

Abstract

Few social boundaries still exist regarding tattooed individuals in Western society, yet the professional workplace remains a barrier to heavily tattooed individuals today. The historical stigma attached to heavily tattooed people is still pervasive across many professional communities. A series of ethnographic interviews examine the decision heavily tattooed professionals make to “cover up” their tattoos. Focusing on identity management as it relates to tattoo wearers in a professional context, the research seeks to explain the communicative processes that heavily tattooed individuals use to negotiate professional life. This perspective will work to explore the impact of identity and authenticity on the tattooed self, the safety provided by covering-up in the workplace, and the identity struggle faced by heavily tattooed individuals when covering up.

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The Hidden Mark: An Ethnographic Examination of Visibility in Heavily-Tattooed Professionals

A distinct difference exists between bearing a tattoo and possessing a heavily tattooed body.

Though “heavily tattooed” is a subjective and contextual term, many tattooed individuals cross a threshold of acceptance by marking a significant amount of their body. I recall arriving at a family dinner with fresh linework down to my wrists, still healing. My parents were at ease with the few tattoos I had prior to that point, but I was entering new territory in sleeving my arms from shoulder to wrist. I remember my mother’s words vividly: “You’ll never get a good job now.” Of course, my parents knew that my tattoos were not indicative of my intelligence or what I could accomplish; yet they were worried about the way others, particularly employers, would perceive me now that I had permanently altered my body to an extent beyond average. I knew at that point that I had made an irreversible alteration to the way others perceived me.

As a whole, social acceptance of tattoos has risen dramatically in Western society over the past few decades. Still, many social boundaries continue to exist and acceptance of tattooed individuals is not universal. Academics have undertaken extensive research on tattoos in the fields of sociology and communication (Atkinson, 2003; Atkinson & Young, 2001; DeMello, 2000; Doss & Hubbard, 2009; Gilbert, 2000; MacCormack, 2006; Vail, 1999) but little of that research has focused on the implications of being heavily tattooed in a professional setting¹. The professional workplace may remain as one of the largest barriers to heavily tattooed individuals today; the historical stigma attached to heavy tattooing is still pervasive across professional communities despite acceptance in many modern Western social settings (Bell, 1999; McCarty,

¹ distinction between “professional” and so-called “blue-collar” workplaces is key here – many employers, particularly within trades, are very accepting/tolerant of heavily tattooed individuals.

2012; Resenhoft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). I classify tattooing as an outsider social practice in this context, recognizing that people who are heavily tattooed can be, and are, negatively evaluated in the professional work environment (Atkinson, 2003; McCarty, 2012). To combat the prejudice that exists in professional situations, heavily tattooed individuals may need to adjust their identity, through the act of covering up, to negotiate equal social and professional standing to their non-tattooed, or “lightly” tattooed, co-workers.

Tattooing strongly relates to one’s identity, particularly for those who have heavily altered their body with ink, and social reactions are a prominent aspect in the decision to become tattooed (Atkinson, 2003, p. 211). Historically, social structures tie tattooed skin to deviant behaviour, criminal activity, and societal distance (Adams, 2009; Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; Gilbert, 2000; Irwin, 2003). As tattooing deconstructs conventional body decorum in the workplace (Atkinson, 2003; McCarty, 2012), breaking down classist interpretations of body art (“tattooed skin belongs in the working classes”) may allow tattooed individuals more freedom in social structures that have been reserved for the upper-middle and upper classes. However, while these barriers still exist, questions arise: How do heavily-tattooed professionals manage their identities in the workplace as a facet of cultural competence? Is the act of covering up an authentic representation of self?

Literature Review

Extensive research on tattooed individuals has been undertaken, particularly in the past 15 years, focusing on tattoo culture (Atkinson, 2003; Atkinson & Young, 2000; Ferreira, 2011; Irwin, 2011; Patterson & Schroder, 2009; Vail, 1999; Wicks & Grandy, 2007), stigma and tattoos (Adams, 2009; Botz-Bornstein, 2012; McCarty, 2012; Palermo, 2008; Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Resenhoft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008), and tattoos as communicative devices (DeMello,

2000; Doss & Hubbard, 2009; MacCormack, 2006; Modesti, 2006; Sullivan, 2009). This study relies on the theoretical underpinning of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Irwin, 2001; Goffman, 1963, 1967; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Specifically, questions of identity management (Doss & Hubbard, 2009; Goffman, 1967; Imahori & Cupach, 1993, 2005), stigma (Adams, 2009; Goffman, 1963; Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Sullivan, 2009), and authenticity (Lewin & Williams, 2009; Waskul, 2009) guide a discussion around the social implications of extensive tattoo work. Addressing gaps in analysis of heavily tattooed individuals, I note that most scholarship has not moved beyond recognizing the distinction between wearing a small tattoo (or a few) and heavily modifying the body with ink without focusing on specialized subsets of tattoo wearers (i.e. modern primitives, punks, etc.). Furthermore, I have found very little focused research relating to the implications that extensive tattoo work might have on the wearer's career ambitions, and specifically how tattoos, as a symbol, are interpreted in professional contexts.

Tattoos and Stigma

Goffman (1963) described stigma as a language of relationships, wherein a tradeoff exists between the stigmatized and *normals* that substantiates the usualness of the non-stigmatized (p. 3). Historically speaking, tattoos did not typically hold stigma within Western cultures, but were more commonly viewed as trend or novelty up until the late nineteenth century (Adams, 2009). With the invention of the tattoo machine in the 1890's tattooing became less painful, cheaper, and more accessible than traditional hand-poked tattoos, generating a shift in interest from the upper to lower classes (DeMello, 2000, p. 50). Since then, modern Western society has perpetually typecast heavily tattooed individuals – linking tattoos to the lower classes, the margins of society (“bikers, sailors, and whores”), criminality, mental illness, and even viewing them as self-mutilation. Atkinson (2003) discussed enduring stigmas: “A cultural stereotype has

long held that tattoos are marks of shame worn only by outlaws, misfits, or those fallen from social grace” (p.23). Much has changed in this regard, particularly since the 1990’s (the “Tattoo Renaissance”), and Atkinson (2003) observed that these antiquated silos for tattoo wearers have mostly faded. Still, as society has come to know that tattooed individuals are not all social rejects and criminals, vestiges of this past stigma remain. The heavily tattooed body remains distanced enough from the “mainstream” that it can still be othered. MacCormack (2006) notes that “if the black face is a failure to be a white face, and the female to be male, a tattooed body fails to be the base-level zero of non-inked skin” (p. 60). This is a question of perceived purity – as skin is an outer shell, easily read by others, tattooing becomes subject to more scrutiny than other forms of body modification that are equally as disruptive (say, a face lift or breast augmentation, for example). Botz-Bornstein (2013) discussed how purity has affected perceptions of tattooing: “Purity is a central notion because tattoos are all about the skin. Diets and plastic surgery might destabilize the metaphorical power of the body more than tattoos, but they do not interfere with the body’s purity” (p. 239). Within Western societies, the aesthetic ideal has long been light, unblemished skin, and knowingly eschewing that ideal aesthetic is an appearance violation:

Within conventional American society, light, clear skin is a long enduring beauty ideal... in addition, blotchy, blemished, and marked skin in American society is seen as unhealthy, impure, ugly, or low class. In fact, light skin is highly correlated with psychological, occupational, educational, and economic advantage. (Irwin, 2011, p. 35)

MacCormack (2006) continues: “A tattooed body as not-‘natural’ or ‘given’ emphasizes the signifying regimes of materiality in place within the discursive systems that precede it” (p. 63). This questions whether a heavily tattooed person can ever be seen as anything other than a

“tattooed person,” strengthening resolve for identity management in environments where stigma may present itself.

Goffman (1963) paid particular attention to the identity management techniques used by stigmatized populations. His distinction between visible and non-visible stigma differentiated stigmatized people by how immediately discernable their membership within a stigmatized group may be during social interactions (p. 49). Heavily tattooed people are an anomaly in this regard, as tattoos hold highly visible stigma, yet can be hidden easily in many cases. As such, heavily tattooed individuals may be considered both *discredited* (their differentness is immediately evident) and *discreditable* (their differentness is not immediately evident, but could be used against them should it be discovered), depending on their individual circumstances. Goffman (1963) contended that the discredited become concerned with managing the tension surrounding their stigmatized skin, whereas the discreditable are chiefly concerned with managing their identity by hiding information that could be used to their hindrance (p. 42).

Phelan and Hunt (1998) revealed that tattoos can communicate a number of traits, which include: “(1) personal identity, (2) cultural values and practices, and (3) membership in sub-groups within societies that are rebellious, peripheral, marginalized, or otherwise set apart from the ‘mainstream’” (p. 279). MacCormack (2006) notes that “seeing a tattooed body is evocative, but reading one develops it into a comparative system of self and other, distancing its power to act as a catalyst toward thinking body relations differently” (p. 65). Thus, if the heavily tattooed body is a revolutionary body, the non-tattooed (or even lightly tattooed) body strips away power as it reads, stigmatizes, and pigeon-holes heavily tattooed skin. Grogard (1994) explained the danger in reading the tattooed body, in that often the tattooed body is misread as an external expression of an inner self; “From this conventional humanist understanding of the body/subject

it follows that the individual's character and/or intentions can be deciphered simply reading his or her skin" (p. 131).

The communicative value of the heavily tattooed body differs greatly from that of a lightly tattooed body. Reading skin that has absorbed greater amounts of ink alters the perceptions of the viewer, in comparison to skin that has spent limited time under the needle. Ferreira (2011) contends: "To have or plan to have a heavily tattooed body is still taken as an extreme decision... as some research has pointed out, to have large portions of skin inked keeps evoking a social world of 'madness,' 'perversion,' 'deviation,' and 'marginality'" (p. 4). This is not the reaction garnered by the average tattooed body – but it is the reality for many heavily tattooed individuals. The permanence of tattooing, and related commitment, undoubtedly plays a role in this reaction – it is acceptable (or, rather, forgivable) to have a minor indiscretion or two, but the level of commitment required to become heavily tattooed crosses a moral boundary.

Cultural Competence, Identity Management, and Authenticity

Cupach and Imahori (1993) view culturally appropriate and effective behavior as a central component of competence, stating "the very construction of a relationship is a function of the extent to which individual identities merge and become interconnected" (Cupach & Imahori, 1993, p. 113). As intercultural relationships develop, they progress through three distinct phases: 1) Trial, the initial reactions of both parties; 2) Enmeshment, where a mutually acceptable relational identity emerges; and, 3) Renegotiation, where an integrated relationship emerges (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). Our identities are built upon, and rely on, our interactions with our families, our friends, our co-workers, and our communities. In order to be culturally competent we must strive to meet societal expectations for behaviour, decorum, and often aesthetic – thus we employ forms of identity management whenever we feel we are not meeting these societal

expectations. Because of the internal and often changing nature of identity “one’s complete identity is never directly observed in its totality. Aspects of a person’s identity are revealed and recognized in communication through the presentation of face” (Cupach & Imahori, 1993, p. 116).

What level of authenticity do we offer to our workplace? It is arguable that most individuals, tattooed or not, do not represent a completely authentic self when in the workplace. Furthermore, is authenticity related to our appearance? In discussing authenticity Waskul (2009) argues that clothing is not a significant reflection of authentic self, yet concedes that clothing is indeed a signifier, or a medium that we use to source information about another person (p. 53). We should consider tattoos similarly, and though tattoos may or may not be tied to an authentic representation of self, others will use them to discern information (whether they are doing so accurately or not).

A struggle arises when one equates their tattoos with identity, and their identity with authenticity – requiring identity work. In looking at modern concepts of authenticity and value of self, Lewin and Williams (2009) note: “individuals celebrate authenticity in order to balance the extreme dislocation that characterizes life in the postmodern world, in which traditional concepts of self, community, and space have collapsed (p. 66). This has become a fixation, discerning what is perceived as factual and what is perceived as false. In this regard, Phelan and Hunt (1999) correctly point out that: “identity work includes attempts to inform others about one’s self-definition, social position, training, past accomplishments, and potential futures” (p. 279).

Naturally, given the amount of time spent at work and the importance that employment plays in modern survival, our workplaces have become our central identity management setting – we require the greatest degree of management at work because we have the most riding on our

character there. Weinstein (1969) notes that “skill at establishing and maintaining established identities, both for one’s self and for others, is pivotal” with regard to our intercultural interactions (p. 757). The professional workplace has many face demands in terms of demeanor and appearance that do not allow for mismanagement of interactions.

Gender Implications and Tattoos

Issues of gender add to the complications of being tattooed in the workplace. Despite policies and laws to combat gender-based discrimination, the professional workplace still holds a double standard in salary, dress, and expectations (among other issues) across genders. Research has shown that women face a heightened exposure to discrimination and stereotyping in the workplace, compared to their male counterparts (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005, p. 272). It stands to reason that heavily tattooed females may face heightened discrimination and stereotyping in the workplace – beyond that of heavily tattooed males. Females face a number of disadvantages: acceptable “feminine” subject matter; breaching feminine amounts of coverage; and archaic perceptions of tattoos as hypermasculine. Botz-Bernstein (2013) notes that “in the case of men, the aesthetic play with stigmas or the voluntary forfeiting of a great deal of social approval is much more acceptable... tattoos have always been dominated by masculinist aesthetics” (p. 238). In the work environment, the heavily tattooed female body becomes a threat to order.

Method

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 21 heavily tattooed professionals from across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, with the purpose of exploring the tactics they used in negotiating between their distinct professional and tattooed identities. Most interviews took place over a single session, though follow up questions were posed when necessary. Interviews were conducted in person for interviewees based in Western Canada. For

those who resided outside of this region, interviews were conducted using a voice-over-internet-protocol (VOIP) service.

The sample population was evenly distributed across genders, with 11 participants identifying as female and 10 identifying as male. Age of the participants ranged from 22 to 62 years old ($\mu = 32.62$; $m = 32$), representing a range of professionals at different points in their careers. Interviewees were found through a network and snowball sampling method (Seale, 2012, p. 145), starting with the researcher's industry and community contacts across Canada.

Participants were selected based on how well they met the two key criteria: having a heavily tattooed body, and having worked in a professional ("white collar") environment. As no definition of "heavily tattooed" exists, only individuals with tattoo coverage greater than 20% of their body were considered for the study. A generalized definition of "professional" was used for the study – accepting salaried and educated non-labourers, whose work environment was office-based.

Directed one-on-one qualitative interviews allowed interviewer and interviewee to explore the rationale around hiding or exposing tattoos in a professional setting. A critical ethnographic process allowed for experiences and perceptions directly from the heavily tattooed community of professionals, reflecting the lived experiences of that group. The interviews were semi-structured, directed by a loosely controlled interview guide. Typically occurring in the interviewee's home, or a centrally located meeting spot, every interview was digitally recorded for note-taking purposes.

As a method, critical ethnography assesses our society as: "inequitably structured and dominated by a hegemonic culture that suppresses a consideration and understanding of why things are the way they are and what must be done for things to be otherwise" (Simon & Diplo,

1986, p. 196). It is important to move beyond traditional ethnography into critical ethnography for this research, in an effort to surpass merely understanding, and begin to challenge existing stigma and stereotypes. Critical ethnography is a reflective process that chooses “between conceptual alternatives and making value-laden judgments of meaning and method” (Thomas & O’Maolchatha, 1989, p. 147). As a research strategy, critical ethnography allows for cultural assessment of heavily tattooed professionals and challenges popular thinking around tattoo visibility in professional workplaces. Situated to dig below the cultural surface, ethnography allows for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and perceptions. We are reminded that institutions of power guide cultural meanings that create and restrict choice, as well as bestow legitimacy (Thomas, 1993, p.6).

Negotiating Professional Spaces with Heavily Tattooed Skin – Identity and Authenticity

A number of interesting themes emerged through my interviews, foremost issues of stigma, identity management, and authenticity. However, other themes consistently surfaced, such as: issues working with children and parents; acceptability across generations; and issues of touch, boundary, and unwanted attention.

Stigma

Stigma describes a condition that disqualifies individuals or groups from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963). This was a core issue, arising in every interview I conducted. Whether the participant was concerned with, or affected by, the stigma or not (and many were not concerned with pre-conceived notions of heavily tattooed people), each and every interviewee acknowledged the existence and prevalence of stigma in the professional workplace. The tattooed body could be viewed as *voluntary stigma* used as a symbolic isolator (Sanders,

1988, p. 397). Still, stigma is an issue that comes up in nearly all intercultural interactions, which Cupach and Imahori (1993) have noted:

Intercultural interactants often lack knowledge about each other's cultural norms, rules, symbols, and so on... in an attempt to support the other's cultural identity, one may refer to inaccurate information, such as stereotypes about the other's culture, which the other finds offensive. (p. 123)

When we look at tattoo culture as a sub-culture, we see a different type of intercultural interaction – heavily tattooed people will be fully aware of the conventions of dominant culture, but non-tattooed people will lack knowledge about tattoo culture, and also have inaccurate and stigmatic perceptions that accompany their information deficiency.

Ferreira (2011) describes extensive tattooing, perceived as abuse of the body – “a social history rooted on deviation and pathology that feeds the distrust and fear often felt toward heavily tattooed bodies” (p. 5). Though unsurprising, the stigma is more pervasive in industries that tend to be more conservative (law, private medicine, finance, etc.) and heavily tattooed people who work in “more creative” industries (marketing, information technology, etc.) believed that their workplace was more tolerant of their level of coverage. This demonstrates a spectrum of tolerance across professional fields, so we must be careful not to assume that white-collar spaces all operate with the same prejudice.

A threshold of indiscretion. In discussing the stigma still attached to tattoos in the workplace, many were quick to create a distinction between lightly and heavily tattooed bodies. Small tattoos (or light amounts of tattooing) have become very acceptable in the professional workplace since the 1990's, and perhaps even before that (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000). A recurring theme showed an opinion that non-tattooed (and even lightly-tattooed) communities

perceive tattoos as indiscretions or youthful mistakes – a souvenir of a wild time, or a reminder of a rebellious phase. Numerous interviewees attributed this to a “threshold of indiscretion” – a subjective limit to body modification, which when crossed cast the wearer as an outsider, too far-gone to return to polite society. *Alana*, 34, an attorney from Michigan explained that “up to a certain point people can write it off as a foolish mistake... I get the impression that people think I have poor judgment.” If a single tattoo is considered a mistake, then heavy coverage must be a string of mistakes – but when a tattooed body passes the threshold of indiscretion the tattoo can no longer be considered a mistake, and must now be considered part of a larger character flaw. This belief cycles back to fear and rejection of difference. As light tattooing has become increasingly pervasive in Western society, it is no longer sensible to fear lightly tattooed skin – yet, the heavily tattooed body still stands out as foreign, risqué, and potentially dangerous.

Becker (1963) found that the valuation and reaction of others were integral to classifying behaviour as deviant. Poignantly, in a society that prizes thought, planning, and preparation, heavily tattooed individuals feel like the threshold of indiscretion exists in part because of the conscious decision-making involved in possessing large amounts of ink coverage. *Paddy*, a 33 year-old Project Manager from Calgary expands on the difference between light and heavy coverage:

If you walk into a meeting with a small tattoo it’s easier for [non-tattooed people] to reconcile that, because they can assume that you made a bad decision once. People are okay with that. But, when you come in and have a giant piece, you’ve actually put thought into it.

Conversely, small amounts of tattooing seem to be perceived as more meaningful than large amounts of tattooing. Meaning, symbolic importance, and memorialization are devices that non-

tattooed (and also lightly tattooed) people use to explain or validate the indiscretion of bearing tattooed skin (Irwin, 2001, p. 61). It is acceptable, even encouraged, to have a memorial tattoo, a religious symbol, or a small identifier that can be linked to an aspect of your identity – but crossing the line is viewed as radical and even nihilistic. Notes *Gil*, 33, a manager for a telecommunications firm in Calgary:

When someone has just a single tattoo people always believe it must be very meaningful, that it has a lot of personal meaning. It's a big commitment [to become heavily tattooed], and that's meaningful in itself. It's a part of me. I really put time in to it. Though, it doesn't mean that the subject matter has to have some deep, introspective, personal connection for me.

As posited by Goffman (1963), identity norms can stimulate nonconformity (p. 129). Attaching meaning or perceived personal significance to tattooed skin becomes a coping mechanism for outsiders to work through the stigma they hold deep – a mask of acceptability. *Gil's* paradox then becomes whether to accept de-stigmatization on outsider's terms, or to reject that conformity and work toward de-stigmatization on his own terms.

Ability and intelligence. Perhaps the most prevalent manifestation of stigma to emerge during my interviews was the perception that heavily tattooed individuals may not have the ability or intelligence to perform their professional roles. *Alana* shared her apprehension about interaction with her clients as an attorney: "I'm concerned that people may see my tattoos, my clients, and be worried that I'm not fit to represent them. I do think people start to question your judgment which leads to other concerns – if you have poor judgment, can you be trusted in your professional capacity?" Of course, these stigmas are based in historical biases and perceptions of tattooed people – the biker, the sailor, and the criminal. The class implications that come along

with those historical stigmas influence perceptions of intelligence and ability – (upper-) middle-class hierarchical interpretations of lower-class value. *Lindsay*, 32, a lawyer in Vancouver, noted: “socioeconomic degrees are tied in with perceptions of tattoos, and that goes in with education and intelligence. They’ve always been associated, and it will take a long time to get over those seedy elements of society and their relation to tattoo culture.” As Irwin (2001) points out, the once-deviant act of owning tattooed skin has been legitimized to a point, yet stigma persists through the conventional moral values of *normals* (p. 67).

It is often assumed that the heavily tattooed body belongs in the trades or the service industry (a welder, an electrician, a bartender) – workspaces which have traditionally been tied to the “lower”-classes. In this respect, the assumption is that a heavily tattooed individual is body-focused and not mind-focused. *Paddy* expands on this thought:

Some people look at tradespeople as uneducated, because they don’t have ‘formal’ university. When people assume that you work in the trades because you’re heavily tattooed are they assuming so because they believe you’re not smart enough to work a professional job? Probably.

This exposes the depth of class-based bias as it affects heavily tattooed people – but also exposes deeper issues correlating class standing to perceptions of intelligence and ability. The heavily tattooed professional struggles for acceptance in the upper- and middle-classes, but also suffers a crisis within the tattoo community – fighting the internal biases that distance working-class and “elite” tattoo practices. This is a point the DeMello (2000) emphasizes early on – noting that people “both within and outside the tattoo community use terms like ‘biker’ to *mask* class differences, yet at the same time to distinguish a class of people and their practices as different from, and inferior to, the preferred practices of the middle class” (p. 6). As such, the heavily

tattooed professional fights to distinguish themselves from other heavily tattooed bodies (read: lower-class), in order to qualify their standing in the professional community – yet they must reconcile that decision if they cast-off segments of the heavily tattooed community.

Stereotypes of ability and intelligence run deep. *Ali*, the Director of International Operations for a technology company recalls her experience in the workplace: “I’ve found people who assume I’m not educated. I’ve found people who assume that I can’t be a leader.” Adds *Janet*, 33, a social worker and therapist: “I’ve come across people who have been shocked when I tell them what I do and my education level. They can’t believe it.” If a positive were to come out of this ability/intelligence dilemma, it would be that heavily tattooed professionals have reacted to these stereotypes by working to prove their inaccuracy. In numerous cases, interviewees mentioned their inclination to combat existing stigma through positive action. The result creates the opposite effect – a core of heavily tattooed professionals who have created a higher work standard as part of their identity management. *Serena*, a teacher from California, notes:

I like to think I’m functional in promoting the acceptance of those with tattoos – living by example, I would think. Showing that I am good at my job, and I do care. The fact that I have tattoos has nothing to do with my abilities to do my job.

Taking control of social change allows heavily tattooed professionals to better manage perceptions across the wider cultural spectrum. Taking the opportunity to confront existing stigma is an effective means to challenging stereotypes and changing perceptions.

Class

Issues of class, with regard to heavily tattooed professionals, can become very complicated. First, acknowledging that “white-collar” workplaces have class implications of

their own is important (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013) – these are spaces that traditionally belong to the middle- and upper-classes. The fight of the heavily tattooed professional is to be recognized as equal within two disparate peer groups or communities. It seems that gains in one group tend to be set-backs in the other. Through my interviews, numerous people mentioned the trade-off between appearing to be an authentic member of the heavily tattooed community and then working a white-collar job. For many, the aesthetic that accompanies being heavily tattooed is derived from the working class, and to be heavily tattooed in a professional setting is a misrepresentation. This could be tied to the subcultures that have been associated with body modification in the past and their ties to the working class (in particular, punk culture and its associated subcultures, where rejecting established notions of class and hierarchy can be central to membership).

As discussed by Goffman (1963), the stigmatized individual must learn about the structure of interaction in order to minimize the interference of their stigma (p. 104). In this sense the heavily tattooed individual must manage their identity on two fronts – proving that they are qualified to hold their position at work, and conversely, proving that they are “authentic” enough to be a member of the heavily tattooed community (or associated subculture). If, as Goffman (1963) posits, our *natural* in-group membership is defined by our stigma, then loyalty and authenticity come from membership within that in-group, and seeking acceptance from *normal* society is cowardly or foolish (p. 113).

Tattooed classism. Heavily tattooed society may face prejudice from sectors of professional culture, but also may inflict their own prejudices on segments of the tattooed community. You will notice that throughout my research, references are often made to bikers, whores, sailors, and other forms of “trash.” In many cases, the heavily tattooed professional

seeks to separate themselves from the rest of heavily tattooed society, through markers of quality, artistic excellence, and cost, creating an elite tattooed in-group. *Gabriel*, a financial journalist from London, UK told me: “I do differentiate between heavily tattooed people who I think have good work, and those who have shitty, generic, fashionable, or on-trend work.” DeMello (2000) explored the issue of classism within the tattooed community in-depth – discussing stratification and othering: “If class operates on a continuum, then “biker” is positioned at one end in order to give meaning to the other end (“not biker” or middle class), as well as to all point in the middle” (p. 6). A legitimization of the modern tattooed body, this device enables the heavily tattooed professional to belong at their hierarchical position and still identify as tattooed (when appropriate) – expanding the distance between the heavily tattooed middle-class and the sailors, bikers, whores, riff-raff, and other “trash.” (DeMello, 2000, p. 6)

Navigating class-specific spaces. Many of my interviewees stated they did not feel comfortable in situations that had direct class suggestions, in or outside of the workplace. “I tend to feel apprehension as a heavily tattooed person in ‘upper class’ spaces” states *Kate*, 28. “I’ll usually wear something that covers my tattoos to cut out the stares.” Often the discomfort felt in these spaces was derived from an increased sense of difference, or othering. This relates back to previous generations’ perceptions of tattooed individuals, derived from times when tattoo shops were frequented by those who existed on the fringes of society (Atkinson, 2003, p. 36). *William*, a communications officer, added that he felt as if “tattooed people are still struggling to establish themselves as professionals.” In masking their tattoos, or minimizing the area that is visible, it removes an obstacle to negotiating class-defined spaces.

Many heavily tattooed individuals use their tattoos to confront the class implications that accompany their body modification. *Jerome*, 38, shared his approach to class-defined spaces: “I

get off on being uncovered in those spaces – because I have access to them, so I can do it. I feel like those people are generally some of the most uptight people in our society – the most intolerant.” *Cameron*, 29, shared a similar sentiment:

I think [covering up] plays in to a stereotype that there’s something wrong with tattooed people. I make a choice at weddings, fine-dining restaurants, and those type of spaces, that if I cover up I’m playing in to the social convention that there’s something that needs to be covered. Maybe I’m being an idealist.

Most interviewees who used this technique tended to use it in spaces outside of the workplace – choosing to be less disruptive with their tattoos in professional settings. Confronting tattoo stigma in class-defined spaces can be relatively safe (long-term consequence free), yet that cannot be said for doing so in a work context. *Paddy*, 33, notes:

There are just certain careers where you can’t be openly heavily tattooed, due to the lingering stigma... I think it’s a professional thing – the thought that showing your tattoos isn’t professional. If you always keep your tattoos covered it’s never something that people can look negatively upon. You eliminate that, and now it’s just about your work.

Atkinson (2003) found that the primary concern for tattooed individuals in conservative work environments was the loss of achieved status among their coworkers (p. 221). He goes on to suggest that tattoo wearers will always have to weigh the potential repercussions that stigma may have on their career aspirations against their decisions to be tattooed (p. 222). This has resulted in a form of self-stigmatization: “enthusiasts come to view their own tattooing habits as a form of intolerable deviance in the work setting – a profane form of representation carrying immediate career-related ramifications” (p. 222). Overall, my interviews suggest that the heavily tattooed professional exists in a state of “purgatory” between professional and tattooed communities.

They may seek belonging in each community, yet at the same time are required to distance themselves from one in order to feel accepted in the other.

Generational Issues of Acceptance

Older generations. It is natural that most professional workplaces see a distinct generation gap between their core workforce and their management or executive teams. Being as most leadership roles stem from years of experience, most companies (but definitely not all companies) see their leadership groups centered around older generations. In a top-down professional environment, we can assume that corporate culture (and consequently value systems, acceptability criteria, and stigmas) will derive from the dominant values of the leadership team's generation. This has presented issues for heavily tattooed professionals who work in environments where archaic stereotypes of tattooed individuals still preside. Of course, as younger generations (mostly Generations X & Y) move into leadership roles, we see lesser emphasis on past stigmas and greater acceptance of heavily tattooed skin in the workplace.

During interactions, heavily tattooed people are inclined to equate the age of their colleague with the reaction, or treatment, they will receive. The age cut-off mentioned varies, but most interviewees felt like tattooed bodies faced greater pressures (or heightened stigma) from those who were 50 to 60 years of age or older. *Vanessa*, 29, explains: "it's always the older demographic who have issues with my tattoos." *Rosie*, 33, builds upon this notion:

The younger generations are much more accepting of tattooing... For the most part, people who are becoming professionals now have been surrounded by tattoos, in a more normalized setting, than people who are at the end of their careers. When that older generation of professionals was at the beginning of their careers – and for most of their lives – tattoos weren't what they are now. They had that stigma – army tattoos, sailor

tattoos, biker tattoos, jailhouse tattoos. There's a much younger generation in my industry who are fine with tattoos, but a lot of the people who are in positions of authority – the “old boys” – are not.

London finance journalist *Gabriel* counts the generation gap as a significant hurdle every heavily tattooed person faces, but also explains how that is changing:

The people that I'm covering up for are of a certain age: 50-plus. That definitely has something to do with it; tattooing is certainly less acceptable to people of a certain age, or generation... and I do think acceptability comes down to generations. There is certainly less formality around the workplace than there was 10 or 15 years ago.

As *Gabriel* points out, the changing values between generations have affected the workplace in many ways. Professional formality has decreased in many work environments (though there are still exceptions, particularly in more “conservative” fields), and acceptance for diversity has increased across many facets of Western culture (Muir, 1996, p. 475).

Younger generations. Many interviewees noticed that they would experience an increase in esteem or camaraderie when their younger coworkers found out that they were heavily tattooed. *Lindsay*, an attorney, has found that her tattoos have made her more accessible to her staff and peers: “the younger girls at work tend to identify with me better, or find that they can approach me more easily than the other lawyers. Now I'm often the first person to know what's going on around the office.” In dealing with younger generations, particularly those who are just entering the workforce, the tattooed individual may realize the opposite of stigma – in some cases garnering respect or camaraderie. This creates additional layers of complexity for those who employ forms of identity management in the workplace – as their identity management must now work multiple ways; covering their tattoos to manage potential

stigmatization from some coworkers, while also managing their tattooed skin as a benefit to their relationships with others. As Goffman (1963) reminds us, we are best not to think of relationships as a continuum with concealment of stigma and open treatment at either end, but rather think of contact occurring across numerous structures where stabilization will require different identity management techniques (p. 55).

The changes in acceptability can be attributed, in part, to the dramatic increase in the popularity of tattooing since the 1990's, but also to increased exposure to positive tattooed role models. To this end, many interviewees believe that the proliferation of heavily tattooed individuals will lead to a greater acceptance in the workplace, particularly as greater numbers of middle- and upper-class professionals become open about their tattoos. Greater visibility amongst successful professionals can be a viable catalyst toward acceptability in the white-collar workplace, but is likely only a single device among many societal changes that will affect acceptability.

Working with children and parents. A wholly separate level of complexities arises when children (and particularly their parents) are a part of professional life. My interviewees described a distinct difference in the stigmatic pressures of working with children. The issues in these cases were never with the children themselves, and always with the parents. Children tend to have a keen interest in tattooed skin – finding it remarkable and attention grabbing. *Natasha*, a registered nurse, recalls working in a children's hospital:

The kids are drawn to you. They're not scared and usually they are very inquisitive.

Parents – you can see it on their face when they walk in, even see the judgment in their eyes. You see it, you can see that they are scrutinizing your every move.

Tattoos can act as an “ice breaker” when working with children, however, parents and school administrators can be opposed. I have heard incredible stories through my interviews regarding parents’ reactions to tattooed people. *Janet*, a Youth and Family worker explains one parent’s reaction to learning she was tattooed: “I did have a parent who fired me from working with their children because of my tattoos.” Many interviewees thought the reason for this increased hostility towards heavily tattooed individuals stemmed from the impressionability of children. This implies that for some people, acceptance of heavily tattooed skin does not include their own children living a heavily tattooed lifestyle. Parents naturally protect their children from perceived threats, and it is obvious that heavily tattooed people are still viewed as threatening by some, and heavily tattooed skin is still seen as an undesirable or “impure” modification.

Some teachers face the stigma before the parents of their students can find out they have tattoos. *Dawn* recalled a moment where school administration looked to minimize the potential damage her tattooed skin could cause:

They did freak out about the tattoos at first. As a response to that, my principal took me out shopping and bought me three suits and two blouses. I think she wants me dressing the ‘next level’ of formal in order to counteract the fact that I have tattoos. This is a private school that I work at, and they are paying for their children to not only receive an academic education, but a moral and religious education as well. I think that as a tattooed woman, they don’t see me as capable of providing that.

In my sample population, these situations were isolated to positions that work with children – no professional outside of these fields related stories where others worked to mitigate the impression left by the tattooed body. This signifies an understanding on the part of the other that

tattoos do not impede ability – yet, an inability to argue (or openly acknowledge) that a heavily tattooed individual’s credentials, experience, and skill are removed from their personal aesthetic.

However, I did find instances where heavily tattooed individuals found their tattooing beneficial in working with children – mostly within their work with at-risk children. *Boyd*, a teacher in South Carolina, discussed how acceptability changes with at-risk students: “If you’re working with at-risk kids, that line in the sand is probably a little more liberal than if you’re working in an academic magnate school.” Naturally, there are class implications tied to this notion, yet in these situations, teachers discuss creating a more effective bond with students through their tattoos. *Paddy*, explored the notion that his tattoos humanized him when he worked with at-risk children, removing some of the perceived authoritarianism that came with his position:

Their parents are sitting there, and they’re “perfect.” The officers are sitting there, and they’re “perfect.” The kids would respond to my questions in a completely different manner than they would to those other “perfect” people. I think it’s that I looked like someone who may have been in their shoes. That’s what a lot of those kids wanted – to look at somebody and think that they might be able to understand what they’re going through, whether I actually could or not.

These are situations where the stigma that tattoos hold can work for a heavily tattooed individual. As suggested by Blumer (1969), response is not related to action as much as the meaning one attaches to action (p. 79). If at-risk children view tattoos as symbolic of a similar struggle, then unanticipated bonds and camaraderie can be forged, allowing the heavily tattooed individual a hand-up in their position. Working with children has its barriers as a heavily tattooed person, but

those barriers come from adults and not children – adults who feel they are protecting their children by not exposing them to heavily tattooed skin.

Gender Implications and the Heavily Tattooed Body

MacCormack (2006) noted that tattooed women exist outside traditional femininity, and can be seen to resist or challenge accepted institution (p. 64). If a woman is defined by what she is not (a man), then a tattooed woman stepping in to masculine tattooed space becomes problematic. The professional workplace, like many aspects of modern society, still tends to operate within a gender dichotomy – male or female². Due to differences in gender-specific clothing, the professional experience can vary greatly between heavily tattooed individuals who identify as male or female.

Gender expectations operate in a much wider context than just workplace fashion normativity - taking cues from society as a whole. *Ethan* (age 62) discussed his thoughts on differences in gender expectations for tattooed bodies:

In general males can get away with more than females. There are so many beauty rules that women are supposed to live by; so defacing their bodies, or doing something permanent, becomes a much more significant act for a woman than for a man.

When Botz-Bornstein (2013) discussed traditional gender implications of tattooing, he noted that tattoos can be read as unfeminine, and that they act as hypermasculine signifiers (p. 238).

Through my interviews I identified two main issues relating to tattoos and gender in the workplace: first, the restrictions that accepted dress codes and gender-specific dress may place

² Though I acknowledge that gender should not be minimized to a mere binary, my sample population identified as either male or female, and thus this section will focus as such. There is an opportunity for future research to focus on the experience of transgender, transsexual, gender-queer, and other non-cisnormative populations of heavily tattooed professionals.

on the tattooed body; and second, the disparity between perceptions of male and female tattooed bodies (tattooed males are tough, whereas tattooed females are “damaged” or promiscuous).

Dress and gender. I set a rule for myself when I started being tattooed – nothing below the cuff or above the collar. By ensuring that my tattoos can always be covered by a suit, I have ensured that I can always blend in at my workplace, when needed. As a male, wearing male corporate dress, the percentage of my body that I cannot tattoo and still hide is very small. Many heavily tattooed females do not have the same luxury. In this regard, attorney *Lindsay* explains the challenges she has faced:

It’s harder to be a female in this profession regardless, never mind a heavily tattooed one. They expect things of me, even with dress – dressing appropriately. I don’t have any chest tattoos for that reason; women can’t wear neckties. I don’t have anything on my calves because of the fact that I need to wear a skirt. I’m already five notches down the ladder in being a female... then being tattooed too? I’ve been in situations where I’m not taken seriously anyway. That’s why I remain covered all the time. This profession is mostly old, white men – there’s still those rules of the roost. To come in and be a woman – a young woman – and also to be tattooed... you’re not taken seriously. I don’t need another reason other than being a woman and being young to have them underbelly me, or not take me seriously.

Hawkes, Senn, and Thorn (2004) found that women with tattoos were generally perceived with greater negativity than those without tattoos (p. 602). Furthermore, the amount of coverage and visibility were found to directly contribute to the degree of negativity a woman received (p. 602). Many of my female participants reflected these findings, relating to *Lindsay’s* lived experience.

Ali, 25, questioned whether her gender, her age, or her tattoos were a bigger hindrance to success in the modern professional workplace:

I've found people who assume I'm not educated, I've found people who assume that I can't be a leader. It's difficult to draw the line between what they're thinking because I'm female, what they're thinking because I'm tattooed, and what they're thinking because I'm young – there's a lot of things counting against me in the professional world.

Overwhelmingly, women interviewees in this position chose to cover up their tattoos. Where gender and age are very difficult to mask, hiding heavily tattooed skin (while sometimes uncomfortable and seemingly unnecessary) is the easiest way for young women to mitigate some of the pressures of the professional work environment.

In order to accomplish this task, most women I interviewed discussed the strategy involved – covering their tattoos becomes a conscious effort that strings through so many aspects of their lives. Many had entirely separate wardrobes for work and private life, without the potential for crossover, strategically ensuring they do not accidentally expose tattooed skin during the work day. *Lindsay* notes: “If it's a really hot day I make sure I wear a sleeveless shirt to make sure I'm not roasting under my blazer. Sometimes I have to close my office door and take off my jacket just to cool down.” *Rebecca* spoke about choosing her dress depending on her daily schedule: “Who I'm meeting with makes my wardrobe for the day... if I'm talking to financial people my dress code is very formal – a suit with a button up shirt. If I leave the office I always wear my blazer.” *Janet* discusses how her shopping is impacted by the need to cover her tattoos:

I have to consider how my wardrobe will compliment, or not compliment, my tattoos.

Will it look good with dark tights? If I buy knee-high boots, will they cover my leg

tattoos? Making sure suit jackets have sleeves that are extra-long so if I reach for something my tattoos don't peek out. I've adapted my style to wear a lot of scarves – because my chest tattoo creeps on to my collarbone, most shirts won't cover it. I have a really nice selection of scarves now [laughs]. So, tattooing absolutely impacts my choices for professional style.

These issues are not typical concerns for heavily tattooed males – unless they have branched out below the cuff or above the collar. *Natasha* notes: “men have the upper-hand in that regard because they are able to disguise themselves better.”

Gender expectations for tattooed skin. Along with differences in dress in the workplace, there is also a split down gender lines surrounding the perception of heavily tattooed individuals. In the workplace, these seem to be centered around issues of femininity, and what is appropriately feminine. As Botz-Bornstein (2013) mentions, tattoos have traditionally belonged in the masculine sphere (p. 238), and as such professional females face additional pressures when it comes to their tattoos. *Kate* discussed how subject matter, as it relates to femininity, also relates to acceptability in the professional work environment: “for females, unfortunately, if it's small and delicate it tends to be more openly accepted. If a tattoo is not dainty or traditionally feminine then it usually receives a negative response.” This becomes an automatic problem for heavily tattooed females, as large quantities of tattooing are rarely perceived as dainty or feminine.

There are additional issues that affect the heavily tattooed female body, and many of them relate back to past stigma or masculine stereotypes. Many of my female interviewees discussed assumptions of promiscuity, sexual orientation, and emotional “damage” they have faced due to their level of tattooing. In some ways these assumption are reflective of the “bikers,

sailors, and whores” era of tattoo stigma, but also symptoms of the notions of purity and desire. Botz-Bornstein (2013) argues that “female tattoos are not a matter of decoration or body transformation, but instead they concern the symbolic purity that is important for the economy of male desire,” continuing that “the female body screen is supposed to *reflect* male desire, that is, to desire *because* she (or her skin) is desired” (p. 239).

Many of the females that I interviewed noticed differences in male gaze when their skin was uncovered to expose tattoos. *Rosie* reflected on a client who did not know she was tattooed – after he saw her uncovered skin by chance he mentioned that he “never knew how fuckable I was until he saw my tattoos.” In this regard, Guéguen (2013) noted that tattooed women are generally considered by males to be less attractive, but more sexually promiscuous (p. 1517). There are other perceptions of tattoo fashion that reinforce this mode of thinking – the popularization of pejorative terminology such as “tramp stamp” is a simple example. As long as tattoos are related to moral value, male fetishism will continue to commoditize the female heavily tattooed body – which is a further threat to women seeking equality in professional settings. This places a greater onus on heavily tattooed females to cover up in the workplace – in order to not only avoid the ability and intelligence stigmas that come along with tattoos, but also to avoid the fetishism that accompanies their inked skin.

Boundaries: Conversation, Touch, and Unwanted Attention

Tattoos can be very attention grabbing, but problems can arise when unwanted amounts of focus are directed towards a heavily tattooed individual, or when boundaries are crossed. A common theme emerged – covering to avoid interaction with someone who was an outsider, or who did not understand tattoo culture. *Gabriel* discussed the wear that these interactions come to take: “there’s an ordinary dialogue that becomes consistent with people who don’t understand

the culture, don't understand the references, the art, the history, and it becomes a bit tiring and a bit boring." Other interviewees find the constant threat of being approached to be more invasive, particularly at work. *Alana* discusses her trepidation:

I've had bosses who find out I have tattoos and want to see them... and you have to expose yourself in your work environment. I always feel awkward doing that, it makes me feel at-risk. I don't necessarily want to be known for my tattoos. I'd like to be known for the work I'm doing.

Many tattooed professionals mentioned that they have felt minimized in this manner – reduced and defined by their aesthetic. Once tattoos are exposed at work they become classified as “tattoo guy” or “tattoo girl.” *Walt*, who does not cover his tattoos at work, explained how he can struggle through the perception that his tattoos are his main identity trait:

It gets old fast when people stop you and ask about your tattoos all the time. I don't just identify myself as a tattooed person – my thing isn't to *be tattooed*, I just like *having tattoos*. You have to explain the same concepts over-and-over. To them it may be the first time they're hearing it, but for me it may be the 150th time. It becomes old hat. It's like you're no longer a person now, you're a piece of art... but you can't go to the Louvre and grab the Mona Lisa. I don't want people touching me.

As *Walt* mentions, avoiding a tired discourse is not the only reason many of my interviewees cover up – there are often issues of touching that come along with a heavily tattooed body.

There are perceptions that tattooed skin is on display – that a heavily tattooed person's objective is to draw attention to their body. *Rosie* discusses this assumption: “I don't expect to be heavily tattooed and not have people look at me... but I don't do it for that, I do it for me. There's this perception that it's done for other people.” The assumption that heavily tattooed skin

is an attention-seeking adornment becomes precarious when it comes to personal boundaries, in particular touch. Unwanted, or uninvited, touching becomes a problem for the heavily tattooed professional – both in and out of their work environment. Many interviewees reported cases where people would try to move pieces of their clothing in order to expose their tattoos for a better look, which is compromising in any situation, but particularly in a work environment.

Janet recalled particular situations where this happened:

I've had many women looking at my chest tattoo and then trying to move my shirt to see more – and then I have to say “oops, hands off my body” because they don't necessarily realize that they're being invasive. It comes back to the idea that because I have artwork on my body I must want attention... I think it may tie back to the subtle underlying tones of loose morals and promiscuity – I must be okay with being touched because I'm a heavily tattooed woman.

This issue is not confined to spaces where heavily tattooed individuals may be more prepared for it (nightclubs or bars, for example), it happens everywhere, including within the work environment. It is also not limited to inappropriate sexual touching – many people just are not aware that they are crossing a boundary because of their perceptions of heavily tattooed individuals. As *Curtis* points out: “having large tattoos seems to take the idea of personal space away from people. They'll just come up, grab your arm, and start touching you.” For many heavily tattooed individuals this has become such a regular experience that they have to prepare for it.

Identity Management and Authenticity

All of the issues discussed to this point (stigma, class and gender implications, space boundaries, etc.) become explanations for a heavily tattooed individual's need to manage their

identity in their workplace. As *Alana*, a 34 year-old attorney puts it: “You can’t un-ring the bell.” In other words, once an other is aware that you are a heavily tattooed individual you can never go back to being “normal,” you can only work to change their perceptions of tattooed people. Many heavily tattooed professionals work to manage their aesthetic in the workplace, in order to minimize the potential damage that “ringing the bell” may cause. However, this identity management may bring feelings of inauthenticity. Cupach and Imahori (1993) identified the challenges of identity management:

Successful management of face involves paradoxical challenges. First, inherent in facework is a dialectical tension between satisfying one’s own face wants and the face wants of one’s interlocutor. Second, supporting one aspect of another’s face may simultaneously entail a threat to a different aspect of face. Third, an individual’s own face wants can be in conflict with one another. The simultaneous desire for fellowship *and* autonomy represents a classic dialectical tension. (p. 117)

My research sample was fairly evenly distributed amongst those who chose to cover up at work at all times, those who would cover up for specific work situations, and those who chose not to employ any form of identity management in the workplace. Though a very low proportion of the sample was required to cover up at work by employer policy (9%), a large majority of the sample said that they covered up on a regular basis (85%). Nearly my entire sample (95%) considered that their tattoos were significantly tied to their identity. Given the high percentage of professionals in my sample who choose to cover up, and the strong tie between tattoos and identity, we can see an authenticity struggle at play.

“The type” and covering up. Many of my interviewees deliberated upon the relationships they have with their coworkers and how they may change (or have changed) when

their tattoos are exposed. The phrase “I didn’t see you as *the type*,” or some variation thereof, was constant in these interactions. *Kate* discussed the reactions she has received when coworkers have found out that she is heavily tattooed:

You’re covered all day, and they really don’t know that much about you – it’s the corporate uniform. The most common response I get is “I didn’t peg you as *the type*,” or “I didn’t think you’d be the *kind of person with tattoos*.”

Of course, the notion of “the type” can be problematic, tying to earlier stigmas and suggesting that only certain people of certain class distinctions should possess heavily tattooed bodies. This causes further apprehension for many tattooed individuals, worrying that they may be typecast due to their coverage. *Janet* explained her anxieties: “I’m concerned that if my tattoos are a focus, my ability to contribute to the agency will be overlooked, and my legitimacy within the profession will be compromised.” This emphasizes exactly how deep stigmas around ability and class can be rooted. Of those interviewees who do cover up in the workplace, many choose to cover up at all times to mitigate these perceptions. Taking away the focus from their tattooed skin becomes one less worry that they may have in their workplace. Goffman (1963) described this as *covering* – “restricting the display of those failings most centrally identified with stigma” (p. 103). Covering allows the heavily tattooed professional to operate without suspicion that their tattoos affect their face at work.

First impressions and continued management. When making a first impression, my entire sample population mentioned managing their identities through covering their tattoos. This allows heavily tattooed professionals to navigate any prejudices that the person opposite them may hold. Covering for a first meeting (or first few meetings) establishes the desired professional

identity, before allowing aspects of the tattooed identity to show. *Jerome*, 38, a commercial real estate broker from Calgary, discusses first meetings:

I'll always manage first impressions, but I don't think that's unique to tattooed people.

That's what you do in general. I would consider it a sign of some extreme mental disorder if you went up to a stranger and were truly honest with them.

This is preventative facework, as defined by Cupach and Imahori (1993): "Preventative facework is designed to avoid or minimize potentially face-threatening acts before they occur and thereby defend one's own face and protect the face of others" (p. 117). By covering up their tattoos while they establish a relationship, heavily tattooed professionals are enacting preventative facework, but also minimizing the chance that they will have to employ corrective facework at a future point in the relationship, to repair the indiscretion of exposing heavily tattooed skin.

Professionals who manage first impressions and then selectively cover-up tend to want to work towards directly changing attitudes and stigmas around heavily tattooed people. The goal with this strategy is to cover up while demonstrating credibility, reliability, and expertise, eventually exposing tattooed skin once there is an established relationship. This allows them through the trial phase of relationship building, but can also be a risky move in cases where their interlocutor carries deep-seeded stigma or dislike toward heavily tattooed individuals. When executed skillfully, the heavily tattooed professional will establish themselves as an expert in their field long before they expose tattooed skin, which helps their face negotiation with their opposite, but also helps to break down existing bias and stigma, when it exists. *Jerome* continued his discussion of identity management:

I'm in control of my exposures at work, and at the end of the day I'm confident that my clients work with me because of my skill set. My appearance is to get in the door, to earn

their confidence. My decision to cover up when I first meet a colleague or a client is about managing my first impression – my only concern is that I want to be able to get in the door, to be able to give someone the confidence and comfort level that I know what I'm talking about. After that, if somebody doesn't want to work with me because I'm tattooed, I'm assuming they're the same type of person who wouldn't work with someone due to their race, or gender, or whatever. Fuck 'em.

Jerome is far from alone with this opinion. This was a view that many professionals who chose to gradually (or occasionally) expose their tattoos at work took; people who are not accepting of their tattooed skin simply are not people that they would choose to work with.

Authenticity. Some of my interviewees struggled with covering their tattoos, as they felt it was leaving an authentic piece of them out of their work lives. Others, like me, enjoy representing an “inauthentic” self in the workplace, or creating and managing a score of identities. Some never felt a struggle – feeling that they were able to put forth a consistent persona across their work and private lives, or they did not consider covering up an authenticity issue. It is important to regard authenticity as self-reflective, a *subjective* interpretation of the degree someone believes they are presenting an honest interpretation of self (Waskul, 2008, p. 58).

Jerome discussed authenticity as it relates to the workplace: “I'm not concerned about being authentic at work because work is a place, in my opinion, that you shouldn't be authentic.” This viewpoint was common across my sample – that we are not expected to act “authentic” in our workplaces. Rather, corporate society anticipates that we put on a face for work – a professional face – that follows a line of conduct. As *Rosie* notes: “even if I wasn't tattooed I'd have a separation between who I am at work and who I am in my private life.” To this end,

Cupach and Imahori (1993) discussed how private identity can be, and how a truly authentic self is never observed in public: “because it is complex, partially internal, and ever-evolving, one’s complete identity is never directly observed in its totality” (p. 116).

Some chose to alter their work identity, and cover up their tattoos, because they felt that the work environment was undeserving of glimpses in to their private lives. This was often referred to as “holding something back.” With this strategy, heavily tattooed professionals tend to only present a more authentic version of self to those they feel have earned it – whether that be through trust, companionship, or social belonging. *Gabriel*, a financial journalist in London, UK, shared his motivations behind covering up in this manner:

I like keeping a little part of me back – maybe because I’m not in love with my job, I like having a little bit of myself kept private... a little bit held back just for me. I quite like the fact that there’s a professional me and a non-professional me, and that they can be delineated in that way.

For a majority of my sample, what started out as a hard split between identities (work and private) has begun to blend as they progress in their careers. This is due in part to gaining acceptance of heavily tattooed skin, but also as professionals become increasingly comfortable in asserting themselves. *Rosie* explained the changes she experienced as she advanced in her career:

There’s definitely an overlap as I become more comfortable in myself and in my career – to know that a little bit of who I am personally is acceptable at work. In the beginning of my career I had created hard lines between my personal and professional self. I still have a line, it’s just not as hard as it used to be.

For others, the duality and identity management becomes grating, and they prefer to start letting more authentic aspects of their personalities seep in to their professional lives. This becomes a

dangerous situation, and may mark a transition from discreditable to discredited that creates additional face work. As Goffman (1963) suggests, those who are willing to admit possession of a stigma must, in turn, work to minimize the impact that stigma may impress on their life (p. 102).

Accommodation. An interesting form of face negotiation and identity management that emerged throughout my interviews appeared in situations where the heavily tattooed professional chose to cover their tattoos in order to make their interlocutors more comfortable – I describe this behaviour as accommodation. Accommodation eases the potential discomfort of others, and was employed by most to save their boss, or their company, from potential embarrassment due to the employment of a heavily tattooed professional. *Lindsay* described her rationale behind covering up: “If I made anyone else feel uncomfortable in my workplace that would make me uncomfortable.”

For many, accommodation was more to save face on behalf of their company, or their direct report. Goffman (1963) characterized how stigma can ripple outward, albeit with weakening intensity (p. 30), which would allow for the transfer of stigma from the tattooed professional to their employer, in a less concentrated form. *Curtis*, who typically does not cover up at work, described why he does hide his tattoos in certain situations: “I don’t think tattoos are unprofessional, but I know other people may have that perception. I don’t want to cause stress for my company because someone may have a silly perception of tattoos.” *Rebecca* had a similar sentiment: “I don’t want people to think my boss is strange because he hired someone with tattoos all over her arms.”

Accommodation apologizes for an other’s discomfort with heavily tattooed skin by covering up. It could be seen as passive conflict management. *William* explained how his views

on covering up, despite how he felt about the choice to don tattooed skin: “I don’t think that the workplace should have any influence on personal decision making in terms of how I want to express myself. More than anything, I cover up just to avoid potential conflict at work; it’s easier.” This tactic could be construed as overcompensation for societal stigmas surrounding heavily tattooed people - an approach that seeks to set the *normal* at ease, but it also assumes that tattoos are problematic and should be considered cause for discomfort. *Natasha* recognized this trait in herself: “I feel like sometimes I compensate for my appearance by trying to be overly professional in the way I interact with patients or their families.” We see a desire in accommodation, to compensate for perceived failings brought about by tattooed skin, blaming ourselves for the discomfort of others. In order to change stereotypical notions of heavily tattooed individuals, tattooed people will first have to stop accommodating those who hold deeply stigmatic views.

Change, Future, and Moving Forward

In order to change acceptance of heavily tattooed bodies in professional settings, opinions must change first. This becomes a paradox for the heavily tattooed professionals – do you openly confront stigma surrounding tattooed skin, risking your professional standing, and potentially your career? Or, do you hide your tattoos to gain acceptance, risking self-completion, or authenticity? *William* noted the struggle that an individual can face in trying to generate change:

I’m a non-traditional person in a traditional work environment. I’m not egotistical enough to think that I, alone, can change it all, so I’ve learned to adapt and work within the confines of this system to the extent that I’m willing to change myself without compromising my integrity.

All interviewees agreed on one thing – acceptance will come with the propagation of talented and intelligent heavily tattooed people. Some interviewees preferred to allow that change come organically. *Dawn* discussed how she thought change in acceptance would best come about: “If people encounter, one-by-one, quality professionals who happen to have tattoos, the larger negative perception will eventually be changed.” In many ways this has begun over the past 30 years, we just have not reached the point where change has caught up with heavily tattooed skin.

Other interviewees preferred to actively work to change professional opinions of heavily tattooed skin. *Curtis*, who shows his tattoos at work, discussed how change would have to stem from heavily tattooed people: “I hope that having my tattoos visible at work, while showing people that I am a valuable leader in my field, will change their opinions for the better. I think that we can change perceptions from within.”

There were some questions about the level of desirable change. Complete change and complete acceptance takes away a part of the aesthetic benefit that comes along with being heavily tattooed. This is the paradox – the difficulty – in striving for complete acceptance for heavily tattooed bodies. So many heavily tattooed people have altered their bodies as a marker or differentiator – a signifier that they belong to a community that exists outside of the norm, and they don’t want everyone to seek belonging in that community. The tattooed body is created – a *voluntary stigma* - and there are no gatekeepers to the community. Most heavily tattooed professionals are seeking a balance, one where they can exist within their work environments without fear of dismissal, rejection, or lost opportunity, but still hold on to the unique and distinctive aspects of their community. This is a desire to achieve a duality - both in-group and out-group alignment (see Goffman, 1963).

In conclusion, as heavily tattooed bodies become more prolific across professional fields some of the age-old stigmas surrounding tattoos (criminality, societal distance, deviant behaviour) have begun to break down. However, heavily tattooed professionals have a long way to go before their skin will be accepted in their workplace. Foremost, continued rejection of existing (and accepted) stigma is critical to the professional survival of a heavily tattooed individual; issues of class, ability, and intelligence are all working against heavily tattooed professionals.

Experiences of identity management and feelings of authenticity are highly varied across heavily tattooed professionals. Aside from specific, traditionally conservative professions (law, finance, etc), there tends to be little consistency across workplaces when it comes to treatment of tattooed skin. There exists a wide spectrum of identity management solutions employed by heavily tattooed professionals, ranging from full coverage at all times to only covering to manage first impressions – nevertheless, identity management is an issue for all heavily tattooed professionals. As such, there are many further opportunities to continue the study of identity management in heavily tattooed professionals which could benefit our understanding. Specific areas of interest include the additional pressures of gender on the heavily tattooed professional body, specifically focusing on female or transgender populations. There is also opportunity to look at populations of professionals who are tattooed on areas of the body that are still considered to be *very* taboo, such as the head, face, neck, and hands.

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