its entirety through an apprenticeship until clients are established. The client aspect of tattooing is one that goes unnoticed, it is a highly social job that centers around customer service for many. There will be clients that are easy to work with, and others that make the social interaction of the job difficult. At the center of it, however, is the fact that a tattoo artist is putting a permanent marking on a live human being. Respondent 7 stated that: "the most challenging thing about what I do is actually tattooing. I have like crazy anxiety." He noted that it was the pressure that comes with socializing while you are trying to create a beautiful art piece on someone that is the most anxiety inducing aspect of the job. Another area of pressure for tattoo artists is knowing the permanence of the tattoo they are giving. Both Respondent 6 and Respondent 7 shared similar sentiments when reflecting on the pressure of permanence:

Respondent 6: It's easy to be extremely intimidated when you first start like man I'm about to put this on somebody permanently. It's really, I don't know, it's a struggle and hard to do.

Respondent 7: Having to create an image, manually, on a canvas that's live and sentient, you know inches away from them and be in their presence for hours and hours on end and have a permanent record of what you did literally on their arm, yeah that is the hardest thing (laughs)...for me.

Despite both Respondent 6 and Respondent 7 having over 10 years of experience, the physical application of tattoos is where the most pressure is felt. That is in part why the passion for tattooing is of the utmost importance, along with the self-regulation that allows you to control your business. For the main part of your career to also be the most high-pressure, your passion for your work must also be high.

Community and Passion

The tattoo artist industry is one that is tight knit. While there are outsiders, as there are in any industry, artists generally respect one another and view their career as a type of community. This is in part due to the secretive, mysterious nature of the occupation – as many who are not within it do not understand the ins and outs of tattooing (Thompson, 2015). Due to its all-consuming nature a community is an important resource. Social media is one way in which tattoo artists are able to connect from around the world, as Respondent 3 stated: “There is a whole Instagram community for tattoo artists.” Even among shops in the New Hampshire area, there are ways the community stays in touch with one another through social media. Respondent 5 shared: “A lot of shops are pretty close and so many shops, we have like Facebook pages.” These ways of connecting have only made the community stronger, as they are able to keep in touch more frequently and from a wide range of areas. The ability to connect globally with different

tattoo artists is one of the biggest assets to tattoo artists in the present day, something Respondent 6 spoke highly of:

Things like Instagram and Facebook have made that really, really easy to do now. Where you can see who an artist is following and follow them, and find out who that person is following, and follow them, and suddenly you have access to a massive amount of amazing art. So I think that's when my mind really started, I guess it started to change my mind about the whole thing in a more positive way you know. What was originally a way where I could use my education as a career, became like you know I sort of like fell in love with it in a different way. So, yeah I think having access to sort of a global market of tattoos really sort of made me excited to be a part of that and seeing how things have been changing since tattoos sort of hit mainstream and started being on TV shows and stuff.

The artistic growth that is found when tattoo artists connect with one another is a large factor of the community. It is a unique occupation in that way, where their craft expands and grows as they collaborate and learn from one another. In that way, it is necessary for tattoo artists to have a community, because without it, it would be difficult to expand ideas and talents. Traveling is an important part of the tattoo artist career, and the main way many individuals meet new people and learn about how other artists are conducting their business and creating their art. There are multiple ways in which this occurs. Individual artists often connect over social media, from all around the world, and visit each other to be tattooed or connect in general. There are also tattoo conventions that frequently occur in and around major cities across the U.S., and the world, that tattoo artists can choose to travel to and share their work with a wider audience. Respondent 8 credited this aspect of the community for helping him grow the most as a tattoo artist:

Definitely traveling and being open minded to meeting new artists because like in the first beginning years like being, well yeah being an apprentice and also just being like the first few years of being licensed as far as meeting new artists and going to different cities, like Philly, San Francisco, you know Boston and all of that. You've been inspired differently and it's definitely changed your perspective of how tattoos can be done and not even just tattoos, artwork and business. There's so many different management styles that I've seen over the years and helped me find what works for me. But yeah, definitely just being open minded to opinions and pretty much just opinions of people.

Meeting new artists is an important part of being a tattoo artist, as Respondent 8 spoke about. Traveling and being exposed to new tattoo artists ensures never-ending learning and growth. Without the type of wide ranging community that many tattoo artists are a part of, many without even knowing one another, this type of education would not be available. There are a plethora of artistic styles, ways of running a tattoo shop, and skills to learn for the job. An apprentice, for example, learns the way of the shop they're training with. This makes expanding your knowledge through travel and meeting with other artists vital to the growth process. It is the drive to learn more and dedicate yourself to the craft that makes tattoo artists so tight knit within their community.

While there is a global community of tattoo artists, there are also smaller communities within tattoo shops and local areas. Many participants spoke about their experiences in their own tattoo shops, reflecting on the importance of community with the people you work with every day. For Respondent 11, this is a unique aspect to the industry: "I would say we're all artists so we all have something to relate to and we all want to help each other. There's really no other industry that's like this. That especially is not being really regulated." This statement ties back to the self-regulation that is integral to the industry. Respondent 11 spoke about this being necessary for the community to exist. Without a heavy amount of regulation, it is easier for artists to help each other and learn from one another. It is also a part of the reason why individual shops are able to become a small community, because they are able to operate how they would like to. Respondent 11 spoke about this, going so far as to refer to the shop she works at as a family:

I would say that shops are very like family oriented in like the shop is a family, versus like a general job where you clock in and your boss really doesn't give a shit about you. so I think that's really cool, even as an apprentice we all check in with each other if

somebody isn't at work, we're all like "oh!" it's not like...people care about each other more in each shop, even the whole community itself too like we hear about a shop that has a problem, we go help them or like vice versa. So that's a big thing I would say in the industry, everybody is very close.

The community and family dynamic of shops and the industry as a whole is unique to the tattoo artist career, as Respondent 11 mentioned. While in many careers there is competition, as there may be among tattoo artists, the overall community is supportive and focused on learning from one another. Respondent 5, the owner of a tattoo shop, spent some time discussing a time period where if it were not for the family dynamic of his shop and the supportive artists who worked with him, his shop would not be open today. He mentioned one artist in particular who helped him greatly:

I mean I took on [confidential name] when she was 17 years old I took her under my wing, and she's 23 now. She's the shops all-star. I love her to death, she's awesome. I've done so much for her and her fiancée and they've definitely helped me along the way too. At one point honestly I would not own my company or if it wasn't for her stepping up and taking care of it.

Respondent 5's example of someone who works with him mirrors much of what other participants spoke about when discussing the dynamics within their specific shops and the tattoo artist community as a whole. Without the community of people who are eager to learn from one another and grow their artistic talents, the tattoo artist industry would not be as successful as it is today. Social media and shows on television allow for networking and more exposure to a diverse range of artists, all of which promote the success of the community. The lack of regulation also makes the family-like dynamics among shops that much more important. They act as each other's oversight and helping hand when it is needed. This would all not be possible without one factor that brings tattoo artists together: passion for their work.

The passion for their work was one subject every participant agreed upon. Whether they only mentioned it once, or had many reflections, it was clear that passion was the main drive to join and stay in the tattoo artist community. When thinking about his identity, Respondent 9 states that: “The only thing I care about is making good tattoos. Like I just want them to look good. I want that to be the identity is that my work is good.” This was a sentiment shared by many, that at the end of the day ultimately all of the other positive aspects of the job paled in comparison to creating great art and tattooing well. Respondent 1 notes that this was vital to getting through the bad days that inevitability come with the job: “Which is where it comes down to it’s a passion thing too. It’s like there are so many obstacles that you have to overcome.” The art and the act of creating tattoos is the main reason why many enter into the industry, and for those interviewed it was also why they chose to stay. Similar to how the occupation is a lifestyle, the learning curve and the growth of artistic skills and styles is one that never stops. Multiple participants spoke about this exact point of the non-stop education that comes with their career:

Respondent 4: I think if someone doesn’t feel challenged as a tattoo-er then they’re probably not on a path to growing or learning or ever improving. I think once you believed that you’ve got it figured out and you’re killing it then you’re kind of dead in the water as far as progression goes.

Respondent 10: I don’t know if the learning ever really stops. You’re always trying to parse and trying to master something, perfect something, push yourself, you know the tattoos that I do now aren’t going to be as good as the tattoos five years from now.

Respondent 11: I definitely would say that as a tattoo artist even six years doing it I have learned something new almost every day, just tattooing in general. Whether it be different types of skin, different techniques, different styles. There’s so much to learn. So I say there is never ending learning, which is cool because then you keep trying to get as good as you want to be I suppose.

The never ending learning that goes into the job of a tattoo artist is an important reason why one must be passionate about the work, as Respondent 4, 10, and 11 mention. It is not an industry

that is easy to access, and once you are in the community the career path is filled with obstacles and growth opportunities. The trends in tattooing change and the quality of artwork that other artists put out changes, but an individual's passion for tattoos must drive them to always be better.

Many participants noted that they learn more every year, some of those having been in the industry for decades. For someone with minimal passion for tattooing, the career path would undoubtedly be difficult. Respondent 6 believes the passion for the job is what makes a tattoo artist great at what they do:

I think that that's what makes a great tattoo-er, is the drive to make a beautiful thing and then to find as beautiful as it can be to find the faults within that thing and find out how to make them better next time, or just see a thing and be like wow how the hell did they do that and just push yourself to try and figure that out, how to learn that new technique. So I think the hardest part of this is to be motivated, to be better. I think that takes a specific type of person, and I think it's not easy.

The motivation to learn, grow, and recognize when others do great work are hallmarks of a great tattoo artist, as Respondent 6 spoke about. It is not a job one enters into because they need to find a career, as there are difficulties to overcome to even find an apprenticeship. Without the passion and the drive to create great artwork and find other artists who create tattoos you would like to learn from, a tattoo artist would not be able to survive in the industry. With every profession there are the few who do not prioritize the quality of artwork and lose their passion for the job, but they are not the norm. Respondent 7 is someone who has been in the industry for decades, and has gone through the ups and downs of working as a tattoo artist and connecting with your passion:

So nowadays, I think of it more as a job but through the lens of my history. Understanding that it's a lot more than that, but it feels a little bit more like that to me instead of the other way around... You know, when people started really asking me to design stuff for them from scratch you know, using my art skills, and setting me up for a

successful tattoo instead of just mimicking something else, that was awesome...And then bumping into a few people where the tattoos like genuinely changed their lives and made them feel different or better about themselves or whatever.

As the tattoo artist career evolved into more of a job and less of the hobby that it started out as, Respondent 7 noted that what makes it worth it did not change. The passion remains with the occupation, because the art and the process of creating for others remains. The passion behind the work is what drives the community to be close knit and focused on learning from one another. Those two important facets within the industry, community and passion, are also why the change in stigma occurred at a faster pace. Once the mainstream media chose to shine a light on the tattoo artist career, and tattoos were shown as not only a type of body modification but a canvas that displays passionate artists' work, the stigma lessened. This is also due to the community the artists belong to, where lifting each other up is commonplace. It was the community focused change that helped changes in the stigma happen, through TV shows and the like. While it may not be on the minds of artists every day, the passion that drove them to enter the industry and keeps them there is not forgotten. For the women in the tattoo artist community, this is especially true as they face the complications and barriers to entering a male dominated industry.

The Male Dominated Industry, Sexism, and Presentation of Self

The tattoo artist community has historically been a male dominated industry, beginning with a population of sailors, bikers, criminals, and generally people not widely accepted in society (Thompson, 2015). With the added obstacles of the heavy gatekeeping involved in entering the industry, it makes it a difficult profession to be in as a woman. Therefore, stereotypes emerge of those within the male dominated industry being sexist or controlling

towards women. The old school values of the tattoo artist community are tied with tradition, which is shown through the consistent nature of apprenticeships as the method of training.

However, there are also some who hold onto the old school view of the tattoo artist career being one for men. Respondent 6 spoke about the difficulties he believed women faced when they were first allowed to enter into the industry:

It's a very, very sexist industry. It's terrible. It's run by the good old boys...and if you were a female and a tattoo-er the only reason they let you do that was because you know you had your tits out and you were wearing provocative clothing.

Multiple participants spoke about this same occurrence of the first group of women to enter the industry being expected to dress provocatively and not be taken seriously as an artist. This is one way in which sexist gatekeeping made it difficult for women to stay in a shop, or even continue on as a tattoo artist. This kind of gatekeeping was only mentioned in relation to men who have been tattoo artists for decades and who try to perpetuate the old school values of the industry. Respondent 7, a tattoo artist for over 20 years who spoke highly of the women he employed in his shop, had first-hand knowledge of this occurring: "I've heard of women apprentices under men, especially men that have been in the game a long time, getting kind of short shift or you know kind of Clinton'ed." The term "Clinton'ed" is in reference to men who are in charge of women at a tattoo shop expecting some type of physical or visual exchange for their employment, as well as general sexual harassment. However, these discussions of the male dominated industry of tattooing and the sexism that occurs were based more in the past history of the community. While many acknowledged that there are some male tattoo artists who are still sexist towards tattoo artists who are women, they also spoke of change.

Respondent 7, a male tattoo artist who suggested that evolving client preferences make it increasingly important to hire women, mentioned that the gender ratio has changed in many

shops: “Yeah as far as like a client basis goes, there’s always an advantage to having a diverse crew in the shop. But yeah I wish it wasn’t as homogenized. It’s a lot less nowadays though.”

The diversity in gender of tattoo artists was a topic multiple participants spoke about and they emphasized the importance it has for attracting a wide range of clients. This is because there are places on the body where some women would prefer another women tattooing, rather than a man. Respondent 7 mentioned how his shop used to have an equal number of women and men working as artists, and that increase in women working in tattoo shops is welcomed by many shop owners. Respondent 8 also spoke about how he views this change:

No, like the way the industry has changed so much now like first of all when it comes to women in the industry it’s just 50/50 you know but when I first got into it, it felt like it was mainly a male dominated in the industry, but I knew of like a few women here or there but it wasn’t something that was like oh a studio full of women and there’s plenty of stuff like that now.

Respondent 8 in particular spoke about how the sexism that was in the industry, in part due to it being male dominated, has dissipated. Other participants spoke about the change, but in a manner that also acknowledged the male dominated roots of the industry that have not completely vanished. With more shops having women working for them, as well as shops that are fully women owned and run as Respondent 8 stated, change is evident. Respondent 10 reflects on why she believes this is the case:

Tattooing in the last 20ish years has been experiencing a type of renaissance, we have the TV shows to thank, we have (undetectable audio) to thank, we have you know millennials and Gen X’ers getting tattoos and making it more common, and with that has come a freedom of women joining the ranks of both clients getting tattoos and that are tattoo-ers themselves.

Thompson (2015) echoed Respondent 10’s statement about how tattoos have experienced a type of renaissance since the 1970s and 1980s. Respondent 10 connects this with the influx in popular television shows, as well as social media and the younger generations choosing to be tattooed

more than the older generations. With the renaissance of tattoos comes, as Respondent 10 said, more opportunities for new tattoo artists to join the industry. This is especially the case with women, and it is important to note this includes women clients as well. The historical exclusion of women by the male dominated industry of tattooing is not an easy barrier to break through for women. Change is occurring when it comes to more women being employed as tattoo artists and more women choosing to decorate their bodies with tattoos. However, with any male dominated industry, it is important to recognize that sexism still exists within it.

Both the men and women who participated in interviews shared stories or thoughts about the sexism within the tattoo artist industry. They were similar in nature, and all expressed a disdain for its reflection on the community as a whole. It was apparent that sexism does still exist within the tattoo artist industry, but less so compared to the past. Respondent 6 speaks about how it is a difficult history to reconcile with, even as a male artist, while at the same time trying to enjoy your craft:

So it's like you know, there'd be like these tattoo studios with their token pair of tits at the front desk to kind of like lure people in, and then it's just like you know she'd get all the shitty little walk in tattoos and you know all the good old boys out back were doing the custom stuff... You know it's really gross when you see something that you're involved in, that you love, be filled with so many people that are sexist like that, but for sure it is just this whole industry is absolutely riddled with sexism.

The observation of the “token woman” was made by other participants who discussed how the industry is male dominated. It shows the power and persistence of the sexism in the industry, that at times women do have to choose to be that token woman if they want a way to be employed at a shop. The act of male tattoo artists taking advantage of women using their power was not reserved solely for women tattoo artists or employees. This extends to women who come into a

shop for a tattoo. Respondent 12 spoke about this, specifically in how men use their position to take advantage of women clients' bodies, even though she herself has not experienced this:

But I know that some male tattoo artists in the industry tend to take advantage of the fact that they are getting to touch women's bodies and yeah so there is some not so good people out there but you know, and now they're starting to get called out for their behaviors and then they're pretty much ostracized from the industry. I think that used to happen a lot more and nobody would say anything, and they thought that was normal. You know they're tattooing me so they have to touch me and they have to have my clothes off in certain ways, you know. So I think the bad men out there took advantage of being able to have women with their clothes more off than they usually would be.

The policing of sexist behavior within the tattoo artists industry is in large part why women are able to enter the community with more ease. As Respondent 12 stated, in the past sexism was a normal occurrence in the male dominated industry of tattooing and was not spoken up about. However, as the world changes and the industry changes, sexist behavior by tattoo artists is now punished by others in the community. Sexism is monitored mainly through word of mouth, as many tattoo shops are in contact with one another. In this way, it is up to those who experience it and witness it to know that it has occurred, and want to say something about it. Due to there being little regulation outside of the self-policed norms of the community, there are no formal punishments and men who do mistreat women can still own shops and profit from being tattoo artists. However, being ostracized from the community is a difficult obstacle to overcome, as it is such a vital part of being a successful tattoo artist. Ostracization from the tattoo artist community results in a person not being able to expand their network. This could be no longer having connections to other shops in your area, being flagged by the Health Department if multiple clients complain about conduct, and generally having no support or artists to hire if it is known in the community that you are not someone to work with. Other than those main ways of ostracizing, due to the self-regulated nature of the industry there is no formal way to stop someone from being a tattoo artist unless the government steps in.

The women who participated in interviews were not all in agreement about the persistence of sexism, but those who believed sexism still exists spoke about their experiences with great passion. Respondent 10 was one who paid homage to the women who entered the industry before her, a type of trailblazer, that she now thinks highly of:

I mean in the previous generation of women, the shit that they had to go through just being in this industry I would not have been a tattoo-er. If I had to go through what my predecessors had to go through. And we're talking very recent history too, like the 60s and the 70s is when women started joining the ranks. Prior to that it was...women were very far on the (undetectable audio) of society. But yeah there is a stigma, the stigma still exists. A lot of women got into this because they were dating someone who was a tattoo-er, a male tattoo-er.

The acknowledgement that she would not be a tattoo artist had she wanted to start in the 1960s and 1970s is an important one. Respondent 10 recognizes that there is sexism in the industry today, that later will be discussed in connection with male clients as well. However, compared to when women first started being able to enter into the industry, it is a welcomed change. To be the first wave of women in any profession is difficult, but especially in one as un-regulated and hidden as the tattoo artist industry. There are people who still connect the tattoo artist profession with masculinity rather than what it is: artistic expression. This is evident in Respondent 9's example of clients who still hold this belief that women tattoo artists, like herself, are not to be taken seriously:

There's a certain amount of like young guys that come in and go "oh I'm gonna go get tattooed by that hot tattoo chick," you know what I mean? "I'm gonna see if she'll tattoo my balls," or something stupid. And they just want to come in because they feel like it's sort of a feather in their cap. I think we deal with that as well.

The types of clients mentioned by Respondent 9 are in line with the past treatment of the "token woman" in tattoo shops. For a few of the women, experiences with sexism were always related to appearance rather than skill. In an occupation where there is a heavy visual art component,

many choose to focus on the women's bodies, rather than their artistic styles and skills.

Respondent 10 felt her tattooing skills were heavily critiqued because of her gender, but she saw a change in the industry nonetheless:

It's frustrating to kind of to be looked at as like 'oh well are you as good as your husband?' I'm not running the machine with my vagina! I use the same as any others...But the largest group of people who do tattoos now are women, and women are the largest number joining the ranks.

When the women spoke about a change in sexism within the tattoo artist industry, it was more in connection with more women entering the community as both tattoo artists and clients and less so about a general change in men's behavior. Respondent 10's reflection is an example of that. The men who spoke about a change in the sexism tended to speak about how, as Respondent 6 said, those who choose to behave in a sexist way are ostracized from the community, such as losing their network that helps their business be successful. This may be because both genders view and experience the sexism in different ways, and therefore the meaning of change is not universal. This was also evident in the discussions that revolved around the presentation of self, specifically for the women tattoo artists.

The presentation of self is importance because of experience women had when joining the industry. As stated previously by multiple participants, when women first entered into the industry they were there purely for a visual purpose. This included wearing provocative clothing, and if they were also hired as a tattoo artist, only being given the clients who wanted small, easy tattoos. This created an expectation for how women who work as tattoo artists and in tattoo shops are supposed to present themselves. Respondent 6 focuses on this when discussing how he views the presentation of self by women in the tattoo artist industry:

There's so many of them that still have that sort of persona that they were forced into in the industry. You know they've got their tits out, and you know if that's how you want to

look I don't care. I don't care how people want to dress or look, but I always I feel like why are you doing that? Are they doing that because they feel like they have to, because that's what the women before them had to do?

This notion of there being an expectation for the women who enter into the tattoo artist industry to look a certain way is one that is shared between other participants. For the women who were interviewed, however, the expectation was noted but many explicitly stated that they chose not to dress a certain way because of it. For the women who were interviewed, presentation of self was less about how they chose to dress, and more about how they chose to identify and market themselves. Respondent 9 spoke about her business specifically, and regrets around making her gender identity known:

So I don't show myself on social media. I actually regret even naming my business with my name because I would rather people just look at my tattoos and think that a man did them than realize that I am a girl tattoo-er.

This was a continuous theme for Respondent 9 as she spoke about her presentation of self as a tattoo artist, and the ways in which she chooses to conduct her business. She spoke about how she wished she could be a masked individual and remain anonymous while she tattooed people, because of the added complexities around presentation of self that arise when tattooing clients. That was a sentiment only shared among the women who were interviewed, as their thoughts around their presentation of self can become more of a burden whereas men oftentimes expressed that they did not have to think about it. This theme will be explored more deeply in the section on the clients. Respondent 10 also found that in the first few years of her career there were moments where her gender led to setbacks and assumptions that she was not a tattoo artist:

So when I introduce myself to people I am a tattoo artist first, I have to identify myself as an artist first, and then I will tell people my husband and I own a studio together. Because if I say my husband and I own a studio together they will assume that he does the tattooing and I am the person behind the books. We went to a convention, we were probably 5ish years into our careers at that point...The app developer of this thing is at the convention and he's talking to [husband's name] and then he said something along

the lines of [to Respondent 10 only]: “when a client comes in...” and he was under the assumption that I didn’t tattoo. I actually had to correct him in that moment and say ok so when I (undetected audio) with my client...

Respondent 10 went on to express extreme annoyance and frustration, as this was not an isolated incident. It connects with the importance of presentation of self for women in the industry, not solely physical appearance, but their choices regarding their identity as a whole. As Respondent 10 noted, similarly to Respondent 9, she has to identify as a tattoo artist first. Even in doing that, there are still barriers and obstacles they are met with. In the male dominated industry of tattooing, women have been and in many ways still are met with sexism in regards to their legitimacy in the profession. With the rise of the tattoo renaissance (Thompson, 2015), however, women have more access to apprenticeships and opening their own tattoo shops, giving them more freedom than ever before.

THE CLIENTS AND THE TATTOOS

Without clients to tattoo, tattoo artists would not have careers. Customer service and developing relationships with clients is an integral part of the tattooing business. Many clients choose their tattoo artist based upon the artistic style and skillset of that artist; however, there are also bonds that form that produce loyal clientele. Due to this, it is an occupation that relies on social interaction to be successful in many ways. There is a recognition that great customer service skills and the ability to guide people towards the right decisions regarding their tattoos, are what makes a tattoo artist successful. At times, it is the clients who change a tattoo artist’s perspective of their own career, because of their tattoo choice or their reason for choosing it. With the tattoo artist profession being hidden by mystery, there are also misunderstandings involved that can at times result in a negative client experience. Nevertheless, every tattoo artist I

interviewed shared stories about their clients that reflected the level of importance they hold in the industry.

I have organized this section in terms of four themes. The first theme discusses the transformation of self that many clients experience from being tattooed, and the healing process that occurs because of that. This healing in part is what makes tattoo artists so passionate about their careers, especially in the early days of their employment. The second theme discusses tattoos, their meanings, and the artistic expression behind them that is important to both artist and client. The third theme evaluates the customer service expectations and necessities for creating a successful business. This is paired with the common misunderstandings between client desires and beliefs about the profession and the tattoo artists' reality. The fourth theme uncovers bad client experiences, good client experiences, and gendered interactions experienced by women tattoo artists and their male clients. There is no standard bad client or standard good client for tattoo artists, but there are common characteristics that many of the tattoo artists agreed upon.

Healing and Transformation

It is incredibly healing and transformative for a client to get a tattoo. They transform a part of your body in a permanent way, and that can change how someone feels about themselves both physically and mentally. As Respondent 10 said: "There's a variety of reasons why we tattoo ourselves and do body modifications." Every person that chooses to get a tattoo is not always making that choice to knowingly transform their body in some way or help heal an insecurity or memory. However, the aspect of transformation is one that is strong within the tattoo community. For Respondent 1, this was one of his favorite parts of the tattoo process:

I love the transformative aspect of it. I think tattoos have been around you know for a very long time. Since what like 2500 B.C or whatever, so it's like so intrinsic to the human experience that we like to decorate our bodies with whatever our expressions are and I think that's so interesting. It can be an incredibly transformative experience for people at its core.

Tattoos are both an experience and a way to celebrate your body with decoration. They are transformative in the way that they change one's outside appearance, as well as how they may feel about themselves. For some people, tattoos serve both decorative and psychological functions. For others, tattoos are just a way to put art on their bodies in a way they find desirable. Respondent 3 also believed tattoos made people embrace their individuality: "I think people like being different too. To feel unique." While tattoos do follow trends and certain artistic styles, they are inherently unique. This is the case for placement, the tattoo of choice, and the style in which the artist designs it. The transformation of one's body in such a permanent way does not stop when a person stops getting tattoos or gets multiple tattoos over the course of their lifetime. Respondent 10 noted that tattoos' transformational component can also be a bookmark for where a person was at that moment in their life:

A tattoo you've had for 50 years is not going to be the same tattoo you're getting 5 years from now. You're at different places, it doesn't make either right or wrong, it's your journey and your life. Tattoos end up being a nice snapshot of that and I enjoy that component.

While tattoos have the power to change an insecurity or difficult memory, they also have the power to serve as a permanent reminder of something important in one's life. The ways in which tattoos transform someone's body, and at times life, is an aspect of the art form that is not always a focus due to the stigmatized nature of tattooing. This is unfortunate because for many, the transformative aspect is the most important, and often is overlooked.

For many who embrace the transformational aspect of tattooing, it is to turn a part of themselves that they may have viewed as ugly or unpleasant into something they now consider beautiful. A spot on their body that once brought them a negative feeling, now makes them a walking art canvas. Respondent 11 discussed this aspect of their job, and examples of why past clients chose to be tattooed:

I think a lot of girls and even guys come in and some people who are overweight or something there's a scar or something they're unhappy with. I usually tell people if you're unhappy with hypothetically your legs, throw a tattoo on it and then with the tattoo you'll forget about the liposuction or whatever. So I think that's really cool too for people to kind of use artwork to make themselves feel better about themselves.

While Respondent 11 describes a tattoo as a type of coverup, the theme of people choosing to tattoo over an area that they deem as unpleasant is more of a transformation of self. It is a small action towards becoming a new version of yourself, simply by adding art to your body. An example of this is when women who have had mastectomies choose to place tattoos over their surgical scars. Multiple tattoo artists who were interviewed spoke about this, although only few actually tattooed that area due to it requiring a specific type of skillset. For many who choose to tattoo for personal and meaningful reasons, they do so knowingly. Respondent 7, a tattoo artist for many decades who frequently experienced people choosing to be tattooed to transform an area of their body in the early years of his career, spoke about a specific client who chose to transform her head:

There was a lady, just a bunch of years ago and she came in, 52 years old. And she wanted like dandelions like tattooed on her head. And I was like "woah!" No tattoos, zero tattoos. And um she had alopecia. So when she had her kids, her chemicals went all crazy, she lost all of her hair. She wore wigs and she's a lovely lady or whatever and she's like "in the summertime the wigs are so damn hot and you can't wear a scarf because everyone thinks you have cancer not that there's anything wrong with that but I don't have cancer and I'm not looking for that type of attention. I just want my head to look beautiful"...But yeah, you could see her like confidence in the summertime, and blah blah blah.

The choice to be tattooed and the placement of the tattoo from Respondent 7's story exemplifies the power of tattoos. To have no tattoos and choose your first one to be on your head, is no small decision. It was a decision made to bring beauty back to a part of the body that this client felt was no longer beautiful. It also exemplifies the trust many people have in tattoo artists to help them transform, and do so through an artistic avenue. In many ways this aspect of tattooing can be healing both for the clients themselves who sought it out, as well as the tattoo artists who help create the art.

A common sentiment shared between participants is that if you have been tattooing for long enough, you will have stories about clients who had amazing reasons for getting a tattoo. You will also have experiences where your clients share personal and vulnerable aspects of their lives with you. This in many ways is healing for the client, especially if the tattoo is being done for a meaningful reason. Respondent 4 reflected on the clients who share about their lives:

You know because people bring in what's going on with them in their life, and there's something about getting tattooed that makes you feel vulnerable. It makes people feel comfortable talking about whatever. So, I hear all kinds of stuff that people might not normally share with a stranger, but yeah so stuff like that will stick with me, in a lot of ways its memorable.

The vulnerability that comes with being tattooed is an experience that is not widely reflected upon in discussions about tattoos. This vulnerability, and frequently the reasons behind tattoo choices, outweigh the potential stigma from society for many. It is healing to be open with someone who is helping you transform and decorate your body in a meaningful way. Respondent 7 shared a similar sentiment as Respondent 4 when it comes to this vulnerability:

I mean as a tattooist you hear, you know some stuff about people that maybe nobody else knows. You do hear a lot of stories about just dark stuff, like deaths in the family I mean I do mostly larger pieces right? So, I'll spend 30, 40, 60, hours with someone over the course of several years and when you're sitting down you know for 3-6 hours out of whack [wonky] you have a lot longer than like a therapist to actually like build a

relationship and you don't have these codes of ethics so you can really talk about how you feel versus how they feel and all this other stuff and you end up building these relationships.

Here, Respondent 7 is reminding people that the self-regulation of the tattoo artist industry is an important factor in this artist and client relationship with vulnerability. As he also noted, there is no code of ethics that needs to be followed when it comes to sharing about their lives and giving advice. While the main purpose for many clients to see a tattoo artist is to receive a tattoo, it goes deeper than that for the actual process of tattooing. The amount of time many tattoo artists spend with their clients is unique to the profession. The healing that tattoos provide for clients is also rewarding for the artists as well. Their profession is to create art, and when their art is appreciated and worn by others' it is an added benefit. Respondent 11 spoke about this, and the importance of making clients happy:

Making people happy, people leave with big smiles, and I get to see my artwork. Not only like, it's exciting to create custom pieces for people, but they get to walk around with it and that's how they show my art which is cool. Instead of buying pieces or something like that. So I'd say rewarding would be definitely making people happy, lots of memorial pieces people get because that just makes a person's day so much brighter, which is very cool.

The rewarding and healing aspects of the tattoo artist profession are some that go unnoticed by those who are outside of the community and choose to stigmatize the industry. When discussing clients and the necessary customer service qualities one must possess to be a successful tattoo artist, the conversations almost always led back to the same notion. This notion is that helping people become a better version of themselves is what makes the bad days worth it. While there will always be clients that are difficult, there are many that provide rewarding experiences for the artists.

While many tattoo artists who were interviewed shared the same sentiments about tattooing clients being a healing and transformative process, for both artist and client, a few shared personal experiences that were especially notable. Respondent 7 spoke about one of his most memorable experiences tattooing another person. It was not the tattoo itself that made it memorable, but what happened after that provided healing for both client and artist:

A gentleman came in and he was like, you know maybe he was in his early 40s or something like that. Didn't have any tattoos. And when he was a baby he was like in one of those like wheely walker things where they can scootch themselves around, he had pulled the cord from a countertop electric percolator and it came down and it scalded and burned him. And it was like Freddy Kruger burn, you know even when I had him at 42 or whatever, and he just wanted a like a lion like a big lion with a mane you know. So I did a big old, big black and grey you know realistic lion with a mane there. And he thought it was awesome...it came out pretty darn well and man he came back about a month later and he walked in and I was like "how's it going blah blah blah, you here for a touch up or a new tattoo?" And he was like... "nope, I just wanted to stop by and tell you that last week I went to the beach for the first time in my whole life without a T-shirt on"...and I was like, THAT. It doesn't even matter if the tattoo was good, that is the most rewarding shit from my job.

For the gentleman that chose to be tattooed that day, he was also choosing to change his life.

That was not fully apparent to Respondent 7 until after he came back and shared with him just how much the tattoo changed his life, but when it was known it changed Respondent 7's life as well. Experiences such as those are ones an artist never forgets and serve as reminders for why tattoos are special. A similar experience was shared by Respondent 13, who explained how important these healing moments are for his career. Tattoos become more than a way to make an income, they are a way to help bring about transformation for others:

You would think it's a tattoo what's the big deal, it was kind of how I thought about it when I first started doing it. But then as you moved on you realize, like a good friend...her niece got killed in a car accident. She had some writing on her forearm, the girl. And she actually had a picture of it. So I replicated the picture of her and two of her kids. Things like that to me it's like how do you take money from something like that. It was just very moving, it was a very good exchange, even for me you know. And what did I really lose?

To be a part of a healing process or a transformation is a special part of tattoo artist work.

Respondent 13 explained why he frequently does not require payment when tattooing certain people as described above, and that in and of itself is healing for him. Tattoos hold special meaning for many people, and tattoo artists get to partake in the process of bringing that meaning to life. For many of the artists, it is an integral part of their artistic expression.

Tattoo Meanings and Artistic Expression

There are a variety of reasons why people get tattoos. Many people choose to get tattoos that hold a special meaning, many choose to get tattoos because they like the way they look, and many choose to get tattoos for a combination of both reasons. For tattoo artists, whose clients have a variety of reasons for getting tattoos, they see neither way as right or wrong. As Respondent 13 said: “I don’t think every tattoo has to have a meaning. I think sometimes the meaning is I wanted to get a tattoo.” The idea that every tattoo must have a meaning comes from both the fact that many choose a tattoo for a specific meaning, and also because the media has pushed that expectation through TV shows and the like. Respondent 9 reflected on TV shows’ specific impact:

I think it’s really common to see the smaller tattoos or like feminine or simplistic tattoos more, or if they mean something because people will do that all the time - “well what does that mean?” Because the TV shows especially make it sound like it has to have meaning.

The meaning people derive from their tattoos is an individual experience. For one person, they could get a tattoo of a flower because they thought it looked nice and for another person that flower could be in memory of someone who passed away. Tattoos are special for clients, as well as tattoo artists, because they are personal whether there is meaning behind them or not. Tattoo artists themselves are oftentimes heavily tattooed, and those who participated in the interviews

reflected on how some of their tattoos had special meanings and others did not. Respondent 2 was one of those participants who had both reasons for being tattooed and specified that placement was the more important factor for him: “Other tattoos I get because I think they’re cool or I like the way they look. The ones on the face definitely have a more solid meaning which is why I chose to place them there.” For clients and tattoo artists themselves, the meaning of tattoos can be special, but it does not make a tattoo with no meaning behind it any less notable.

The clients who do choose tattoos with a specific meaning in mind oftentimes are remembered by their artist in some way. As discussed previously on the topics of transformation and healing, tattoos can be incredibly special for artist and client. Respondent 4 spoke about this briefly, in connection with tattoo meanings:

Some people only get tattoos that mean something, and even though that’s not how I do it, it makes total sense to me because how could it not. If you’re looking at it like this is permanent and this is on me forever, I want it to mean something or I want it to remind me of someone or sometime in my life, then yeah cool.

Respondent 4 is a tattoo artist who, as he shared, does not only get tattoos that mean something. In fact, many of his tattoos are just designs he liked or wanted on his body. This is important for the understanding of tattoos because in many ways the stigma around them has lessened only for those tattoos that have meaning. This is in part, as Respondent 9 shared, due to TV shows and media in general sharing mainly about tattoos that hold special meaning. Respondent 13, a tattoo artist for over 30 years, discussed this shift in the stigma around tattoos being connected to people choosing to get them for a specific meaning:

You know what happened? People are getting them for reasons now. Back when I started, they’d walk in and there’d be pictures on the wall and they’d be like “I want...uh that one.” You can have a computer that can make it, it has billions of designs on it. It’s not like that anymore.

Many tattoo artists, like Respondent 13, spoke about tattoos that have meaning and those that do not. They all shared the same opinions regarding the meaning being less important than the desire to get a tattoo in the first place. While tattoos that hold special meaning to people are incredibly important, and those types of tattoos are in part tied to the lessening of stigma, they are not the only legitimate form of tattoo. Historically, tattoos began as ways of decorating your body and expressing yourself artistically (Sperry, 1991). Whether the artistic expression of your tattoo holds a deeper meaning than it simply being a nice art piece, does not equate to its value. The artistic expression aspect of tattooing is in part what draws many people into the tattoo artist profession in the first place, and where they find special moments with clients.

The artistic element of tattooing is specific to the artist and critical to the artist-client relationship. For tattoo artists that were artists before they entered the profession, the artistic aspect of the work can be the most rewarding as well as the most challenging. This is in part because of how personal it is. Respondent 1 shared this when discussing how he entered into the industry: “It’s also one of the interesting things about art. I feel like nobody can like really teach you how to make art. It’s such a personal journey that you go on, you know? It’s an expression.” This is an important notion that many clients may not realize when designing a tattoo with an artist. The tattoo artist profession is unique in the way that their art is permanent, but it is not technically theirs to claim. The person who is tattooed can cover it up, replace it, or even get it removed. The tattoo artist is paid for their work, but the design is still technically owned by the client. Respondent 5 spoke about this when discussing advice he would give clients in regards to the artistic aspect of tattoos:

We don't own anybody's body, we don't even own that art. That art is done and gone you know. Become art collectors, follow great artists, look into great artists, talk to your artists about other great artists that they like at their work and collect cool art.

The art not being owned by the tattoo artist was not something many participants found to be a downside to their occupation. It was more of a recognition for how the client and artist relationship is a give and take. As Respondent 5 spoke about, tattoos can be about collecting art you think is beautiful. The meaning behind someone's tattoos could be simply that they liked an artist, or had a desire to be tattooed. The new wave of tattoos and tattoo artists is centered around this belief. Tattoos can be so personal for both artist and client that it is also important to think more independently about what you wish to get tattooed. Respondent 11 spoke about this:

But I would say honestly it's best to pick exactly what you want because even if it's something childish looking it's for that person, and someone may look down upon it, but then again other people are going to look at it and be like hey that's badass.

Tattoos are a permanent form of artistic expression. Thus, it is important for clients to choose a tattoo or tattoos that reflect them and not worry about the opinions of others. As Respondent 11 explained it, one person may look down upon a tattoo and another person may love it. That is in part a stigma management technique - placing more importance on the opinion of those who agree with the art you place on your body rather than on those who judge it negatively.

Because the artistic expression behind many tattoos is important to tattoo artists, they tend to hold judgements for certain tattoo choices. This is in part because noticing tattoos is intrinsic to tattoo artists' profession. They are trained in creating them and have the artistic eye to notice certain details about tattoos, so it is oftentimes a qualified judgement. Respondent 7, a tattoo artist with decades of experience in both tattooing and art in general, spoke openly about this:

I tell ya I judge people by their tattoos. Placement, quality, subject matter, the decisions they've made, at what age they made those decisions. It's the same as how you dress, or you know, or how you keep your house or how you interact with strangers, or anything like that. It's a little bit of insight into what's going on in your head. No matter what. So, I definitely will impose some sort of like pre-determined like how I'm going into this conversation with this person if I see tattoos then I can get like a quick notion of them.

The observation that tattoos are like clothing underscores their importance as a means of personal expression. As Respondent 7 said the judgments made of someone's tattoos are "quick notions of them." These judgments are also not permanent or inherently negative, but merely character clues to how to speak and interact with another person. While anyone can make judgements on another's tattoos, tattoo artists have a specific eye that may help them do so more accurately. There are types of tattoos that would warrant a more negative judgement by a tattoo artist, and those are the "trendy" tattoos. While, as discussed previously, many tattoo artists who were interviewed did not pay particular concern to whether their clients had a special meaning behind their tattoos. The tattoos that are only chosen because they fit a trend tend to be the type that many artists dislike. An example of one of these tattoos is one that does not require any type of artistic freedom or creativity from the artist, and was taken from Internet images. There are trends that are seen by artists every year, such as the infinity symbol or a feather. They tend to be small in size, simple, and do not challenge a tattoo artist in any way. Respondent 2 was passionate in discussing this topic:

I dislike the trends the most, the trends in tattooing. A lot of people, a lot of things are going on, on Pinterest and shit of these like next to impossible or just not impossible but like they're not client focused tattoos like they're just from the picture for the artist.

The client focused tattoos is the key phrase in Respondent 2's reflection on why he does not like the tattoos that are in line with trends. A tattoo artist not only acts as the person who applies the tattoo skillfully, but they also lend their artistic abilities and skillset towards designing and bringing a tattoo to life. The tattoos that are taken from the Internet do not challenge or excite

tattoo artists, because they are only doing half of their job. The clients that ask for a tattoo taken directly from an Internet image do not tap into a tattoo artists' creativity or ability to work with a client in creating a piece that is special to them. A large part of the passion behind tattooing is the creation of art. Many of the artists expressed that they are still nervous about applying the actual tattoo and do not get much enjoyment from inflicting pain on a client. It is the art that keeps them in their chair. Respondent 7 shared a sentiment similar to Respondent 2 about the tattoos that follow trends, and also acknowledged that those types of tattoos got him to where he is today:

The personal results for the people are way more worth doing that type of tattoo than you know an infinity symbol with the word love on the wrist that someone just bagged right off of Pinterest so they can look like 400,000 other people. I mean that, a lot of people do build their careers on that, and when I started out I was doing again tribal arm bands and tribal tramp stamps with butterflies, I mean I made my living on just you know flash off the walls you know. And it was, you know, probably a good 5 years before, of being fully licensed, before I started filling my entire books up with people that wanted me to design stuff for them as opposed to getting stuff off of the walls.

While the tattoos that are taken from the Internet, or the wall in a tattoo shop, are not always the most fun to tattoo onto someone, they do have their place in the tattoo world. The artistic expression aspect of tattooing takes time to build into a career, as Respondent 7 noted. This may not be for every person or for every shop, especially as the new school type of tattoo artist who is more focused on art emerges.

The ways in which the tattoo artist profession is changing as stigma lessens and tattoos become more mainstream connects to the role art plays in the industry. Respondent 7, a tattoo artist for many decades, discussed at length how he saw the industry change in this way. He was against defining his relationship to the profession in any singular or limiting way but discussed the qualities he noticed his clients look for in an artist: "Quality art and personality...Having the whole package, that is my quote-unquote identity as a tattoo artist, according to my clients." The

quality art aspect of the tattoo artist identity is one that attracts clients to an artist, and the personality is what keeps clients coming back for more tattoos. This idea that tattoo artists enter into the profession because they are passionate about creating art for others was not shared by every participant. Respondent 13, an old school tattoo artist for over 30 years, was a participant who saw that as a coverup reason for entering the business: “You know a lot of people say I’m into the art, it’s the artwork. That’s just a bunch of bullshit that people say who don’t want a real job.” While Respondent 13 was the only one who explicitly shared this opinion, it is important to shine light on the fact that not every tattoo artist agrees with one another. While the new wave of tattoo artists is generally more focused on the artistic side of tattooing, the old school tattoo artists remember an industry less rooted in art.

Within the tattoo artist industry, there are different types of artists similarly to how there are different types of artistic styles. Many range in their skillset and the type of tattoos they are able to do. Some specialize in a certain type of tattoo style, while others are more versatile.

Respondent 5 discussed this through differentiating a tattoo artist from a tattooist:

The difference in the two is a tattoo artist is somebody who is an artist that can tattoo, somebody that can draw. A tattooist is just somebody that you know takes flash sheets off a wall, you know you ask and say oh hey can you add a couple leaves here for me and I want to add a flower here and they're like uh...yeah and they're stuck at a light table for the rest of the day trying to figure out how they're gonna make it work. Versus you know knowing the human anatomy, which way would look best for a flower to lay on the skin with the muscle tone, which direction it should go so when the body is moving it will look properly.

This reflection on the difference between the two types of people working in the tattoo artist occupation also adds to the discussion on artistic expression within the tattoo world. It is important to note that there is no right or wrong way to be a tattoo artist. As long as you are following sanitary guidelines, health protocols, and acting professional. Some participants

expressed more of an interest in the art aspect of the job, while others enjoyed it because they found it exciting. Overall, participants found that at least some level of artistic skill was necessary to be successful in the tattoo artist position. Respondent 8 spoke about the importance of designing for clients:

Having some type of artistic skills, is probably the most important thing. Being able to take people's ideas and kind of, be kind of open minded on the design work and you know, people's direction that you want to go in. And then also patience, (laughs), is huge. Tattoos are a lot of work, so putting a lot of time into the design work and then doing the tattoos.

To remain open to the design process and a client's desires is one of the aspects of the tattoo artist profession that multiple participants spoke about, in one way or another. The reasons for what drove someone to pursue the tattoo artist profession does not determine their success in the industry. However, it is a central part of the new school ways of conducting a successful tattoo business. This is especially notable in the shift from old school traditions and stereotypes to a newer focus around art and artistic expression. With more artists focused on the artistic aspect of tattoos comes tattoos that help break stereotypes that have been ingrained since the industry first began. For tattoo artists, the relief that comes with the change in stigma is not a relief that they are finally accepted, but a relief that their occupation and their works of art are truly appreciated in the mainstream. This acceptance and change in the industry to more of a focus on artistic expression is important for many tattoo artists, but without proper customer service it would be difficult to be successful.

Customer Service and Misunderstandings

The quality of the tattoos that tattoo artists create are of the utmost importance, with the quality of the customer service coming second to that. For a tattoo artist to not be customer service oriented as well as not have the best quality of work, would result in them having a

difficult time being successful in the business. While the participants did not share their opinions on all subjects, the importance of quality customer service was one that they all agreed on. The business of tattooing is similar to the service industry, tattoo artists are trying to sell their product and create a client focused atmosphere. Respondent 5 summarized this when discussing his business: "I mean customer service in general in this world itself is not an easy task, you know? Tattooing is still looked at as a retail business, you're still selling something, you're performing a service." Customer service is not easy, as clients can range in how they treat the person providing them with a service. However, it is important to remain client oriented and friendly, to ensure a client base is kept for business success. Respondent 12 spent much of the discussion around customer service speaking about client interactions: "I try to present myself the way I would want other people to present themselves to me. You know, super friendly and helpful throughout the process, and have fun and you know." To prioritize good customer service skills is to also prioritize a healthy and fun work environment, as Respondent 12 stated. It was also a common reflection that not every client is the same, and that is a part of the job. Clients must be willing to make themselves vulnerable and to experience physical pain and anxiety. Respondent 10 spoke about customer service in relation to her anxious clients: "You know I mean there are challenges to dealing with different clients, some are far more anxious about the designing or the tattoo process...you have to meet each person where they're at." The notion of meeting each client where they are is important when it comes to customer service in the tattoo industry. Part of having good customer service skills is making clients feel as though their experience is unique and special.

While customer service is important for ensuring client returns, it is also important for client safety and comfort. Many people who get tattoos do not fully understand the process. This

is in part because of the mystery surrounding the industry, as well as the perpetuation of stereotypes that still remain in society. Respondent 6 spoke about this, and how the level of comfort for a client should be a top priority when it comes to customer service:

I think it's really important, something we pushed a lot with our apprentice when she was learning to tattoo and now that she's a tattoo-er, it's about the experience that someone comes in and gets. It's real important that we're comfortable, that they're comfortable, and that they feel comfortable enough to ask questions and interact with us.

Comfort is an important factor to customer service when it comes to tattooing, because of the pain that is felt by most clients during the tattoo process. This is also the case for the tattoo artists, whose comfort is important due to the fact that they are the ones tattooing something permanent on another's body. There is also a level of professionalism and comfort that tattoo artists must have when it comes to guiding a client away from a tattoo design or placement that may not be the right choice. This is a difficult task, as tattoo artists are providing a service and clients may have creative differences. Respondent 11 spoke about this aspect of customer service, and the careful balance you must have:

My professionalism and making sure people know, or leading people in the right direction, so making sure that people understand like if something isn't going to work like tattoo wise then it's not going to work. Like explaining to them in the easiest way and trying to either get them to get something else or guide them to get something that will work, but just making sure people leave the shop with a tattoo that is right versus rushed or too small or put into an area that just isn't going to sit right.

A part of the responsibility of being a tattoo artist and having providing customer service is using your expertise on tattoos and tattooing to move clients in the right direction, whether they want to take your guidance or not. This is no easy task, but it is a balance of guidance, patience, and releasing some control over the final choice in tattoo. Respondent 10 spoke about those clients who are insistent on designs that are not always her favorite to create:

I think with some people you know if they want to micromanage your designs then I let them, like there's a certain point of like is it worth fighting over just because of like

creative differences. If that's what they want to wear, and I have no moral or ethical objections otherwise, then sure, I'll make it the best of whatever it is that I can make it and it won't be my favorite tattoo and I won't put it in my portfolio but I get to tattoo a client. You know there's a certain amount of patience I guess.

The satisfaction of the client is what keeps a majority of tattoo businesses successful, along with the quality of the artwork. This can at times mean, as Respondent 10 discussed, allowing your guidance to go unheard and prioritize the opinion of clients without sacrificing quality of work. This takes a level of patience with your client and prioritizing their needs and desires when it is clear they need more control.

With any service based industry, there will always be clients who require more customer service than others. This can occur with clients who are difficult to work with as well as newer clients who an artist would like as a part of their regular client base. All participants agreed on this notion - that to be successful and attract clients to your business, you must have a certain level of customer service and be kind to people. Respondent 13, a tattoo artist for over 30 years, spoke about many people who did not conduct business this way and how it confused him:

I see some really talented people that can't sell themselves. If you can't sell yourself, you could be a marginal anything, a tattoo artist whatever. But if people like you, they will still go to you. So you know like I said...I shouldn't say just younger ones because I've dealt with some older ones that were just assholes. And I was like who the hell would go to you? Who would give you money to sit with you if you're going to be a jerk you know.

With the rise in tattoo artists joining the industry, the customer service aspect of business is becoming that much more important. It always has been important, but as Respondent 13 shared, some tattoo artists are able to get away with having a less than desirable personality and still be a successful tattoo artist. For many artists, working well with clients is working with their specific personalities. It is a part of the total package of the tattoo experience. Respondent 7 spoke in depth about how he interacts with various clients, and the necessity in following their lead:

You have to be able to tattoo someone that has likeminded interests and wants to talk about you know Pokémon and video games and you know nerd stuff and you have to be able to talk to someone whose completely the opposite who wants to sit there and rail on how if Biden gets elected we're all going to be in a Communist environment you know and you have to kind of just make sure that when they leave, they want to come back, they had a great experience you know. So, the ability to kind of chameleonize yourself without like you know compromising your own personal morals is I think the very first step to being a successful tattooist.

To act like a chameleon of sorts when interacting with clients is to ensure that they have the best experience when getting their tattoo. If a client feels heard and comfortable with an artist, they are more likely to come back to that shop. Respondent 7 continued this conversation by discussing the importance of ensuring the entire experience a client has when getting a tattoo is good, not solely the tattoo itself:

I have clients that I completely do not enjoy their company or say like what they stand for or what they talk about or their politics or something but they don't know that. You know that's neither here nor there, they all still think that they're super special and that I'm working as hard as I can for them and they're getting the best work that they can afford in the state and everything like that and I think that really is the entire package of getting a tattoo. Getting a tattoo but also the visit and the time you spent with your artist and everything like that is the measure for the overall experience is and that's what gets you a solid and loyal client base.

The tattoo itself, and the quality of it, are the most important part of the tattooing process for a client. However, as Respondent 7 highlights when discussing his way of ensuring a high level of customer service, the entire experience one has in designing and getting tattooed is important as well. This requires a level of professionalism and flexibility by the tattoo artist to be able to talk to a wide range of people, with a wide range of beliefs and mindsets. Developing a client base is important for the tattoo business, so whether or not an artist enjoys a conversation to the fullest is not as important as ensuring a client enjoys their experience getting tattooed by that artist. This is not the only way of conducting business for tattoo artists, but an important strategy for customer service that many consider and implement.

Given the important role of customer service, it is inevitable for there to be miscommunications and misunderstandings. This is especially true for tattoo artists, as their industry is already mysterious and wrapped in many stereotypes that lead people astray. The most frequent misunderstandings that were discussed by the tattoo artists in this study were the amount of time that goes into tattooing, what to do before you contact a tattoo artist, and what artists wish clients did differently or knew about their profession. Respondent 6 spoke about the difficulty with timing during the design process: “I wish people had more realistic expectations for how long a good tattoo takes, how much time is involved, on our end. I feel like that’s one of the biggest misconceptions.” This was a shared sentiment among many participants, as clients oftentimes do not think about the amount of time spent on a tattoo outside of actually tattooing. Tattoo artists are not paid for the time dedicated to the designing process. Respondent 8 and Respondent 12 shared similar thoughts on this subject, especially in the frustration regarding clients who are impatient:

Respondent 8: The time first of all, and going into the whole design process, and then completing a tattoo. It’s sort of like different stages, and each one is critical, and that’s for just one individual client, and when you have 30+ clients that you’re dealing with I think I wish clients understood to be more patient and kind of open minded.

Respondent 12: I think I feel like a lot of people don’t understand like how much time does go into it before, before you even sit down to tattoo them. Sometimes it takes hours like drawing and research and I feel like people don’t understand that so they just think you know I can call up today and I can get an appointment today and you know that’s not generally the case.

With the standards around tattooing and the tattoo artist industry in general changing, much of the stereotypes around walk-in tattoo shops are no longer accurate. It is not common, according to the participants, for a tattoo shop to take a walk-in client anymore. There is more time spent during the design process, resulting in more advanced notice for appointments and time

dedicated for research on designs. The time it takes to design a tattoo and schedule an appointment is a misunderstanding that could be resolved with more research done by a client who wishes to be tattooed.

With the time tattoo artists oftentimes dedicate towards a single person's tattoo, it is a frustrating circumstance when the client does not do the same. A client who did not do any research before contacting a shop or designing a tattoo with an artist ends up being more of a burden for that artist than if they took the time to do research. Respondent 6 spoke about the type of client that does not do their research:

There's nothing more annoying than somebody coming to you and they don't know the name of your business, they don't know your name, they don't know what you do, they didn't look at your tattoos online, they just want, you know, whatever the tattoo is.

Other participants who discussed this type of client expressed a feeling of being disrespected when someone acts in a manner that is clear they chose a tattoo shop at random or on impulse. Tattoo artists are passionate about their work, their art, and their time spent doing it. This is especially important when a client desires a specific artistic style or type of tattoo. Respondent 7, a tattoo artist for many decades who spoke frequently about his ability to evolve with changing artistic preferences, spoke about a type of tattoo style that is his weakness. It also happens to be a type of style he is commonly requested to design in. This reflects clients who did not research his portfolio, an important step in the tattoo process that is not always done:

I wish people did a lot more research when they're looking for someone to do their tattoo and found someone whose portfolio actually looked like the tattoo they want because I have people that will get ahold of me and my portfolio is loaded with you know for the majority like realism and black and grey and color, and they just are like this guy's a great tattooist I want him to do my...line based infinity symbol...and honestly, that's my Achilles heel.

The research a client does before contacting a tattoo artist asking them to design a tattoo is in many ways critical to the actual design process. It is a permanent marking on someone's body, and both artist and client would like it to be done well. Oftentimes, tattoo artists are left having to educate their client as well as design for them, which adds to their unpaid labor. Respondent 10 spoke about the importance of an educated client in eliminating these misunderstandings and frustrations:

So many people I think just think that any tattoo artist can do any tattoo and they just go up the phonebook or the google search or whatever and say hey what's your minimum can I get it right now...but it's just like I have almost more work to do in terms of qualifying clients when they haven't bothered to shop portfolios and don't know what they want in that way. So, I think you know in terms of an educated client, like that's...the first hurdle to clear like that's the biggest one, everything else is simple after that. As long as they kind of know what they're looking for that clears a lot of other garbage off the table it's great.

Those who create tattoos are artists first, and to be able to create art they need a client who is clear about what they desire. This is in part why the tattoos that strictly follow trends and do not require any design work can be the least enjoyable to tattoo on a client. Respondent 1 referred to this as: "Forgery as opposed to making art." While these are common misunderstandings between client and tattoo artist, they are not misunderstandings that hinder any real success in the business. They oftentimes come from old stereotypes or incorrect information from the media and will change as the industry continues to change. However, within any service industry there will always remain a mix of bad clients and good clients.

The Bad Client, The Good Client, and Gendered Interactions

The tattoo artist industry is no different from any other service based industry when it comes to client relations. There is a need for customer service and a certain level of client loyalty for a business to be successful. In a customer service oriented profession, there will always be

good clients and bad clients. The tattoo artist industry is also historically male-dominated, meaning that with male clients there can also be many interactions centered around gender when they are working with a woman tattoo artist. The good clients, the bad clients, and the gendered interactions were all reflected on by the tattoo artists. Respondent 6 described his idea of a good client, a simple explanation but one that shows how a few extra steps by the client can be critical to the entire process:

There's a certain amount of give and take when designing tattoos, the idea comes from somebody else generally and we've gotta take it and sort of put a little spin on it. There's sort of a give and take there and it's just really nice when the stars align, you know someone, you know a good client would be someone that did their research and they're coming to you because of what you do, specifically how you do it.

This balance of give and take between tattoo artist and client is one that was also previously discussed in relation to common misunderstandings clients have about the tattoo process. A good client is someone who does their research on the type of tattoo they would like, the artistic style they prefer, and then finds an artist or a tattoo shop that creates tattoos in that style. A client who goes to an artist specifically because they like their style of tattooing makes the entire process that much easier.

Just as easily as you find a good client, there can also be a bad client. Many of the participants have had bad clients, but they are not the norm. Bad experiences often result from misunderstandings or arise when clients want to control every step along the way. Respondent 12 found bad clients to be more humorous than a real concern, and that they are few and far between:

I don't know it's not a super challenging thing, sometimes dealing with people *laughs* They're not always great. But, most of the time people are pretty cool, but you know there's always that 1 out of every 100 that you're just like "why, why?" *laughs*

Even with the common misunderstandings and misconceptions between clients and tattoo artists, a typical bad client is not a frequent presence in many tattoo shops. The frustrating aspects of the tattoo artist profession revolved more around the common misunderstandings previously discussed, rather than one or two people who made a tattoo process extremely difficult or unenjoyable. Respondent 13 believed that bad clients are in every job, which helped him deal with them:

I enjoy being here but you get the occasional asshole. It doesn't matter what kind of job you do, that's going to happen. Whether you own it or you work for it. You're always going to find that one person that just tries to ruin your day.

The important word in Respondent 13's reflection is "tries." Many participants who spoke about these bad clients, or even frustrating experiences in general, noted that they did not take away from the passion they have for their work or tattooing people in general. The clients that are characterized as bad are oftentimes people who do not fully understand the tattoo artist profession. Respondent 11 spoke specifically about this type of bad client when reflecting on her frustrating experiences:

It's really difficult to work with clients that are just not budging with what would work and what won't work, because with tattooing you can't... basically what can go on paper has to be almost double the size on skin. And it's hard for people to jump into a big tattoo (laughs)... when it's like, that's really the only way you can do it so. Um... and a lot of people do you know in general and with everything probably, they try to like manipulate the situation and get exactly what they want. So it's hard to be like, alright yeah you're good... you can't do everything.

This type of bad client experience ties back with people having misconceptions about the tattoo artist industry in general. Those in the profession are artists who have been trained to create art on the skin. They are professionals in their field, who know more than most if not all of their clientele. However, due to the personal nature of many tattoos as well as their permanence, some clients want to control the entire process. At times, this misunderstanding between client and

artist can be due to the gender of the artist. The misunderstandings occur more around communication issues, such as a male client finding difficulty in navigating the power dynamics with a woman artist. Another misunderstanding is that due to the industry being historically male dominated, tattoo artists who are women have a less impressive skillset than tattoo artists who are men.

When discussing the male dominated industry standards of the tattoo world, and the sexism that can be experienced within it, many of the women who participated in interviews spoke more at length about experiences with male clients than with male artists. There are gendered interactions with any pairing of client and tattoo artist, but those who spoke about gender chose to solely speak about interactions between male clients and women artists. This is important to note, as gendered interactions between clients and artists are more wide ranging than the male client and women artist relationship. It is a subject that would be worth exploring in future research; however for the purpose of this paper the gendered interactions that take place focuses solely on male clients and women tattoo artists. Respondent 9 spoke about this specifically, and emphasized how she has not had a negative experience with another male tattoo artist, only male clients:

The biggest place I've noticed it is with clients. I've been incredibly lucky, this is also a period of time where the most women ever are getting into the industry because that was a closed door before. I have had wonderful interactions with the tattoo community in this area as a young female apprentice that I was not even expecting. People have been, all males, have been very kind to me and like very encouraging, which was awesome. But clients are the place where it becomes a certain thing, especially older male clients. There is a power thing that happens.

The need for power and the gender of a client are the two factors that play a role in women tattoo artists' experiences in negative client interactions. Respondent 9 and Respondent 10 were the most vocal about this, in part because Respondent 9 finished her apprenticeship a few months

before our interview. The power dynamic between an older male client and a tattoo artist who is a woman is what Respondent 10 focused on in her discussions on the subject:

In that moment, especially with male clients, I need as much power as I can in that dynamic because often male clients especially men that are older than me (sighs)...there's definitely a bit of that like "well you're going to do what I say sweetheart right because I'm the one paying the bills here" and they come at you like a ton of bricks and then "well I don't know you tell me" ...which one fucking is it you know!

The need for power, despite being unaware of the actual steps in the tattoo process, reflects the need for men to have control in a male dominated industry. Tattoo artists already experience this expectation to prove themselves to their client, whether it affects them or not, and for women in the industry it is heightened when a man sits in their chair. Respondent 9 echoed this same sentiment in relation to the power dynamics between, oftentimes older, male clients with women tattoo artists:

There's a certain like age bracket of male who will kind of like talk down to you and like you don't really know, but you know...they don't want to give you the full responsibility or something or trust you the same way.

Being tattooed is oftentimes a vulnerable experience, no matter what you are choosing to put on your body. They require a certain level of pain and placing a lot of the actual creation in the hands of someone else. In a male dominated industry, with the addition of the vulnerability that arises throughout the process, older male clients may feel a need to assert their dominance in any way possible. This oftentimes is done even if it hinders the artists' ability to work with them, because for many men power and control are more important. This adds another level of labor, both emotional and physical, for women who have this type of client. The added physical labor for women when interacting with male clients extends to how they present themselves.

Respondent 10 spoke about how she changes her style of dress when she has a male client scheduled, to bypass any possible uncomfortable moments:

I'm not speaking for other females but I feel that there is sometimes with male clients, I mean I book myself I know what I've got in the calendar on any given day, and I definitely dress to my clients sometimes you know. Sometimes with male clients I don't want to be feminine. I don't want to have a low cut shirt on, enjoying the view while I'm trying to be a professional.

This type of preparation for a male client in regards to clothing was not something any other participant spoke about, but is an important example of how women tattoo artists experience and plan for gendered interactions in their workplace. This goes past aesthetic labor, as it is grounded in gendered expectations and the belief that a woman's body is not professional – especially in a male dominated industry (Thompson, 2015). While the stigmatization of tattoos has changed over the last few decades, the historical ties to the industry being male dominated as well as the standards that come from that persist. There is stigma in general society, and stigma within the hidden community of tattoo artists, in regards to women. This uncovers a more layered experience than if the stigma was solely around tattoos.

THE STIGMA

Within a community all its own, the tattoo industry has always found ways around the stigma attached to it. The stigmatization of tattoos and the tattoo artist profession helped create a community that abides by its own rules, guidelines, and norms. Specifically within the tattoo community, those who are considered the most elite are the same people who are the most stigmatized in general society. Irwin (2003) describes this as positive and negative deviance, as there is negative deviance experienced by those elite tattoo collectors and elite tattoo artists from mainstream society, and positive deviance experienced in tandem because the more that they are not a part of the mainstream the better for their social standing within their elite group (p. 30). The stigmatization of tattoos began due to their connection with various deviant populations. Aside from bikers, criminals, and prostitutes, sailors were among the first population to receive

tattoos (Thompson, 2015). They are traditionally not considered a deviant group, however; they are the population that first brought tattooing to America after visiting countries such as Japan (Sperry, 1991, p. 315). Due to their initial influence on tattoos, and thus frequent connection with the other deviant populations who chose to be tattooed and tattoo artists, in the context of tattoos they are among the deviant labeled. The amount of stigma experienced by people with tattoos is dependent on various factors. These factors can be a willingness to cover tattoos, social context, and gender (Irwin, 2003, p. 37). Gender is a main factor, as tattoos directly violate many feminine beauty norms, which is explored later in this section. Despite experiencing positive deviance within the tattoo community, tattoo artists still implement stigma management techniques.

In the literature on stigma and stigma management, there are five common techniques of neutralization that many deviant groups use. Sykes and Matza (1957) identified these five common techniques for neutralizing stigma associated with deviance when studying juvenile delinquents: (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of the victim, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. In this study of tattoo artists' experience of stigma, many participants showed a use of condemnation of condemners and denial of injury. As will be discussed later in this section, when recounting stories of stigma experienced due to their profession or their tattoos, multiple tattoo artists spoke about how they were not responsible for the judgement others pass on their life choices. They view tattoos as an art form, and a way to make a steady and honest income, and with the changing opinions of society their stigma management techniques are only getting less and less necessary. Stigma in general represents less of an individual issue, and more of a societal judgement based in norm violation. This was discussed in an article on homeless kids' stigma management strategies, by

Roschelle and Kaufman (2004): “Much like homelessness, we must posit stigma not as an individual attribute but as a relationship to the social structure” (p. 40). This is relevant to the stigma associated with the tattoo industry as it has lessened as the community grew and became less hidden in the mainstream.

The role society plays in both creating and perpetuating stigma is an important preface to consider when reading this section. This is evident through the renaissance the tattoo industry has been experiencing, due to the changing norms around beauty and individuality. It is also due to an increase in the overall standardization among practitioners, in large part due to more media representation (Adams, 2012). For many, if not all, tattoo artists who participated in this study, stigma management techniques were not used frequently if at all, as with such a strong community and separate norms there was little to no need to adhere to general societal expectations. That being said, stigma and stereotypes associated with the profession and tattoos were evident through our discussions.

I have organized this section in terms of five main themes. The first theme focuses on the stereotypes and misconceptions tattoo artists have faced that they believe are connected to the stigmatization of tattoos. The second theme uncovers the lack of understanding that is a part of the stigma around the tattoo industry and the “bad eggs” within the industry that may perpetuate many misunderstandings about the tattoo artist profession. The third theme concerns the family and friends of tattoo artists, both the stigma they push onto the artists and their positive reactions to the profession. The fourth theme involves professionalism, both the tattoos that are deemed more professional than others and the differing professional standards for an everyday citizen and a tattoo artist. The fifth theme explores the change in stigma within the tattoo industry.

Tattoos have entered the mainstream culture in many ways, and tattoo artists are at the forefront of witnessing this shift.

Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Due to the early history of tattoos and the tattoo artist profession, there are stereotypes and misconceptions about the profession that persist in the present day (Thompson 2015, Sperry 1991). Tattoo artists are aware of these stereotypes, and experience them from time to time, but do not give them value. Respondent 2 discussed where he sees the stigma stemming from: “Only sailors, ladies of the night, and prisoners were getting tattoos back then. It became stigmatized to those individuals.” With these populations of people who were the recipients of tattoos and those in the tattoo artist profession came the stigma that is still within society today. These stereotypes of the type of person who gets tattoos or gives tattoos created other stereotypes, such as drug use. Respondent 5 experienced that as the most prominent misconception of someone who is a tattoo artist: “I mean there's definitely that stigma that's like ‘oh he's a tattoo artist and he's a drug addict,’ and I have zero tolerance for drugs.” Respondent 5 went on to explain how he has had to fire multiple artists who were involved with drugs while working, which he did not agree with. His stance on drug use is in part due to his experience of both perpetuating the stigma in his early career through illegal tattooing and working to gain the respect back from the industry.

The tattoo artist community, while self-regulated, does not support those who perpetuate negative stereotypes. Due to the work that must be done to combat stigma, those who prove misconceptions correct are only making the job more difficult. A common way in which this is done is tattooing illegally, or “underground,” which was Respondent 5’s early career:

I was doing it the illegal way, and then obviously other tattoo artists you know were upset with me because I was that bad stigma that kitchen magician doing it in back rooms and luckily I was given a chance and proved myself to the industry.

Respondent 5's early experience as a tattoo artist, and sanctions from other tattoo artists in the industry, represents not only how tattoo artists have changed but also how inaccurate the stigmatized beliefs are about the community. There is extra work that must be done on the part of the tattoo artists who do not fit any stereotypes, by paying attention to the artists that do. As many participants noted, one bad tattoo or one bad tattoo artist speaks for the entire industry. This is in part why, even as the stigma has lessened, there are still inaccurate beliefs about who a tattoo artist is. Respondent 6 spoke about how he believes many people still view the industry inaccurately:

There's just so much not known of tattooing that I think a lot of people still think that we're sort of sitting around in a sort of dingey biker bar you know and everyone's ripping cigarettes and you know motorcycles peeling out...and you know it's a terrible thing that they have in their head about what we do.

The mystery surrounding the industry is in some ways on purpose, as that is a part of the allure of tattoos and tattooing overall. It is also deeply entrenched for the community to be hidden, as that is historically what protected tattoo artists from these stereotypes and misconceptions that could hurt their careers. Respondent 10 spoke differently about where she believes the stereotypes come from:

I think a lot of people assume you know maybe the stereotypes you know about sailors, or bikers, or oh you're just some degenerate kid. I mean there are a lot of folks who ended up in tattooing from all different walks of life, and the cartoon stereotypes are the first ones that come to mind first and foremost for people.

As the stigma lessens, the stereotypes have become less associated with a specific group and more, as Respondent 10 stated, connected with being "a degenerate kid." It is becoming increasingly more obvious that sailors are not the common population of tattoo artists, but that

does not rid the occupation of its deviant label. As the overall stigma changes the stereotypes become more broad and difficult to pinpoint.

With any changing industry, initial stereotypes are difficult to overcome. The tattoo artist industry is no different, especially when it comes to tattoo artists specifically. There is an argument to be made that the stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding tattoo artists are stronger and less susceptible to change because they are so deeply entrenched in the industry. Despite increases over time, many people still do not have tattoos and therefore have little or no contact with artists. Given the lack of direct experience, there remains potential for misconceptions. Tattoos have changed immensely over time. So too have tattoo artists, but there are aspects of the job and the various personalities that make it difficult for the entire community to break out of certain stereotypes. Respondent 7 spoke about the transient nature of many past tattoo artists, and the aspects of that identity that still exist today:

Back then, tattoo artists tended to be transient. They didn't really stick around at the same place for you know extended periods of time...like every year or so they'd be shifting locations, I think there was probably a stigma that was warranted in some cases of artists being like...not slackers but starting shit they wouldn't finish, disappearing on you, canceling because they weren't in the mood, you know not professional.

As Respondent 7 noted, bad behavior such as disappearing, canceling for no reason, and starting designs or tattoos they would not finish, are all examples of this overall "transient" stereotype but also bad business behavior that still may exist today. The increase in the professionalism of tattooing is one of the factors that aided in the change of stigma. All tattoo artists who participated in the study spoke about their professionalism, and it was a highlight for how they conducted business. With an industry that was not built on professionalism, however; there is still stigma that remains in regards to the personality and nature of tattoo artists. Respondent 7

went on to discuss the transient persona, as well as a more positive but equally as misleading stereotype of being “cool” if you are a tattoo artist:

Transient, maybe a little bit unreliable (sighs) probably like throw it all under the general category of rebel you know. Which is, I mean it’s a weak, cheesy way to do it. But it is kind of encompassing of maybe what the perception of the tattoo artist was. And I think an ill perceived level of coolness, you know? Or not ill perceived...unwarranted level of coolness imposed on you by the public...there are a lot of tattoo artists, and even though it’s a pretty cool job, that are not cool people. That’s just a matter of fact. But yeah I think people impose like a sort of mythological status on the position of tattoo artist that isn’t necessarily wanted. They’re all just people, they’re all just as screwed up as anyone you’ve ever met, and maybe even a little bit more.

The heart of Respondent 7’s discussion about tattoo artist stereotypes and expected personas is the notion that all tattoo artists are just regular people, as he said. Similar to any other industry, every personality of an artist will be different, just like their artistic styles and tattoo shops are different. The industry has evolved so much, and although some individuals fit common stereotypes and misconceptions, overall every tattoo artist brings something different to their profession. This has only been able to come to pass because in recent years, the old school tattoo artists have become less common. Respondent 6 spoke about why stereotypes and misconceptions about the industry not only have existed for so long, but also were somewhat correct for so long:

Traditionally people in the industry are looked at as outsiders or you know this sort of like rough and tumble group of people that are just strange and weird and maybe not so...not known for our people skills or you know our personability or something like that. It’s a weird industry and...that idea comes from some truth if you look back at the beginning of tattooing in the United States, primarily you’re looking at sailors and bikers and gang members you know they were the first people giving tattoos. So those are some of the oldest tattoo studios in the country, and knowing that the education spread from there, so you’re looking at this sort of long lineage of people that were trained by you know the same people that set up all of the stereotypes about the industry, just lots of people that were trained by that stereotypical asshole biker and that guy that learned in prison.

When the people who fit the stereotypes of the tattoo artist are the same people who are training the new wave of tattoo artists, there is a source for the continuation of the stigma surrounding the profession. This extends to tattoos in general, as the stigma of tattoos is seemingly stronger for those who are tattoo artists. There are multiple reasons for this, as experiences with stigma were frequently discussed by the tattoo artists in this study.

Tattoo artists are on the frontlines of the stigmatization of tattoos. Society stigmatizes tattoo artists more than those in any other profession. This stigma is associated with both their tattoos, if they are visible and heavily tattooed, as well as their career choice. While all participants spoke about seeing a change in the stigma around tattoos, they also shared experiences they had with the stigma. These experiences were almost always grounded in stereotypes or misconceptions about their industry, and about tattoos. Respondent 2, a tattoo artist with many visible tattoos including on the face shared an experience he had outside the shop that he works at:

I was sitting out front once back when I used to smoke cigarettes and some guy walked up to me and he was like “why?” and I was like “why what?” and he was like “why the face?” and I said “why not dude?” He was like “oh well I think that’s a step too far” blah blah. Sometimes you get stared at or stuff like that.

When instances such as this one were discussed, the conversation almost always turned to a larger discussion on why people believe that they can approach someone to police their choices about body modification. In part, the people that choose to act as the man who approached Respondent 2 did are people that believe it is within their right due to the stigma that surrounds tattoos. When a population or an activity or a choice is stigmatized in society, it becomes an open invitation for people to criticize. Respondent 9 also had an experience with someone approaching her about her tattoos:

Some guy in town once was like trying to bum a cigarette off of me and was like “look at all your tattoos, it’d look better if you didn’t” or something like that. I was picking up my car from like a car place once and a woman asked me why I would do that. People definitely say stuff (laughs).

Respondent 9 was another heavily tattooed participant, as well as a woman, which she noted later may have led to her experiencing more negative interactions with strangers about her tattoos. The people that choose to pass judgement or say something in a rude manner to a person with tattoos are partaking in a shaming ritual that occurs for people who are within a stigmatized population. To those people, they see a person with tattoos and believe an unspoken societal rule has been violated somehow and therefore judgement must be made known. This process could be unconscious, as many stigmas and biases are. Nevertheless, these people and the stigma in general do carry weight in regards to consequences for those that are tattooed. Respondent 2 spoke about a fear he has in regards to consequences of stigma:

I can see people staring when I’m walking around holding the hand of my 3 and a half year old baby girl and people are like “who the fuck let you have a baby?” Not so much anymore but definitely. It is something I think about though sometimes, especially in the summer, because there are a lot of tourists up here and shit so I do worry about that. Not even judgement, I just worry about someone calling the cops because they think I’ve abducted a child.

For the participants that were heavily tattooed and had children, this was a common concern. They experienced the most negative interactions in regards to their tattoos and their profession when in environments connected with their children, such as a playground or a grocery store. Despite the stigma lessening, tattoos are still heavily associated with deviant populations. The stereotypes of tattoo artists being criminals or generally irresponsible people are strong, and because of this the change in stigma is less applicable to heavily tattooed persons who are also parents.

There are similar consequences and fears when it comes to tattoo artists who choose to be business owners, as there are to parents. Similar to tattoos and the tattoo artist profession, tattoo shops are also stigmatized. Many times the stigma a landlord holds about tattoo shops are rooted in misconceptions, but this can result in difficulty finding a property to open a shop. Respondent 7 ran into this exact dilemma when he was first considering opening a tattoo shop. He went to great lengths to be professional as possible and highlight the artistic aspect of tattooing, and still experienced obstacles along the way:

When I was looking for a place to put my shop...I found that there was a high percentage of landlords that I have gotten ahold of that just didn't want, didn't want a tattoo parlor in their building....You know there was about 3 or 4 people that I hit up that just wouldn't even consider a tattoo parlor regardless of like good interviewing, personality, actual professionalism, positive artwork, and then also the portfolio you know when I'd show them photos of tattoos that don't look like tattoos, they look like little paintings or whatever. Stuff they've never seen before because they're already judging tattoos.

The judgements people make prior to meeting a tattoo artist or learning more about tattoos are in part why the stigma still exists around them. This is evident in Respondent 7's experience finding a place to open a tattoo shop, as well as in all the previous interactions with people who chose to pass judgement before learning more about the population they had already stereotyped. That being said, these judgements do not always result in negative interactions or awkward exchanges. Respondent 10 spoke about how she does experience some negativity from others, but in general most people want to inquire about her tattoo choices:

I think the biggest reaction I've gotten is kind of like a non-reaction. They're not going to come up to me and say *vomit noise.* They'll just give me poopy looks from across the room or something like that. Most of the time when people approach me it's because they're going to say something positive.

While Respondent 10 spoke about still noticing judgmental looks, she also highlighted people who approach her to compliment her tattoos. Multiple tattoo artists spoke about these types of interactions, oftentimes as a follow-up to a story about someone who approached them

negatively. Their tattoos are a part of them, and oftentimes come with meaningful stories or were done by an artist they admire. Due to this, the judgement that people pass on them holds less weight compared to those that complement their body art.

Oftentimes tattoo artists are judged on their tattoos first and their profession second. Unlike tattoos, judgement towards their profession may feel more personal. The misconceptions around the tattoo artist profession, or the stereotyping of tattoos being bad or scary, can result in personal losses. Respondent 13, a tattoo artist with visible tattoos including on his face, experienced a situation like this:

I have a friend whose wife is an accountant...and she couldn't believe how I make money out of it. People come in everyday? Well not the same people but yeah, people come in every day. (undetectable audio) I don't see them much anymore, I think it may be because they don't want me around their child. I don't know that's my speculation.

As Respondent 13 noted, his notion that he does not see these friends anymore because of his profession and tattoos is speculation. He senses that his choice of profession has come with personal costs. Despite tattoos and the tattoo artist career putting barriers up with certain people, there are also those within the industry themselves who are supportive despite the stigma. Tattoo artists have a community that they are a part of and where tattoos are not only accepted but encouraged. Oftentimes the spaces where they come together, such as at tattoo conventions or even within a tattoo shop, are spaces where the stigma can be forgotten. Respondent 11 spoke about the difference in how she feels about her tattoos in spaces where there are others with tattoos and spaces where there are not:

A lot of times, when somebody looks at a tattoo artist I feel like their original thought would be "oh they went to jail" or "oh they are doing something bad" (laughs). So, (sighs) I would say even me and my fiancée, we're both covered and we'll go out in public to a place and other people won't have tattoos and we'll get some eyeballs (laughs)...yeah sometimes like and I'm sure even some of my heavily covered clients and my coworkers it happens, and some people aren't used to seeing people covered in

tattoos all the time, and that's all that is. But when I'm at the shop and around at the expo's [tattoo artist expositions], everybody is covered so you feel like you're fine.

Respondent 11's reflection on the different experiences she had in a place without many tattooed people and a tattoo convention where there are many tattooed people shows the importance of the tattoo artist community. While many participants said that the stigma does not affect them greatly, it is still experienced in general society. Spaces where there are many tattoo artists and tattooed people are spaces where the stigma cannot reach them. The stigma that is experienced is oftentimes rooted in outdated beliefs or misconceptions, and shows a general misunderstanding for who tattoo artists are and what tattoos mean to those who have them.

Lack of Understanding and the "Bad Eggs"

A common way in which tattoo artists come to understand the stigma or the negative connotations associated with their profession is accepting that there is a general lack of understanding for what they actually do. This is evident to many tattoo artists based on the questions they are asked and the assumptions that are made about them, or their career in general. They also recognize that there are "bad eggs" within the industry that may cause these mischaracterizations of their career. Respondent 4 spoke about his opinion of people who view his profession negatively: "I don't feel like I have to prove anything to people so if someone's kind of negative about it I just assume it's their lack of understanding for what I actually do or its more so that they're not into it, which is fine." This is an important reflection as Respondent 4 believes this lack of understanding is what causes people to have a negative view of the tattoo artist profession, rather than understanding it and then not approving of it. This was a common belief among participants, as many of them spoke about people asking them questions that show how little they truly know about the day-to-day life of a tattoo artist. Many of those questions

revolved around not believing it is a sustainable career. Both Respondent 2 and Respondent 4 shared experiences with that type of question:

Respondent 2: In the beginning tattooing sucks, you're broke all the time. And then I think we've all gotten the "I think it's time to get a real job now. You've tried this out for a while but I think it's time to get a real job" kind of thing.

Respondent 4: Well, I guess sometimes even my customers, not as much as they used to but still sometimes people will ask "so what else do you do?" As if it's not an actual job, which I think is funny, and I don't think they're saying it to be like negative. I think maybe in the past they've known tattoo-ers who didn't do it full time or whatever it may be.

Both respondents discussed experiences with people who did not believe that the tattoo artist career was one that was supportive and full time. In large part this is due to the fact that many people outside the community do not understand how tattoo artists make a sustainable income from their work. This leads to people not believing it is a "real job," or one that can be long term. Due to tattoo artists' need to self-regulate, there are no benefits or retirement plans within the career path, therefore there is no concrete safety net. However, many people who are not in the industry also do not understand that the community is tight-knit and support one another.

The lack of understanding around the tattoo artist profession extends to client interactions, as well as general outsiders of the community. Solely because someone chooses to be tattooed does not mean that they understand the tattoo artist industry. Respondent 7 spoke about clients' lack of understanding of the tattoo process, and how that affects their experiences in a tattoo shop:

A lot of people still think they're buying a thing you know. They're like going to McDonalds. This is the walk in mentality you know. And it's even COVID time, and even just yesterday I got three calls with people like "do you have time for a tattoo today?" and I'm like "no...no...it's your life. Nobody needs a tattoo today. And if you were planning on getting a tattoo today, you might have wanted to reach out when you started planning that." But I think people still think you go to McDonalds to get a hamburger and you go to a tattoo shop to get a tattoo and there isn't much difference.

This supply and demand idea comes from the older generations of tattoo artists, who were more rooted in quick and easy tattoos rather than the carefully designed art pieces that they are now. The new wave of tattoo artists, as well as tattoo artists who have been in the business for many years, are focused more on putting time into their work to ensure it fits a certain standard. As Respondent 7 explained, some people have an out-dated understanding of tattoo shops as being similar to the pace of fast food restaurants. Clients also can have a lack of understanding around who tattoo artists are. Respondent 13, a tattoo artist with many tattoos including on his face, had one notable experience with this:

I had a mother and daughter and I don't know what they were expecting when they came in, they were referred to me by one of my good friends and they had never met me. And they probably didn't do their research because they walked in, you know I have dreads down to my ass and I got tattooed on half of my face and they walked in and they just looked shocked. I don't know what they were expecting. I was real nice to them, and I could tell the tension so I got a young guy that works for me and I said you know he will take you in. They were just relieved, and I wandered in a couple of times to talk to them and stuff, and you know they actually said to [name] you know, "that guy kind of freaked us out."

While this experience may be unique, it reflects a larger lack of understanding around what tattoos and their placement says about a person. Due to Respondent 13 having facial tattoos, a not so common placement for tattoos, the mother and daughter may have had a lack of understanding for what facial tattoos says about a person. This may not be something every tattoo artist experiences with clients, but it is an important interaction to highlight the misunderstandings that occur between artist and client.

With the change in stigma around the tattoo industry, comes an important dichotomy between the people who view the tattoo artist profession negatively and the reality of people who are now choosing to be tattooed. This is in part because of the increase in media representation,

and also the diversity of people who are getting tattoos. Respondent 7 spoke about the stigma around tattoos and the lack of understanding in how much the industry has changed:

Yeah, you know every once and awhile you bump into someone on the outside and they're like "oh what do you do" and I'm like "oh I make tattoos" and they're like "(gibberish) and bikers and this and that" and it's like, uh...no man I probably tattooed the doctor that delivered your kid. I tattooed the cop that pulled your kid over when you know the headlight was out. I tattooed the lawyer that represented you in your divorce, just all over. All over. But so yeah the stigma is, it still exists it's not nothing. But it has changed an awful lot.

Respondent 7's reflection on the lack of understanding people who still stereotype tattoo artists as bikers and the like shows how much the population of those with tattoos has changed. While he did not name doctors, cops, or lawyers specifically that he has tattooed, he did note he has tattooed people from all walks of life. The type of people who enter into the tattoo artist profession has changed, and with it so has the groups of people who choose to be tattooed. Many tattoo artists credit TV shows with the change in positive exposure of the industry for why more people desire tattoos. With those TV shows, however; comes a new lack of understanding about the industry and the profession due to the fact that they are not always representative of every tattoo artist. Respondent 10 shared her opinions about TV shows depicting tattoo artists, specifically reality shows:

The TV shows as much as they help with tattooing, [by] making tattooing more familiar and they give access...They kind of have a slanted skew of the industry for the fact that they have to be entertaining first and foremost. But you know those TV conceptions you can deal with once you have the clients in the chairs.

As Respondent 10 noted, TV shows have a certain standard of entertainment they have to accomplish to ensure viewership. This does not always produce a realistic view into the tattoo artist world, but the exposure in general lends a helping hand to alleviating some misunderstandings. The lack of understanding that is leftover, as Respondent 10 also mentioned, usually can be clarified once a client interacts with a tattoo artist in person. Many

misunderstandings people have point to a lack of exposure to the actual tattoo artist community. Tattoo artists are a diverse group of people, and meeting one does not mean you are able to characterize the entire population. This can be difficult when there are a few “bad eggs” within the industry that place the profession and persona of a tattoo artist in a bad light, perpetuating this lack of understanding people have.

Almost every participant spoke about the “bad eggs” of the industry who perpetuate the negative stereotypes of a tattoo artist. Those that spoke about them recognized that they still exist, and it is unfortunate for the industry overall. While the stigma around tattoo artists and tattoos is changing, there remains a responsibility for tattoo artists to be aware of how their actions reflect on the community as a whole. As Respondent 7 summarized it: “You do a hundred good tattoos and no one talks. You do one shitty tattoo and everyone talks.” Due to negative reflection poorly made tattoos make on the community as a whole, Respondent 7 stresses the importance of artists who are both good at what they do and motivated to apprentice the same. He specifically spoke about this in relation to a recent change in apprentice regulations:

They actually just recently did away with that, where you only have one apprentice at a time. That’s actually one of the newer regulations where I’m like “finally” because you know you’d have sub-par artists just making a lot of money getting people their licenses and it was saturating the market with some people that gave the whole industry a bad name. Every bad tattoo out there reflects on everybody.

In Respondent 7’s opinion this change was a long time coming. The difficulty with regulating the “bad eggs” of the industry, such as the sub-par artists who saturate the market with people who are also going to be sub-part artists, is that a large portion of it is self-regulated. This creates opportunities for people to bend the rules and thus perpetuate negative stereotypes about the

industry as a whole. Respondent 5 gave an example of a shop that is not conducting business properly:

I mean there are some artists, there's actually one artist I'll throw his name out there I don't care, but that dude is bad. I mean he doesn't even have a tattoo license and he still tattoo's in [confidential location] and has a shop.

The shop Respondent 5 spoke about is not a new tattoo shop, in fact it has been operating without a license for quite some time. It is interesting to note that those within the tattoo artist community are aware of this shop operating without a license, and either had not reported it or reported it and nothing was done. That an unlicensed tattoo shop can operate successfully with the knowledge of other area artists shows how the minimal regulations can cause these “bad eggs” to remain a part of the industry. Respondent 11 spoke about this, in relation to the specific stereotype of tattoo artists being drug users:

Unfortunately the industry is not super ...there's not a lot of regulation. So there are some stereotypes, a lot of drugs in the industry, which sucks because it makes it that much worse for the people that are doing it right. So I would say that is a big thing, it takes a long time to find really good, clean, amazing artists and that would be a big thing I would say, which sucks because it's an art form in my opinion.

Respondent 5 reflected on the drugs in the industry in the previous section on stereotypes, as he spoke about firing multiple individuals for using drugs while working at his shop. He specifically mentioned how he did not care what the artists at his shop did in their free time, but drugs were not tolerated while they were in the shop and working with clients. That is an important specification because there are artists who choose to be on drugs while they work with clients, and that is most likely not something a client would view positively. The tattoo artist profession is a lifestyle, and for many that lifestyle is being a rebel of sorts and partaking in activities such as drugs. However, for the majority of tattoo artists in the present day the lifestyle is more about the art than any other recreational activities.

For the tattoo artists who prioritize the art aspect of tattooing, the “bad eggs” in the industry are those that do the opposite. This goes hand in hand with the customer service standards that many tattoo artists today have, and many participants in this study spoke about. The clients and the art are two important focuses for tattoo artists, and those who do not choose to focus on those aspects of the jobs are the people that cast a negative light on the profession as a whole. Respondent 6 spoke about these types of tattoo artists, and how they affect his business:

There are still a lot of studios even nearby that they don't care about the clients. They don't care about the art that they're doing. I would say that they're less an artist and they're more technical applicators of tattoos. They can put in a tattoo, but they don't care what it is, how they do it, and it's too bad that studios like that are still available because those are the tattoos that we're covering up.

Many artists spoke similarly to Respondent 6 when sharing their opinions about the “bad eggs” in the industry. That is, their poor choices and poor conduct not only reflects badly on them but also means they have more work to do in breaking stereotypes and fixing the work of those who do not try to create great artwork. Being a tattoo artist is not solely about knowing how to create tattoos. It is a package of customer service, artistic ability, and positive business practices. This is especially important in ensuring a client base, something many “bad eggs” within the industry do not have. Respondent 7 spoke about the importance of this:

Because there are other artists out there that are exceptional artists but they have a reputation for being super arrogant and their client base isn't nearly as loyal, you know they can just get away with it because their shit looks really good on Instagram. So, they're kind of like replenishing their client base instead of growing it.

As Respondent 7 shares, there are consequences to the actions of those who do not take their profession seriously in the tattoo artist industry. Client loyalty is an important piece of the work, and something many artists aspire to have. It reflects positively on their business and their work, and ensures that the career is sustainable. In every industry there will be “bad eggs,.” However,

those who reflect poorly on the tattoo artist industry are not the majority, and in the long run are not the people who are the most successful at their chosen profession.

Family and Friends

When it comes to tattoo artists' experiences with stigma, it is oftentimes the case that their family and friends were the first to disapprove or question their choice in career. This extends to tattoos in general, as for both artist and client the family is oftentimes a barrier to getting tattoos as well as the people who pass judgement on their choices. Respondent 1, 2, and 3 all shared examples of this. Respondent 1 had the most difficulties with his grandmother: "Yeah my grandma hated tattoos. So when I started getting tattoo's she would not talk to me for the longest time." Respondent 2 had the most difficulties when he first starting getting tattoos with his grandparents as well: "My grandma wouldn't even look at me." Finally, Respondent 3 found that her parents still do not fully approve of her choice of body art: "My dad tries to wipe mine off with his spit every time I see him." All three of these experiences with familial disapproval stem from both the stigma surrounding tattoos as well as the generations that these parents and grandparents come from, which will be discussed later in this section.

The family is oftentimes a larger hurdle to overcome than friends when tattoo artists both first start being tattooed and first enter their profession. Many of the participants shared about these initial difficulties with their family, but there were also significant moments of silence during the interviews when I asked about family dynamics. It is notable that family and friends' negative opinions about their profession came up so often. Families are vulnerable topic for many, especially in a conversation about stigma or disapproval. The experiences of the tattoo artists in this study reflected that. A majority of concern from tattoo artists' families come from

the misunderstanding about the job choice being a sustainable career. Respondent 1 spoke about this, and how his choice was not accepted until he was able to make a steady income:

My family is mostly educated and for the longest time they were like “yeah what the fuck are you doing.” Like I dropped out of high school to get into tattooing and art. So it’s been like pretty recent that they’re like oh ok you’re making money doing this and you can support yourself.

Respondent 1 had only recently finished his apprenticeship when he was interviewed, and it was only after he began working as a licensed tattoo artist that his family began to accept his career path. It ties with the lack of understanding people have about the profession in general, and not knowing how much of an income tattoo artists can make. Respondent 6 spoke about similar family reactions to Respondent 1 more generally:

Because there’s the stigma about what we do, when the families find out that you’re going to be a tattoo-er its sort of that like “uh what why are you going to do that?”...So you get this twofold thing of like our parents and our parents-parents, their generation, the further back you go the more they didn’t approve of tattoos, so they’re sort of pushing for you to sort of...“When are you going to get a real job?”

The notion that the tattoo artist profession is not a “real job” is not exclusive to the family members of tattoo artists. However, it is a concern of many families as most hope for the success of their children or grandchildren. These parents and grandparents came of age during a time when the general public questioned whether the tattoo artist profession could provide a successful career path, so their understanding is limited. Respondent 4 spoke about this, and the time he spent with his family wondering if the tattoo artist career path was the right choice:

My parents helped put me through college and then I finished and said “I’m gonna try to be a tattoo-er now!” and they were like “[strangling noise] uh ok.” And not really because they saw a problem with that, but they didn’t know that it was a viable career at that point and I guess I didn’t either. I didn’t know if it was viable for me at that time so I didn’t really take offence to that reaction from them.

A similar notion of family members being cautious of the career choice of tattoo artist not necessarily because they saw it as a bad profession, but because they questioned whether or not it

was a steady one. Respondent 2 shared a similar experience along this theme of parents, or family in general, questioning the career choice due to financial concerns:

My grandparents were like, “I don’t know why you would ever wanna do something like that. It’s so silly or whatever.” And now I am the sole worker and I support two kids and my wife and stuff and now they’re like “oh I’m so proud of you, you’re doing so good!”...I think as far as parents go and stuff like that as far as supporting you I think they worry about you financially. I don’t necessarily know if they care about what it is that we do, more so that we aren’t on their dime I guess.

Respondent 2 experiences similar family experiences as other participants where the main concern was income. The multitude of similar experiences shared by tattoo artists shows the pressure they experience from within their inner circle. Stigma is multifaceted and can affect a person in every part of their life, from opening a business to telling family about their career choice to interactions with client. At times, this stigma can result in extremely negative family interactions.

Respondent 10 shared two experiences with family stigma around her profession, both for her and a client of hers. The experience she shared about her family’s opinion of her career was the most negative one shared during interviews. She was also the only participant to share experiences she witnessed between a client and their family member that was negative. These examples showcase the extent to which family can exhibit anger towards one’s chosen profession or body modification. Respondent 10’s mother had the worst reaction to her chosen profession:

I mean I have very unique relationships in the way that I have terrible relationships [with parents], especially my mother. She told me last year in a moment of anger, she said “I would rather you become a prostitute instead of a tattoo artist.” She thinks they are a very similar sort of an uncouth kind of profession.

This is an extreme reaction from a family member, and one Respondent 10 explained is rooted in a life-long difficult relationship had with her mother. However, it represents how deeply the

stigma around the profession can be experienced. This level of stigma and attempts of familial control are not solely for the tattoo artist profession, but can extend to tattoos in general as well. Respondent 10 shared another story of a parent who disapproved of tattoos to such a high level that her client had to cancel her appointment:

I mean parents from the gambit I cringe...I had a young lady once, she forfeited a deposit for her second tattoo, not her first one, her second tattoo. The first one was a tiny cross on her wrist, like not even an inch high...And she wanted to get a second one, little flowers, and mom dropped the hammer and mom said if you get that tattoo I don't pay for your college education anymore. The young lady backed out.

While this client's experience with her parent is most likely more common than Respondent 10's experience with her parent, both are similar in that they show the power of stigma. This is especially true when it comes to members of one's family, whose words and actions oftentimes hurt and control a person more than someone they do not know. That being said, many of the parents and grandparents the participants spoke about are from older generations that carried heavier stigma around tattoos. For those generations, it is difficult to change perspectives around an industry that was so deeply entrenched in negative stereotyping when they were growing up and entering into careers.

The older generations were exposed to tattoo artists who fit the stereotypes that many now have grown out of. The traditional, old school tattoo artist is different from the new wave of tattoo artist that is centered around design and artwork. The profession changed over the course of a few decades, and for many older adults, earlier stigmas persist. Respondent 6 and Respondent 7 shared similar perspectives about older family members who are against the career choice of tattoo artist, and the choice to be tattooed. Respondent 6 spoke specifically about why he understands their perspective on tattoos:

I think that some of the stereotype is warranted from some of the older generations, you know when my grandfather was young and he wanted to go get a tattoo or something he would have had to go to one of the very few places nearby and it would've been filled with probably bikers in this area you know? That's sort of how tattoos spread up and down the east coast in this area, were bikers. Bikers owned a lot of the original tattoo studios, so it's not unreasonable for you know grandparents to think that that's what studios still are.

When a stigmatized group changes and becomes more mainstream in society, members of that group may find difficulty in changing with it, as explained by Respondent 6. Due to this, he does not look down upon those from older generations who hold onto old stereotypes. The misunderstandings that are more difficult to reconcile with for many tattoo artists are that of their friends. Oftentimes their friends are people who are the same age as them, and their stereotypes or misconceptions cannot be explained away by their different generation. Respondent 6 spoke about his experience with his friends and how their misconceptions walked the line of being disrespectful of his career and time:

It's hard when your friends find out that you tattoo, because I think they sort of discount that it's a job and a way for us to be supporting ourselves and they just think that they can come in and get favors. Just, "hey man I just want you to bang out a quick full sleeve for me" It's like no...that's going to cost you a lot of money and they just look at you like "What? Why would you charge me money." And it's like no, I don't ask you to do whatever your profession is for 30 to 40 hours for free, why would you ask me that. It's hard for people to sort of reconcile that.

This was an experience multiple participants had when it came to navigating friendships with people who were not in the tattoo artist community. It is difficult for anyone to fully understand the tattoo artists' day to day job, and the amount of time and effort that goes into it, when there is also stigma that surrounds it. The stigma can be internalized and affect relationships, as Respondent 6 showed in recounting a common exchange he has had with friends. This can be damaging to relationships and serves as an example of how the stigma around tattoos masks the professional aspect of the industry.

Professionalism

While tattoos are becoming mainstream, their acceptability in the professional world lags behind. The term of “professional world” does not include all occupations, as professions such as hair stylist, server, and of course tattoo artist are more open and accepting of tattoos than other jobs. The tattoo artists in this study discussed clients they have had and currently have that either were fired because of their tattoo, are not allowed to be tattooed in certain visible areas on their body, or were turned away from a job because they had tattoos. The idea that tattoos are too “unprofessional” to have in certain industries is a societal construct, one that is born from the stigma around them. Body art does not make one less professional than someone without it, but that has not been fully accepted yet. The professional expectations depend on the occupation one is entering, and this is especially true with the tattoo artist career. What is considered “professional” in the tattoo artist industry is almost the complete opposite of many standards in other industries.

The visual expectations placed on tattoo artists begin early on in the apprenticeship stage. This professional standard within the industry begins early on because for both clients and other artists, tattoos oftentimes speak to their level of experience. As Irwin (2003) described, it is a type of positive deviance for tattoo artists to be covered in high quality artwork. Both Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 shared similar experiences to being guided towards getting tattooed more heavily. This relates to the term “job stoppers” when describing the visible tattoos that render a person unemployable in many other professions, such as on the face or neck or hands. Respondent 2 spoke of this: “When I was looking for an apprenticeship I was told to get visible tattoos. Get my hands tattooed and stuff like that.” He was one respondent who did have many visible tattoos, such as on his face, neck, and hands. Respondent 3 had some visible

tattoos, but was still new to tattooing: “My mentor wants me to tattoo my neck.” For many in the industry, those “job stopper” tattoos equate to a high standard of professionalism, at least visually. There are other aspects of being professional within the tattoo artist industry, but looking the part is a huge factor. Respondent 7 spoke about this, and what being heavily tattooed equates to: “I think tattoo people are expected to be heavily tattooed. Like I think that’s almost like proof of experience or something like that.” Tattoos can act as a resume of sorts for tattoo artists, as Respondent 7 states. Being a heavily tattooed tattoo artist shows a level of experience and willingness to be tattooed. Respondent 13 also spoke about this, and what he feels being heavily tattooed means for him:

I’m probably one of the more heavily tattooed artists in the game and the guys who work for me are as well, and people come in and look at me and go “wow you must be the best one here.” Why because I have tattoos? I’ve just been doing this longer than anybody else and I don’t give a shit anymore.

Respondent 13 is as heavily tattooed as he says, including on his face, neck and hands. He, however, does not view his tattoos as speaking to his ability to tattoo well but more so the decades he has dedicated to the industry. Ironically, oftentimes the amount and type of tattoos an artist has is not indicative of their ability to tattoo well, but instead their ability is shown in their art portfolio. Nonetheless, many clients look instead to the tattoos on someone’s body as the marker of a good tattoo artist.

Among the participants, there were tattoo artists that considered themselves heavily tattooed and others who did not. Each ranged in their artistic styles and how many tattoos they wanted, but all were serious professionals who were aware of these expectations. When those who are not as heavily tattooed spoke about the expectations around what a tattoo artist is

“supposed” to look like, they acknowledged that they don’t feel immense pressure but are aware of it. Respondent 4 is within that group, despite having many tattoos:

Yeah, I mean I have a lot of tattoos, but I always find myself as far as appearance a little bit more conservative, I wouldn’t say the majority, than a lot of tattoo-ers. I feel like when I go to conventions a lot I kind of don’t fit in visually. But I think I like that too. To me it feels lame to, and again this is my judgmental side, it feels like kind of lame to conform and be what you think a tattoo-er is supposed to be.

The pressure to be heavily tattooed as a tattoo artist affects every person differently, as Respondent 4 shows in his view of tattoos. It is clear when a person stands out as being a tattoo artist with fewer tattoos when in an environment where there are many other tattoo artists, but other than that the pressure is not as present. This may differ when comparing old school tattoo artists with more new school tattoo artists, as the focus and meanings behind tattoos shifted.

Respondent 6 spoke about the idea that being heavily tattooed as a tattoo artist equates to being more professional, and how he believed it was more for a persona:

I feel like there’s this expectation within the industry, that we all have to be...so like if I’m going to be covered in tattoos I’m not going to be boring. I have to have my loud and crazy clothes, almost like a uniform. I’ve gotta come up with this persona, and like a lot of tattoo-ers have this like, a moniker, a tattoo moniker, that’s not their name and they sort of come up with this character that they play.

While many, if not all, participants did not describe themselves as having a persona or feeling like they felt pressure to play a character, it was clear from many discussions, such as with Respondent 6, that there are tattoo artists that do. For the most part, the tattoo artists that do tend to adopt a persona or character, and are heavily tattooed, are those that are more in the spotlight. None of the participants in this study were “famous” tattoo artists, and therefore it is possible they felt less pressure to look a certain than a celebrity tattoo artist would. This is evident in Respondent 10’s reflection of the professional expectations of what she should look like as a tattoo artist:

You know it's funny, I can get just hand tattoos and neck tattoos and wear long sleeves and pants for the rest of my career and people will be perfectly fine with me as their tattoo-er. I could have an entire body suit [covered by clothes], they kind of eyeball your naked skin and go "you don't have any tattoos, what's up?" As if what I wear directly correlates to what I can do for other people you know, it's kind of funny that way.

It is interesting that it is not tattoos in general that an artist is expected to have, but specific placements and styles of tattoo. Respondent 10 points this irony out when she states that it would be more acceptable for her to have neck and hand tattoos that clients and other artists could see, rather than a full body suit of tattoos that are covered by clothing. This is in part what makes the tattoo artist career a lifestyle, because there is an expectation for specific and more "daring" tattoos to make an artist look more professional. From the discussions, there was no clear evidence that the tattoo community as a whole intentionally worked to develop its sense of professionalism in opposition to conventional definitions of what it means to be professional. However, when discussing the professional expectations of the tattoo artist career it was clear that they were passed down as a part of old school traditions. This points to an expected level of rebellion within the industry, that coincides with the positive deviance experienced by those who are heavily tattooed within the community (Irwin, 2003). Thus, while there was no clear evidence, it is a strong possibility worth noting.

The tattoo artist profession is unique in that the expectations around what to look like for your job are on the opposite end of the spectrum compared to other industries. Having no tattoos, or no body modifications, is a sign to many tattoo artists and clients that a person is not an experienced or talented artist, as well as possibly uncommitted to the profession as discussed previously. It is not as common to find a tattoo artist with little to no tattoos, but as Respondent 13 said: "There's a small, small, small margin of tattoo artists that I don't know them personally, but have no tattoos." It was clear in conversations about those artists, while no participants knew

them personally, that they were unsure of why someone would be a tattoo artist and have no tattoos. Tattoos on a tattoo artist symbolize a level of interest in your occupation, and dedication to your work, that show others within the industry and outside of it that on some level you are capable of tattooing well. It is confusing for many when a tattoo artist chooses to have no tattoos.

Respondent 12 was among the confused:

I always think it's weird though when tattoo artists don't have tattoos. There aren't a lot of tattoo artists out there like that, but there are some, and it's weird to me that they don't have any. But I think it's important to like, have some.

Many tattoo artists would agree with Respondent 12's statement that it is important, as a tattoo artist, to have tattoos. Multiple participants spoke about clients who became nervous when they could not see tattoos on them, or mentors pushing them to be tattooed on more visible places. It is the overall expectation that to be professional in the tattoo artist industry is to be visibly tattooed. Respondent 6 spoke about this, as well as comparing this expectation to other industries having the opposite expectation:

In most industries the more tattoos you have, I feel like the less desirable you are in those professions and that is completely unfortunate. On the other side of that coin, as a tattooer I only become more legitimate the more tattoos I get. You know, the more crazy shit that I get up on the sides of my head and my eyes fucking injected with ink or my face tattooed or something like that, it's only gonna make me seem like more of a legit tattooer.

The expectations of what a tattoo artist should look like are in line with the stigma that surrounds the industry. That is, the idea that tattoo artists are outsiders of society who do daring body modifications to be shocking. This is not to say there are not tattoo artists with eyes injected with ink, as Respondent 6 noted. The professional standards for tattoo artists are either nonexistent or the opposite of all other types of professions. Respondent 10 spoke about her experience trying to balance professionalism with how she visually represents herself. This relates less to tattoos, and more to her gender in general:

So I do dress a certain way with certain clients to eliminate as many problems as being feminine would create in those certain dynamics, which I find to be frustrating that I have to be responsible for other people's reactions or whatever. Controlling the male gaze in some ways. But yeah some of it is my own personal comfort, I would much rather wear (undetected audio) than a super tight shirt on and a short skirt.

Controlling the male gaze is an important addition to the labor many women tattoo artists must partake in, in regards to being professional. Due to the tattoo artist industry being male-dominated, femininity is not in line with many of the professional standards of the industry.

There are expectations and a past history of women dressing in a more provocative manner in a tattoo shop, but that does not equate to professionalism. Therefore, women tattoo artists such as Respondent 10, choose to set their femininity aside to be regarded solely for her quality of work. While it was not stated outright by any women who participated, there was a commonality of downplaying aspects of their gender identity in ways the men do not have to, which may be a pressure that is felt solely by the women.

The discussions had on professionalism were at the forefront in the discussions about gender, and the tattoo artist position being gendered. This is in part because of how women first entered the industry – by being the person at the front desk, dressed provocatively, and not a legitimate artist (Thompson, 2015). To combat this old stereotype, women tattoo artists in the present day oftentimes have to police their own dress code, if it airs on the side of feminine, as Respondent 10 noted. Outside of the tattoo industry, women who are heavily tattooed in general are viewed as overly-masculine or violating feminine gender norms (Castellani, 2019). In this way, tattooing is similar to clothing in how they construct and deconstruct gender and gender differences (Castellani, 2019, p. 50). This is important to understand for the question of whether the tattoo artist position is gendered, because being a woman who is heavily tattooed in the industry is less important than your gender itself.

What looking professional means for everyday citizens differs from the standards set for tattoo artists. The idea that tattoos are not professional represents the stigma around them, and tattoo artists sometimes feel responsible for ensuring their clients are aware of this. Tattoos say something about a person, whether they intend them to or not. Oftentimes in a professional environment, what their tattoos say about them is that they do not meet the standards of a professional. This tattoo stigma that affects the professional world so greatly, however; is changing. Respondent 10 spoke about what tattoos stereotypes communicate to others:

You use stereotypes to quickly and clearly communicate a vibe or a thought or an idea to an audience. So I mean if you want to show somebody whose an upper class professional or whatever, you put them in a suit and tie and clean clothes. If you want to show someone who is more degenerate, tattoos.

Respondent 10 was speaking specifically about media portrayals, and how tattoos are often used to communicate certain characteristics about a person that are oftentimes more negative. These types of character portrayals speak to the larger stigma that exists in society, as well as specifically showing how tattoos are not professional. Tattoo artists are aware of this standard in most professional environments, and many who participated in this study spoke about the conversations they have to have with clients on this topic. Respondent 6 is one of those artists, who tries to deter clients from certain tattoos or tattoo placements if he believes it could hurt their professional career:

Having the sort of professional conversation with people about well “man you don’t have a ton of tattoos and you want to get all of these things on your hands,” and then I have to sit there and have this conversation about the implications of how that’s going to affect them professionally.

Many participants described this exact conversation as being one they dread. Not because they do not want to keep clients from getting tattoos they may later regret or would lead to them having difficulty finding a job. Instead, because they themselves do not believe tattoos are

unprofessional. That is the case for Respondent 6, and other participants who spoke about this, as guiding someone away from a tattoo placement for professional reasons is not always in line with their own beliefs. This is not a requirement of the job, and is within each artists' discretion, but tattoo artists have this conversation more frequently than outsiders might expect. However, the professional stigma is one that is changing with the general tattoo stigma, and this is evident to many tattoo artists. Respondent 4 spoke about his own experiences with doctors or veterinarians having more and more tattoos:

I think people have been very loud about doctors and surgeons and dentists...what our society considers the upper tier of professionalism, those people being covered in tattoos I think that has helped to kind of take away the stigma that maybe used to exist...But I don't think you see that so much anymore, and like if I'm at a doctor's office or if I'm at like the vet's office with my dog or whatever, they're covered in tattoos. All these people have tattoos, so I think that helps with the trust.

Respondent 4 is in part giving credit to the change in stigma around tattoos being unprofessional to those within highly regarded careers choosing to be visibly tattooed. These populations being allowed to have tattoos sets a standard for other professions to allow the same. Tattoo artists notice this change more than most, and also aid people in ensuring that their career would not be hurt by tattoo stigma. Professionalism standards are the opposite of those in place for tattoo artists, but regardless a person's job oftentimes controls their tattoos.

In an array of industries, the professional standards limit or completely bar visible tattoos. There are similar reasons for not allowing employees to have body modifications in each industry, such as in law enforcement the idea is that each person represents the department and must look uniform. However, industries vary in their willingness to change their professionalism standards. Many of the participants spoke about this, and were especially vocal about their

clients in the military or police departments. Respondent 5 spoke about the changing regulations around tattoos, and how they represent a change in stigma, but are not always permanent:

I'm tattooing people in the military or you know professional people... They don't want to go too far below like the T-shirt line like the sweep because they feel as though you know their line of work won't allow it but also some employers don't allow it and some branches of the army. It's weird with the army you know one minute they're like yeah, yeah you can get whatever you want tattooed as long as it's above the wrist it just can't be bigger than your hand. Then no we can't get tattooed, and yes we can.

It is difficult to commit to a permanent art piece on your body when the regulations surrounding their acceptability in your place of work change frequently. As Respondent 5 described, in the military specifically as well as other professional industries, the rules around what tattoos are allowed and where on the body they are allowed changes. This may make it difficult for people in those professions to be tattooed. Respondent 5 shared a specific story about a client who was finally allowed to be tattooed on his hands, and when I asked what would happen if the rules changed about allowing tattoos on the hands, he was unsure. These rules and regulations around tattoos and specific tattoo placements are not universal within any one industry. Respondent 10 spoke about this at length, as she has many clients who are police officers in various departments. She shared one example of a particularly strict department:

I do have clients that work in more professional environments and they put their tattoos in places where business attire can cover them. I struggle with like, the [confidential town name] police department for instance, has a very specific policy about tattoos... we know an individual for instance who wanted to get a job in [confidential town name] as a police officer and they wouldn't even consider him for candidacy because of the sleeve on his arm.

This example of Respondent 10's client who was barred from applying at a specific police department because of his tattoos shows how strict certain industries can be regarding their professionalism standards. In those strict environments, the stigma around tattoos persists, and

tattoo artists oftentimes have to help their clients navigate this. What is and is not professional in regards to body modifications continues to change but remains industry specific.

For many higher level professions the regulations around tattoos set the standards for other industries. It helps to normalize tattoos when they are seen on professional people.

Respondent 7 believes they humanize people in their professions:

I think it really depends on the job. I think it's adjusting, you know. But I think if you're a neurosurgeon that rolls up his sleeves and has tattoos on his forearm [it's ok], but if they were onto his hands and neck and head and under his eyes...that would definitely be construed differently. I don't know if it's ever going to head there, you know? It's a different kind of job. But for them to roll up their sleeves and have tattoos on their arms, that honestly I hear a lot now, that makes them seem more human.

Respondent 7 shared two important views on professionalism and tattoos. First, he believes the placement of tattoos will always be important in certain industries. In this way, the stigma may always exist on some level when it comes to professional standards. Second, he suggests that tattoos affect a person's identity in relation to their profession. Respondent 7 views those with tattoos as more human when you interact with them in a professional setting. As the professional standards shift, tattoo artists are becoming witness to a wider range of people choosing to be tattooed. There are still differences depending on the occupation, as well as other factors such as gender. Respondent 4 spoke about this:

I definitely tattooed people and they were like "oh I hope my boss doesn't get mad at me for this one!" But even in the time that I've been tattooing, it's way looser. I tattooed police officers, full sleeves, and that's kind of like case-by-case things because some police chiefs are like absolutely no tattoos visible and some are super relaxed so it kind of depends where you're at with that...It's definitely easier for men because the way that we dress it doesn't really change as far as what is exposed depending on the job.

Respondent 4 shared a similar experience as Respondent 5 and 10 with clients whose departments allowed them to have visible tattoos, and others that would not. Regardless, the fact that there are departments within industries that allow tattoos, especially ones as visible as

multiple arm tattoos, shows the loosened professional standards that Respondent 4 spoke about. These standards do differ based on other factors, such as gender. With this change in stigma, comes the acknowledgment that it reaches different groups at various paces.

Change In Stigma

One of the opinions that every participant shared throughout their interviews was that the stigma surrounding tattoos and the tattoo industry in general is changing. This change happened in waves, due to multiple reasons, and it is continuing to do so. As Respondent 2 explained it: “We are entering an era where to not have a tattoo is kind of weird.” Tattoos are becoming more commonplace, for all age groups, and the understandings of the tattoo artist industry are shifting. Specifically, Statista studied the change in people who choose to tattoo themselves from 2003-2015, by age group. Overall, within every age group the amount of people who tattooed themselves from 2003-2015 increased. The most substantial percentage being 30% in the 30-39 age group (Statista, 2016). This is similar to a study done by Ipsos in 2019, which showed that 30% of Americans have at least one tattoo, an increase from 21% in 2012 (Jackson, 2019). There is the question of whether declining stigma has encouraged more people to get tattoos or whether more people getting tattoos has resulted in declining stigma. While respondents did not discuss this specific question, they did discuss the declining stigma and their own opinions of why there has been a change.

For many of the respondents, the change in stigma is in part because of TV shows and the Internet in general portraying more accurate representations of current tattoo artists. It has helped break older stereotypes, as Respondent 12 noted: “It’s definitely gotten more mainstream, you know we’re not all biker dudes that tattoo.” Due to the highlighting of the media inspiring

younger generations to be tattooed more, it is more the case that the declining stigma from heightened mainstream exposure has led more people to get tattoos. This is not to say that both do not work together, meaning people being tattooed more often helps change the stigma and declining stigma encourages people to be tattooed, but that the participants in this study were focused on the latter. The legitimacy of the industry is still not fully accepted in mainstream society, as tattoos have become less stigmatized compared to the tattoo artist career. However, with the change in perceptions around tattoos has come changes in how the industry overall is viewed. This is especially notable in the shift from old school traditions and stereotypes to a newer focus around art and artistic expression. Respondent 2 spoke about this as well: “I think it’s becoming more focused on art more probably too. Now they call tattoo people tattoo artists instead of tattoo-ists.” This sentiment of naming those within the industry tattoo artists rather than tattoo-ists was expressed previously and connects with the changing in stigma around the position. It adds a level of legitimacy to the position, as well as acknowledgement of the artistic work that is done. As stated previously, and throughout multiple sections, this shift is in large part due to the creation of TV shows and heightened media representation in general.

The popularity of tattoos with the newer generations helped reduce the stigma associated with tattoos and thus with the tattoo artist occupation. The Internet, TV shows, and celebrities embracing tattoos are all a part of the media surge that aided in this change. Celebrities specifically are a group that have not only helped in the tattoo renaissance, but also inspire tattoo trends. Respondent 9 spoke about this in connection with the changing stigma:

You can see your favorite celebrity post themselves with a face tattoo now like it’s nothing. I don’t feel like that would’ve happened 10 years ago. I’ll get a wave of people in my inbox for this like same tattoo and I’ll be like who just got that? Oh Ariana Grande, so now you all can get it. The TV shows, the reality shows, even the internet I feel like just make it very common place to see it.

In Respondent 9's discussion of the Internet and celebrities' effects on tattoos, she brings up the important point that they aid in making tattoos seem commonplace. When TV shows about tattoos and tattoo artists first started airing, the stigma around them already had begun changing, but it was this type of widespread exposure that helped the general public view tattoos in a different light. This, along with popular celebrities, opened up a new world that made tattoos less stigmatized and more a choice that others who are admired were making as well. This also promoted a sense that the new wave of tattoo artists are artists first. Respondent 7 spoke about this in a discussion of the TV shows depicting tattoo artists:

It's crazy how it changed you know in 10-12 years you know. The advent of the you know those TV shows right?...With Miami Ink in those early tattoo shows, everybody in the world was just like "oh that seems like a cool job I'll do it." Which was great because it added a lot of like really talented artists to the pool, whereas before that those were in limited supply. But I mean now you have people coming out with their Bachelor's in Fine Arts going directly into tattooing instead of it being kind of like a (sighs) you know maybe a little more off the grid or underground kind of like universe.

Respondent 7 is a tattoo artist who has been in the industry for over 30 years, so he is an individual who has been a witness to every step of the changing stigma. This is evident in his surprise at how much the industry, and tattoos in general, have changed in the last decade that he has been working. His credit to the TV shows echoes other participants' thoughts about the change in stigma. He also credits these TV shows for inspiring people who did not know about the tattoo artist position, due to the industry being mysterious to outsiders, to pursue the career. This new pool of artists is in part how the industry has come to change so much in recent years. With more artists focused on the artistic aspect of tattoos comes tattoos that help break stereotypes that have been ingrained since the industry first began. This can be seen in the different types of people who have chosen to be tattoo artists, as well as the wider range of age groups being tattooed.

The significant increase in the number of people with tattoos illustrates the decline in tattoo-related stigma. The common sentiments expressed by many of the participants is that it is difficult *not* to know someone who has a tattoo in the present day. This was stated by Respondent 2 when discussing stigma, and similarly discussed by Respondent 13:

I was at the beach in [confidential location] over the summer and it's rare to see someone without one now. When I started it was very stereotyped, but now to not see someone even with a small tattoo, it's very, very rare. I don't think the stereotype is there anymore.

Respondent 13 is another tattoo artist who has been in the industry for over 30 years, so he has also been a witness to the change in stigma in recent decades. When he spoke about seeing so many people with tattoos, he spoke with pride. For tattoo artists, the relief that comes with the change in stigma is not a relief that they are finally accepted, but a relief that their occupation and their works of art are truly appreciated in the mainstream. This is especially true when looking at the wide range of people who are choosing to be tattooed now. Respondent 7 listed a few of his various clients when discussing this:

I tattoo lawyers, and doctors, and professors, and construction workers, and people that live with their parents, and it's interesting seeing you know dentists that own their own practice and like just the scope of people that come through the shop in any given year is a lot wider than it used to be.

Respondent 7 spoke about this with a similar attitude as Respondent 13 in that being an old school tattoo artist who has been a witness to such meaningful change in tattoo stigma has added to the pride they have in their occupation. It is refreshing for tattoo artists to be able to tattoo a diverse range of people, and that is part of what makes their job so enjoyable. Respondent 9 also spoke about the increase in the types of people who both know someone with tattoos and choose to be tattooed themselves:

I think it's so much different now even from when I started getting tattoos myself like the perception is it's far more accepted. Like I tattoo grandmas now that come in with their

grandkids and I'm like that's crazy like I don't think that would've happened before. But I think some people still hold on to the stigma of what comes with being a tattooed person or being a tattoo artist and like what it means.

Importantly, Respondent 9 acknowledges that there is still stigma. Much of what the participants spoke about in regards to the change in stigma came with this same acknowledgement. Some even mentioned that they feel there will always be some semblance of it around the industry and tattoos. This is reflected in Respondent 9's statement, where she spoke about the change in who is being tattooed and the age especially, while also mentioning that the meaning behind her occupation and tattoos has not fully been freed from stigmatization. Respondent 4 also gave an example relating to a grandmother, but in discussing the increase in people who either tattoo themselves or know someone who is in the industry:

I think that's what's affecting the stigma or lack thereof of tattoos and tattoo-ers in general because there was probably a point in time not so long ago, 10, 20, 30, years ago where most people didn't know a tattoo-er personally or they didn't have anyone in their life who was a tattoo-er. But now you'll talk to someone's grandma and "oh my granddaughter is a tattoo-er, she went to art school, she's so great, and the work she does is beautiful." That's not what a grandmother would say 30 years ago typically, so we've definitely evolved a lot and I think it's been a long time coming.

Grandmothers, or grandparents in general, were given as examples frequently when discussing stigma with the participants. Respondent 4 and Respondent 9 were not discussing specific people they had in mind, but more the older generation as a whole. This is important to point out as both Respondent 9 and Respondent 4, as well as multiple other participants, used that generation as a marker for how much the stigmatization of tattoos and tattoo artists has changed. It was the tattoo renaissance that came from the younger generations of people viewing TV shows about tattoo artists, admiring celebrities' tattoos, and becoming tattoo artists themselves that made change possible. As this change in stigma progresses, it will do so because of these younger generations who have broken and disregarded past stereotypes and misconceptions. The stigma

still remains, but the changes that have taken place in the past decade show that its power is lessening.

DISCUSSION

The tattoo artist industry is one that historically has been secretive and mysterious to those on the outside. This is in part due to the stigma that surrounds tattoos in general, as well as traditional old school values that make it difficult to gain access to the industry. In this study of tattoo artists I asked: “How do workers in deviant occupations experience stigma?” and “How is working as a tattoo artist gendered?” The first question was answered through participants’ reflections on the stereotypes that are entrenched in the industry and misconceptions people hold about tattoos and those who tattoo in general. Through the lens of the tattoo artist occupation, workers in deviant occupations experience stigma in how their career is delegitimized as a job, stereotypes that have a strong hold on the entire industry, and the few people within the occupation that perpetuate misunderstandings and a bad reputation. The second question was answered through the multiple, but not all, women participants who discussed their presentation of self and experiences with additional expectations due to their gender identity. The men who discussed the same topics as the women almost always answered questions about identity, professionalism, and stigma, differently. That is, they focused on what was wrong with those who do not understand their career compared to the women who focused on their experiences with those people and the added labor they must take on as a result.

The tattoo artist industry began as a mysterious occupation, and one that was highly secretive due to the stigmatization as well as the population attracted to it (Thompson 2015). The mystery that surrounds it, even with TV shows and Internet exposure, persists today. The tattoo

artist occupation is perceived as a job that is unsustainable and unsupportive by those who are not in the industry. This is similar to other deviant occupations, and connects with the stereotypes that surround those industries. For example, in other deviant occupations such as topless dancing or stripping (Thompson et al., 2003), the stigma management techniques and development of emotional dissonance (Hochschild, 1983) are similar despite the stereotypes being different as well as level of stigma. It is difficult for those who do not have knowledge of the industry to understand how a tattoo artist, who they may stereotype as being a criminal, biker, or something similar, holds successful employment. Therefore, the stigma is experienced as obstacles of understanding within society, rather than concrete social sanctions that may have occurred in earlier decades.

The tattoo artist profession began as a male dominated industry, thus having a foundation of being gendered. The women that spoke about experiences with sexism within the industry highlighted their limited ways of interacting and dressing more than any other aspect of the job. To be a woman tattoo artist who represents her gender before her tattooing abilities is to break from the expectations of the industry. There is extra labor that must be done, compared to the tattoo artists who are men who do not have to think about how they portray their gender because their gender is the norm. Thus, as shown in the discussions on professionalism for the tattoo artist occupation, as well as in previous sections, the industry remains gendered. However, this is less so than in previous decades. This has changed in tandem with the change in stigma overall, as there are more people entering the industry and more of a focus on artistic talent rather than the persona of the artist. There is an added level of strategizing for women tattoo artists in how they present themselves as well as what being professional encompasses. This added layer of stigma for women within an already stigmatized occupation could be comparable to other

industries as well, such as the restaurant industry (Wildes, 2007). For the tattoo artists, conversations with the men who participated only ever touched on their tattoos unless asked specifically about clothing, whereas for multiple women the topics of clothing and presentation of self in general were a natural part of the discussion. For those who do not feel that they need a persona or a character to play as a tattoo artist, the default is to present yourself as masculine in the way of dressing extremely casually and being heavily tattooed. The gendered aspects of the occupation also connect with the larger society, as exemplified by the experiences of women in this study with older male clients who questioned their credibility as artists. This is not unique to the tattoo artist occupation, and points more to the sexism weaved into societal structure in general rather than specifically a part of the tattoo artist industry.

Tattoo artists have historically been considered a deviant occupation, while also being one that has experienced a change in the stigma around it over the last decade. In discussing the stigma they experience, as well as their thoughts on stigma in general, the majority of the participants spoke about how - while the stigma is changing - the stereotypes and lack of understanding around their job persists. This speaks to the fact that the stigma around a deviant occupation can change, but the foundations it is built on are more difficult to uproot. With the research of deviant occupations being focused mainly on how those within them manage the stigma, rather than how the stigma has changed, there is a need for further research in this area. It is difficult to compare the changes in stigma within the tattoo artist occupation to other deviant occupations that are considered more stigmatized. For example, the occupation of prostitution or strip dancing. While the stigma management techniques within both the prostitution and tattoo artist occupations are similar, and at times the same, the changes in stigma for both professions are for the most part different (Thompson et al, 2003). That being said, the stigma experienced

within the tattoo artist career is more comparable to other service industry professions, such as hair styling and restaurant service (Wildes, 2005). It is unique in how the stigma around the profession can be separated from the stigma around the service, therefore making it difficult to compare levels of change. What all service industries have in common with each other when it comes to how stigma has changed is in how the more sought after an individual or a service at a specific establishment is, the less stigma there is around that person or business. For example, there are celebrity hair stylists, celebrity chefs, and celebrity tattoo artists. This can all be linked to changes within the industry culture as well as more exposure from the increase in mainstream media, as discussed previously. Overall, those within occupations that are stigmatized react and tend to it by either enveloping themselves in the industry or leaving all together.

Ritzer (1977) cited three criteria for what constitutes as a deviant occupation: if it is illegal, if it is considered immoral, and if it is, considered improper. When an occupation meets one or more of those criteria, it is considered deviant and thus workers within the profession are stigmatized. Tattoo artists are no longer considered illegal or immoral by most, as exemplified in the change of stigma, but all deviant occupations have earned their label due to once fitting all three criteria. Thus, many of the stereotypes, misconceptions, and stigma can be traced back to one of the three misled beliefs: that an occupation is illegal, immoral, or improper. This is why it is important to conduct research on deviant occupations to gain insight on the stigma attached to all of them. Within those deviant occupations, it is also important to look at how the stigma may affect different members of the population differently. Such as, how women tattoo artists experience their gender identity in their chosen profession. Stigma is multifaceted, powerful, and deeply entrenched. While consequences of stigmatization change as the stigma surrounding a

deviant occupation changes, as shown through many of the stories of change by participants in this study, the ripple effects remain important for understanding deviance as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Although the social norms around tattoos are changing, and the tattoo artist profession with that, the stigma persists in ways that are invisible and long lasting. While this stigma may not be seen as life threatening or dangerous in obvious ways, it still warrants continued research because it deepens the understanding of stigma in general. The benefits of studying groups that have experienced a positive change in social norms are wide-ranging. While there is literature on stigma surrounding aesthetic labor and the various workplace norms within those professions (Warhust and Nickson 2007), there is a need for additional insight to unravel the complications within the culture of stigmatization. Tattoos are a form of body modification that has a history of being heavily stigmatized, and a research topic that can allow for a deeper understanding around the stigma of other body modifications and careers that assist in them. There is also important work to be done in exploring how stigma has changed for various groups, and what that change entails. Due to this interest, my specific research questions that I have answered are: “How do workers in deviant occupations experience stigma?” and “How is working as a tattoo artist gendered?” These questions allowed me to better understand the experiences of those within a stigmatized profession, how they view the stigma around gender within a male dominated industry, and how they may stigmatize certain tattoos or tattoo artists themselves.

Through exploring how one enters into the tattoo artist profession, the tattoo artist profession itself, experiences with the clients and tattoos, and the stigmatization of tattoos and tattooing, my research questions were answered. With an understanding of the tattoo artist

occupation, the experience with stigma for workers in deviant occupations can be understood through how their career is delegitimized as a job, stereotypes that have a strong hold on the entire industry, and the few people within the occupation that perpetuate misunderstandings and a bad reputation. In regards to how the occupation is gendered, for women there is extra labor that must be done in regards to how they think about how their gender is portrayed. For those who do not feel that they need a persona or a character to play as a tattoo artist, the default is to present yourself as masculine in the way of dressing extremely casually and being heavily tattooed. Thus, as shown in the discussions on professionalism for the tattoo artist occupation, as well as in previous sections, the industry remains gendered.

The findings from my study shine a light on the importance of interviewing people who are not only in a stigmatized profession, but the population of people who choose to modify their body in some way and thus place themselves in a stigmatized population. While previous research has explored this, a gap in the literature remains when it comes to a focus on how exactly this stigma both persists and changes within the tattoo artist profession, and professions that are similar. With the changing opinions and acceptance of tattoos, and viewing tattoo artists as the artists that they are, there is more to be explored on the subject of how stigma can be changed. The tattoo artist industry has formed a community that many artists rely upon. This community has allowed those within the industry to remain mysterious and unknown to those on the outside. This extends even to those who have tattoos, but are not in particularly close relations with artists. With stigma comes stereotypes, misconceptions, and forms of social sanctions. However, there are also strong communities that are not easy to enter even when the stigma around a profession or type of body modification changes and becomes more acceptable.

This has allowed the profession to evolve, both artistically and professionally, with the change in stigma, while also remaining tight knit and a difficult industry to enter into it.

There are traditions that persist within the industry, both in how it is entered and who is allowed to enter it. It was and remains a male dominated industry, with its roots deeply in bikers, sailors, and prisoners being the first artists. Historically, both the stigmas associated with tattoos and the masculine nature of the profession established the industry in ways that remain inhospitable to women. Women entering the industry have both their gender and the general difficulty as an outsider trying to gain access to such a mysterious and secretive world working against them. That being said, women have been and are entering the industry and doing so successfully. With the shift to tattoos being more about art and less about a symbol of masculinity and rebellion, it has allowed for women to enter the industry and be successful. Difficulties remain that are related to overall sexism, such as male clients who do not respect the authority of a woman and hesitancy or outright denial of an apprenticeship to become a tattoo artist. These difficulties come with a heavily stigmatized industry, and a heavily sexist world. However, they are difficulties that are noted by the professionals themselves as changing.

My conclusions warrant additional research. An expansion of my findings would add to existing knowledge by allowing for those who are stigmatized to define stigma themselves, and understand the differing experiences individuals with intersectional identities have within an already stigmatized population. From a deeper understanding of stigma comes change in how aesthetic labor is achieved and perceived, both in the workplace and general society. Body modifications are not widely seen as professional or acceptable in many cases. With the change of stigma around body modifications such as tattoos, comes a need to explore how they and

aesthetic labor in general can influence stigma. From these thirteen interviews conducted with tattoo artists in New Hampshire, there is an uncovering of how stigma is experienced by those within a deviant population, the role of gender in being a tattoo artist, and how those important facets of the tattoo artist industry are changing.

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