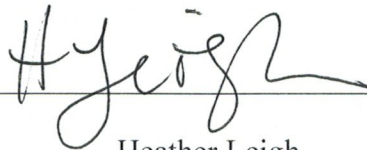


Stained, Not Tarnished:
A Heuristic Study of Tattoos and Symbolism from an Art Therapy Perspective

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Running head: STAINED, NOT TARNISHED

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A Heuristic Study of Tattoos and Symbolism from an Art Therapy Perspective

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Art in Art Therapy
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

May 2020

ABSTRACT

The practice of tattooing has been around for thousands of years, but has not been given positive attention in Western cultures until recently. Art therapy holds the power to further positive opinions on this art form by viewing a client's tattoos as an expression of self through personal symbols. Much of the existing literature surrounding the topic of tattoos discusses how they are perceived by others; literature centered on the personal, lived experience of those with tattoos is particularly lacking. In this heuristic self-study, the researcher immersed himself in the history of tattoos and sought to understand through his own experience of creating a tattoo image how personal symbols and worldview are integral to the process people go through to create their body art. Findings indicate that in the process of designing a tattoo a person pulls from a wide variety of conscious and unconscious sources that hold personal symbolic meaning, and undergoing a mindful process of symbolizing in order to create a tattoo can lead to increased self-awareness and self-understanding. Further research into ties between identity, tattoos, and art therapy could lead to an improved understanding of tattoos as self-symbols, their psychological benefits, and how they can be used in the process of therapy.

Keywords: tattoos, art therapy, symbolism, identity, self-esteem, body art

DEDICATION

For Florence; thank you for helping me through more than you will ever know.

“We should wear our hearts on our sleeves in this life.”

-Sylvia Plath, The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all my professors for the care they put in to training the next generation of art therapists at the expense of their own time and energy; I promise I'll try to be worth it. I also want to thank my friends and family for sticking by me these past two years; I was warned it would be hard, but who knew? Thanks to all the people in my cohort, both past and present; without you, I would not know how goofy of a therapist I will be. And finally, to all the people I met in bars, coffee shops, and bookstores, and talked about your tattoos; thank you for your stories. Without them, this would be a blank page.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, tattoos have served important cultural purposes. A variety of cultures use them for rites of passage (Krutak & Deter-Wolf, 2017; Rush, 2005). In many cultures, both past and present, tattoos are a popular form of expression (Atkinson, 2003). Despite the variety of reasons that a person may have a tattoo, in some contexts a negative connotation surrounds tattoos and the people who have them. The historical, westernized stereotype of the people who have tattoos may include being gangsters, circus performers, or sailors. While these no longer apply, it seems some people still associate tattoos with rough-and-tumble groups. Even among people who explicitly say they have no negative opinions of tattoos, their implicit bias (the bias that lies in the subconscious) has been shown as being the opposite (Zestcott, Tompkins, Williams, Livesay, & Chan, 2018).

From an art therapy perspective, the reasons behind why someone may want to get a tattoo make sense; to have an intensely personal symbol representing a meaningful experience displayed on your body can be an intimate form of communication with the self and the greater world. Art therapists are uniquely equipped to explore the meaning-making that is so intensely tied to tattoos and can help to bring the personal meaning and interpersonal connectivity inherent to tattoos and the process of getting them into a 21st century understanding of tattoos.

In this heuristic self-study, I immersed myself in the history of tattoos and sought to understand, through my own experience of symbolizing and development of a tattoo image, how personal symbols and worldview are integral to this subconscious process. This study broadened my understanding of tattoos, the motivations a person may have to get a tattoo, and how having tattoos affect a person's sense of self and place in the world. My additional aim was to provide a

more positive lens through which to view tattoos and those who have them, so that understanding them as an expression of self does not involve judgment. I was then able to understand how an art therapist can uncover their client's personal meaning of a tattoo with curiosity and compassion, and use a client's tattoos as a way to exploring the self through personal symbols. My overarching research question is: what benefits does a person receive from getting a tattoo, and the process involved in developing one? My hypothesis was that there is no single process involved in the creation of tattoos, but an amalgam of different processes that lead to these images.

Operational Definitions

Bias – an inclination of temperament or outlook, especially a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Costly honest signal – a signal given purposely by a living being that identifies a motive or thought, but which also causes a detriment to the being (Lynn, Dominguez, & Decaro, 2016).

Epidermis – The outer non-sensitive and non-vascular layer of the skin of a vertebrate that overlies the dermis (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Heuristic – “... heuristic comes from the Greek root *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find. It refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis” (Moustakas, 1992, p. 9).

Heuristic inquiry – “... a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one’s self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance” (Moustakas, 1992, p. 15).

Modification – the making of a limited change in something, also the result of such a change (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Pigment – a substance that imparts black or white or a color to other materials, especially a powdered substance that is mixed with a liquid in which it is relatively insoluble and used to impart color to coating materials (such as paints) or to inks, plastics, and rubber (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Scarify – to make scratches or small cuts in (something, such as the skin) (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Scarification – noun form of scarify (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Self-discovery – a realization of the self that was not apparent to an individual before (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Symbol – something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance, especially a visible sign of something invisible, or an act, sound, or object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Tattoo – “the introduction in the dermis of exogenous pigments and dyes to obtain a permanent design” (Kluger & Koljonen, 2012, p. 5).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review of the literature, I will examine the history of tattoos in historical times and the modern era, the various methods of receiving tattoos, and how modern tattoos have developed from historical uses. After developing this frame of reference based on the physicality of tattoos, I will examine information on modern cultural understandings of tattoos, including symbolism associated with tattoos, tattoos as an art form, cultural implications of having tattoos, and bias associated with tattoos. I will conclude by examining the potential therapeutic relevance of tattoos and how they may be used in the context of art therapy.

History of Tattoos

Early records of tattoos. Tattoos have been present and used for a variety of reasons since the beginning of recorded history. Rush (2005) reported that body modification practices like tattooing and scarification have existed for as long as cave paintings. Deter-Wolf, Robitaille, Krutak, and Galliot (2015) compared mummified remains and found that a mummy named Ötzi, found buried near the Ötztal Alps, had tattoo markings that were carbon dated to the 4th century BCE. For perspective, 4th century BCE is when experts believe writing was invented, which means that humans have been permanently marking their skin for as long as they have been making marks on paper, walls, or boards. For Ötzi, it is thought that these markings were physically therapeutic in nature; his tattoos are located in various areas of his body that mostly align with joints (Deter-Wolf et al., 2015). The prevailing thought is that his tattoos were used as a sort of pain relief for arthritis-like symptoms, similar to acupuncture practices today, used for “creating anesthesia, promoting endurance, and detoxification” (Rush, 2005, p.26).

Body modification (specifically scarification) can serve as a reminder of important events in one's life. Like battle scars from altercations and wounds from wars, Rush (2005) stated that scars provide a physical symbol for an experience; a way to commemorate an event that happened, like battle scars from altercations and wounds of war. Specific examples include stretch marks produced by pregnancy or raised physical scars on the body from hunting predators. Every culture has performed body modification for cultural significance (Rush, 2005; Laux et al, 2016).

Body modification has also been used for punishment. If you were to view body modifications through the lens of serving as a reminder of an event, then body modification for punishment is easy to understand through this same lens, because they provide physical evidence of an individual's misbehaviors. Rush (2005) cited practices that involve torture or dismemberment which serve to remind the perpetrator/victim of a previous action deemed negative by the predominant culture. Even self-mutilation functions this way. For example, Mayan priests self-inflicted blood-producing wounds for sacrificial rights. This practice was so prevalent and recognizable that Rush (2005) recounted the tale of an individual traveling to Mexico City who stated they knew who the priests of the city were just by seeing their bodies covered in scars (p. 40).

Methods of administration. While tattoos have been around in one form or another since the time of Ötzi, roughly 4th century BCE. Not much is known about tattoos and their administration from this time. Rush (2005) hypothesized the use a sharp utensil to administer tattoos, such as fish bones sharpened and fastened to a wooden handle used to administer pigment into the skin. Later tattoo tools were made from whatever sharp object was available, such as “thorns, picks made of bone or antler, and small flint knives” (Rush, 2005, p. 81). These

tools would be carefully stabbed into the skin (so as to avoid the fat and muscle beneath) to create dozens to hundreds of small punctures. Pigment, historically consisting of charcoal or indigo, would then be smeared into the wounds. Garnett (2010) identified that the word tattoo comes from the Tahitian word *tatau*, which means to inflict wounds.

Rush (2005) described the following history of pigments used for tattoos. In early tattoos pigments mostly consisted of black, dark blue, or dark green; these colors were found most easily in nature. The black pigments made from various sources would age to a dark green-blue color once under the skin for a long period of time. Later in history, the pigment would often be applied to the actual tool used to puncture the skin, similar to modern tattoo equipment. This process ensured the entering of the pigment more directly into the wound, allowing for as much absorption of pigments as possible.

As described by Rush (2005) in the information provided below, the method of tattoo administration becomes an important differentiator of body modifications. The puncture method, for example, becomes the basis for introducing inks and pigments to the skin; this method results in visible pigment beneath healed skin. In Southeast Asia and in Polynesia shark teeth attached to a wooden club were hammered into the skin repeatedly. Because the serrated edges of the shark teeth are angled to produce numerous puncture wounds, this practice allowed for shading of designs. The slicing method results in a different effect, similar to a raised scar. In this method, a sharp tool is used to make small incisions, as opposed to punctures, in the skin, where pigment is introduced beneath the “flaps” (Rush, 2005, p. 86). The slicing method triggers a healing process in the skin which results in a raised scar, called a keloid scar. This method was more popular on the African continent and resulted in the creation of the practice now known as scarification. Scarification involves using the body’s natural healing process to create scars in specific and

intricate patterns and is sometimes done without pigmentation being added. In Polynesia, the hammering method has long been used to speed up the tattooing process (Rush, 2005), specifically because the cultural tattoos of the Maori cover large areas of the body. Designs created by assembling lines and shapes in concentric patterns along the body, which Garnett (2010) called *Moko*, required a faster process so that these large tattoos could be completed much quicker.

Modern tattoo equipment, although using a similar method as the puncture method of olden days, has evolved tremendously. This evolution was described by Rush (2005), as follows. The first electric tattoo machine was created by Samuel O'Reilly in 1891 and its design is still used today (p. 127). The mechanism works as a single unit, where a needle is fed ink by periodically dipping the tip into a well of color, similar to writing with a quill. The needle is mechanically retracted and sprung forward hundreds of times a minute. This action simultaneously creates puncture marks and disperses ink into the marks all at once. Several types of needles can be used with this method, from single needles for doing thin lines, to groups of needles meant to help cover wide areas with swaths of color or for shading, similar to the Polynesian method of tattooing using serrated teeth.

Uses of Tattoos

Tattoos have served various functions throughout history. Their ability to affect the body through their intentional placement and application has been studied in relation to many theories, from physical beneficence to spiritual enlightenment or protection, and everything in between. While many theories and practices surrounding tattoos contribute to just as many different ways of viewing their uses, it is possible that all hold some semblance of accuracy.

Medicinal. As described prior, Otzi's tattoos were used for what was believed to be a physically medicinal reason, providing relief to key points similar to acupuncture practices in eastern medicine (Rush, 2005). The thought behind these practices is that the inflammation that occurs after the administration of a tattoo can trigger the bodies healing processes in that specific region of the body, thus healing an underlying issue that may have been in the region as well. Interestingly, Otzi's tattoos align with roughly 80% of the acupuncture points used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, meaning his tattoos were likely used to help manage pain and discomfort associated with the disease (Krutak, 2012). Otzi is also not the only mummy to show this type of tattooing. Researchers have found multiple mummies over the years who show signs of tattoos correlating with positions on the body that might indicate their use as a remedy of sorts; however, many of these correlations are hypothetical and almost impossible to confirm (Krutak, 2012).

Spirituality and religion. As time went on, tattooing became associated with spiritual practices and began to be used as communal and personal symbols. Mummified remains in Egypt dated to around 2004 BC show evidence of ritualistic marking of lines and dots on the body as symbols of servitude toward Hathor, the goddess of beauty and sexuality (Friedman, in Krutak & Deter-Wolf, 2017). These uses are mirrored in modern tattoos. For example, Islamic women have tattooed dots to help ward off evil spirits (Rush, 2005). Maori tattoos hold spiritual power in their culture. The Maori of New Zealand used tattoos under "strict social rules to protect the individual from spiritual harm and was accompanied by *karakia* [or prayers]" (Furey, in Krutak & Deter-Wolf, 2017, p. 181).

Ornamental. It is widely thought that pacific island tattooing practices led to the modernized tattoo (Rush, 2005). When white seafarers such as naval forces and explorers visited

these islands and saw the tattoos of Micronesian and Polynesian individuals in the 1700's, they admired the practice so much that they bartered or took by force the tools and practices to create tattoos (Atkinson, 2003). When these colonizers began practicing these methods on themselves, they started by tattooing symbols which were universally appreciated and identifiable in their social circles, such as anchors or nude women. This appropriation is considered the turning point of when tattoos transitioned from spiritual protection to purely ornamental purposes (Atkinson, 2003).

Cultural significance. The use of culturally specific designs is well documented. These tattoos were seen by sailors who traveled the region and obtained these tattoos, which were later brought to the mainland and seen as exotic. Their acquisition was so popular that European soldiers would decapitate Maori people to bring their facial tattoos back to the west as a souvenir (Atkinson, 2003). These types of interactions provide an example of the way culture interacts with tattoo content. Prior to western militaries making contact with the Maori, these tattoos were worn for spiritual protection. Atkinson (2003) claimed that after the advent of the decapitation practices by foreigners, the Maori began to neglect and even entirely stop their facial tattoo practices to avoid being hunted.

Another example of cultural significance is the use of coming-of-age tattoos present throughout various cultures. The example of the slicing method discussed prior is a way to identify ancestral origins; certain patterns of slices indicate belonging to certain tribes on the African continent (Rush, 2005). These tattoos are given to individuals at the determination of their rise from child to adult, as a sign of their growth. These initiations can frequently involve tattooing as a signature of the community's approval for this rite of passage. Rush (2005) also hypothesized that these rites-of-passage are just as much about symbolism of the community

coming together to acknowledge the difficulty and pain of the tattooing process, and the sense of accomplishment the individual receiving the tattoo feels afterward, as it is about the actual content of the tattoo.

Self-identity. Tattoos play an important part of self-identity in many cultures, but some cultures have developed their own mythology around the use of tattoos in modern times. Tattoos themselves have seen a culture develop surrounding them; people with tattoos are seen as more immature and less able to be skilled (Atkinson, 2003; Rush, 2005). In the modern era, tattoos deliver a variety of messages to both their wearer and the people who see them and these messages are mixed; both people who have tattoos and people who don't may hold both positive and negative opinions about tattoos. However, the positive effects of tattoos on self-identity are not to be ignored. Tattoos are capable of promoting positive self-regard and an increase in the self-esteem of people who have them (Roggenkamp, 2017). If viewed as a tool for increasing positive attributes within the self, it is possible that tattoos may be able to be utilized as a form for a person to increase their positive self-image, or to solidify the positive self-image that is already present.

Therapeutic Applications of Tattoos

The therapeutic uses of tattoos include both physical and psychological applications. Though much research still remains to be done in both categories, it is worth noting that there is multivariate research that shows how tattoos may be used to benefit those who have them. In the physical category, research is geared towards showing correlation between physical health and the ownership of tattoos. In the mental health field, research generally aims to look at the relationships between people and their own tattoos, as well as the relationships between people with tattoos and their place in the differing societies of the world. Examining both allows for a

comprehensive understanding of what ways tattoos may provide some tangible benefit to the world.

Physical. Otzi is not the only person to ever be tattooed for medical assistance. As time goes on, more research is being conducted on the physical benefits of tattoos and the processes involving them. Lynn, Dominguez, and Decaro (2016) found that the body is physically impacted in positive ways by the tattooing process. According to them, the body undergoes a shock reaction after receiving a tattoo that involves a release of a chemical called Secretary Immunoglobulin A (shortened to SIgA). This chemical is responsible for helping to motivate the immune system to jump into action, which in turn jumpstarts the body's healing process. As a result of their study, Lynn, Dominguez and Decaro found that people who receive multiple tattoos exhibit the ability to heal faster over time, and this healing process begins sooner (2016). In essence, more tattoos could mean more biological stability and immune response.

There is also mounting evidence on the risks of tattoos as well. While the United States Food and Drug Association does not actively monitor the contents of tattoo inks, research by Kluger and Koljonen (2012) indicated that there is a slight connection between tattoos and cancer. Their research showed that skin cancers such as carcinoma and melanoma are correlated with tattoos. However, the mechanism behind the development of cancer is complex; many factors including genetics, the individuals' body's natural response to trauma, and environmental factors. A new hypothesis in this study presented the idea that tattoos can alter the way skin absorbs UV rays, which may connect tattoos to increased skin cancer rates by increasing the amount of UV absorption; UV rays are a known factor of the development of skin cancer (Kluger & Koljonen, 2016). However, more research is needed. Kluger (2016) found that tattoos are capable of damaging the epidermis in multiple and varying degrees of severity. After

examining data from various sources, Kluger (2016) reported that in the practices of artists who do not follow proper sanitization procedures, tattoos can be connected to asepsis, edema, swollen lymph nodes, minimal or severe infections, and viral infections such as hepatitis C or HIV.

The likelihood of these complications can be further increased by the composition of the ink used in the tattoo. Laux et al. (2016) found that certain chemicals and ingredients used in inks can instigate a negative reaction in the body. For example, the researchers found that the color red is one of the most widely used colors in tattoos, but has a record of causing allergic reactions. Previously, the issues with red ink were due to its inclusion of cinnabar, a metallic mineral whose chemical makeup included mercury (Laux et al., 2016), which was removed based on this finding. However, Laux et al. (2016) and the other researchers found that red ink continues to test positive for allergic reactions in individuals, although the exact allergen is unknown; the reaction is hypothesized to be formed within the ink after its placement in the skin (p. 397). Inks themselves have also been found to occasionally be contaminated by bacteria, which increases risk of infection in the final tattoo (Laux et al., 2016; Kluger, 2016).

These risks are important to note because of their relationship to cost-benefit analysis of getting a tattoo. Lynn, Dominguez, & Decaro (2016) found that the benefit of having a tattoo as a form of communication to others may be worth the negative effects involved in the process and product.

Tattooing is not merely decorative; it is communicative, painful, and dangerous. Costly signaling is one of the most salient themes found in studies of body ornamentation.

Signaling refers to communication between individuals whose interests may be in conflict, such as between potential mates or predator and prey. Costly signaling occurs when the production of signaling entails some handicap to the signaler. (p. 603)

An example of costly signaling in the natural world is fireflies. The flashing of their tails encourages mates to seek them out, but it also makes it easier for predators such as birds and bats to find them; thus their mechanism of attracting a mate also becomes a handicap (Sorenson, 2020). By deciding to place an image on the skin, people who receive tattoos are participating in the creation of a costly signal. Despite knowing the possible physical effects and sociological consequences of permanently marking their skin, individuals are proclaiming their passion about certain ideas or imagery. A person receiving a tattoo determines what imagery and meaning is worth the costs. In a sense, tattoos are for humans what the flash of light is to a firefly.

Psychological. Current ideas on tattoos as psychotherapeutic tools is promising. Doss & Hubbard (2009) found that tattoos are quickly becoming a vital source of information about people in the modern age.

Modern tattoos may be of particular interest to communication scholars because, according to researchers who completed interviews with tattooed people, the decision to tattoo is typically premeditated and deliberate. People are *choosing* to tattoo themselves. They pay tattoo artists, who use tattoo machines, to create a design that meets particular specifications. This alteration of an individual's physical appearance has implications for impression management. People who obtain tattoos may be using those tattoos to help them convey a specific image to others, especially when others can see the tattoo. (p. 63)

This communicative value aligns with the therapeutic idea that understanding core ideas or thoughts about a person can enhance the therapeutic relationship. Atkinson (2003) calls the body as a means of expression panopticism, coming from the Greek roots for all (pan) and opt (seeing), which is the idea that our bodies are constantly seen as a method of communication—through body language, shape, and even action. This could be seen as using the body as a

billboard, covering it in images that a person deems important and controlling or directing the message shown to others.

In clinical practice, tattoos can be a form of obtaining information about clients during the screening process, or even throughout their treatment (Roggenkamp, Nicholls, & Pierre, 2017). The literature on tattoos presents a few ways that tattoos can be used as a source of information. Firstly, they may be viewed psychoanalytically, as a way of expressing an unconscious need to be seen or noticed and as a form of rebellion from the norm (although the researchers warn that these views tend to be based on older studies that have different understandings from their modern uses) (Roggenkamp, Nicholls, & Pierre, 2017). Alternatively, tattoos can be understood through the lens of self-expression (Atkinson, 2003; Roggenkamp et al., 2017). Roggenkamp et al. (2017) found that the most cited reason for obtaining tattoos was for “creating and maintaining a distinct self-identity by controlling one’s appearance;” other reasons include decoration of the body, the metaphorical badge that signifies pain tolerance, affiliation with spirituality, or for no reason other than impulsivity (p. 151). Tattoos have also been found to have an impact on individuals’ self-esteem, with some individuals reporting that their tattoos made them feel like they had higher sex appeal and attractiveness (Roggenkamp et al., 2017). This idea was also cited by Swami (2011) who found that individuals can use tattoos to improve their sense of self-esteem related to a specific body part or about themselves in general.

Biases Surrounding Tattoos

Tattoos as an art form are well known throughout the world and relate to both cultural norms as well as personal norms among individuals (Atkinson, 2003; Rush, 2005). However, public opinion of tattoos varies widely based on geographical location, age group, ethnicity,

socioeconomic status, and gender (Zestcott, Tompkins, Williams, Livesay, & Chan, 2018). Some people may consciously validate tattoos, but harbor negative feelings or opinions of the people who have them without consciously knowing it (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Resenhoft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008; Zestcott, Tompkins, Williams, Livesay, & Chan, 2018; Ellis, 2014). According to Broussard and Harton (2018) approximately 21%-29% of people in the general population have a tattoo; this number spikes to 47% when only measuring those in the millennial age group (2018). They also highlight the fact that tattoos are chosen and self-imposed can lead more readily to negative stereotypes.

Content. The specific content of tattoos may have led to negative stereotypes about the people who have them. Resenhoft, Villa, and Wiseman (2008) biased tested tattoo content by showing participants models whose bodies were superimposed with either dolphin tattoos or dragon tattoos; models who had the dragon tattoos were seen as less caring and attractive than the models with dolphin tattoos (2008). From a list of 13 perceived traits, dolphin models were rated lower on two of the thirteen traits; those same models when superimposed with a dragon tattoo were rated lower on five of the thirteen traits. A study by Zeiler and Kasten (2016) showed a correlation between the content of tattoos and likelihood of criminality. Those with peaceful tattoos were shown to have a similar likelihood as non-tattooed individuals for criminal behavior, but those with aggressive tattoos (such as skulls, swords, and bombs) had a higher likelihood for criminal behavior (Zeiler & Kasten, 2016). Although the relationship was correlational, Zeiler and Kasten (2016) hypothesized that a cycle of negative bias exists related to people's perceptions about tattoos, their treatment of people with tattoos, and the behavior of people with tattoos related to the treatment they receive.

Visibility. The visibility of tattoos may be perceived as indicating just as much about a person as the content of a tattoo. Zeiler and Kasten's (2016) found that there was no difference in the criminal likelihood of those whose tattoos were visible versus invisible (defined as being placed in areas of the body easily covered with a t-shirt and full-length pants). However, concern about such prejudice related to the visibility of tattoos continues to be a concern for individuals with tattoos. Timming (2014) noted that those with tattoos feel less able to get jobs if their tattoos are visible, which was proven an accurate perception through interviews of hiring managers. This may be related to the negative biases against individuals with tattoos, or may be a bias against the placement of the tattoo itself. Implicit attitudes and explicit attitudes may also differ in relation to location. For example, someone with positive opinion of tattoos may still be capable of having negative opinion of a neck tattoo, and those with tattoos may even harbor these same opinions (Timming, 2015; Zestcott et al., 2017).

Signifier of ability/qualifications. Though it is unclear exactly where the belief stems from, tattoos have been shown to have an impact on people's opinion of the capabilities of those who have them. Resenhoeft, Villa, and Wiseman (2008) found that women with tattoos were perceived to be less intelligent than those without tattoos. However, the same study showed that these women were perceived as more creative than those without (Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). These findings may mean that the perceptions of intelligence may have different qualifiers, i.e., scientific intelligence being different or more valuable than creative intelligence. Gender-based bias between men and women was found by Westerfield, Stafford, Speroni, and Daniel (2012); in their study, female hospital care workers with tattoos were perceived as less professional than their male counterparts. However, another study found that men with tattoos received more negative bias than women with tattoos (Broussard & Harton,

2018). Similarly, consumer perceptions may provide reasons for business owners to not hire or to more readily fire individuals with tattoos, which in turn may further the perception that individuals with tattoos are incapable of doing certain jobs or tasks (Timming, 2015). Ellis (2014) stated, “tattoos certainly don’t capture the knowledge, skills, and abilities that individuals bring to the job” (p. 102). Even so, hiring managers may feel comfortable making judgments because tattoos are a chosen, reasoning the individuals selected to get tattoos and knew the possible consequences when getting them (Ellis, 2014; Resenhoft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008).

Social worth. The literature on perceived social worth related to having a tattoo is mixed. Some literature supports the view that having a tattoo lowers an individual’s social worth (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Ellis, 2014; Resenhoft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008; Roggenkamp, Nicholls, & Pierre, 2017; Zestcott et al., 2018). However, other literature cites that those with tattoos can be seen as more expressive than the average person (Zestcott et al., 2017) and more independent (Broussard & Harton, 2018). Younger individuals tend to approve of tattoos more than older individuals (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Resenhoft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). While familiarity of the content of tattoos may lead to increased acceptance, though this finding is inconsistent with the view that tattoo reflect social benefits such as creativity and expression (Broussard & Harton, 2018).

Group associations and stereotypes. Biases about tattoos may stem from early days in western culture, where they were known for being used by sailors, performers, or circus freaks. These groups already were perceived as having decreased social worth. As evidenced by Atkinson (2003) in *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*, this thinking is exacerbated by the people studying them:

Tattooing has neither a long nor a storied past as a subject of sociological investigation, despite the fact that it has been practiced in North America for generations. Yet predominant in social, historical, and cultural accounts of tattooing is an association between the practice and social deviance. A cultural stereotype has long held that tattoos are marks of shame worn only by outlaws, misfits, or those fallen from social grace. According to historically dominant perceptions of the practice, willfully marking the body with tattoos is the embodiment of a person's inability to conform with existing social norms, values, and beliefs. ... Thus, the limited sociological analyses of tattooing have viewed the practice from a narrow viewpoint. (p. 23)

Interactions amongst social groups have contributed to the negative associations with tattoos. The early stories of sailors from the 1800's receiving the practice of tattooing from "savages" on island excursions is an early source of these ideas; those with tattoos were seen to have pulled from a primitive culture for their ornamental skin art (Atkinson, 2003). Another example is militia who would receive tattoo imagery known to have symbolic relevance to the infantry culture of the times, such as tattoos of scantily clad women (Atkinson, 2003), and those images being admired and then used by other social groups.

Symbolism

Symbols and their usage. The word symbol has a broad definition but is precise in its requirements: "something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance" (Merriam-Webster, 2019). In short, symbols are representational, meaning they represent some other object, experience, or idea.

Factors that go into symbols span just as broad of a range as the word's definition. Many symbols have developed due to their cultural surroundings. Symbols can also be created from

key aspects of an idea or situation. The cross shape, for example, is a well-known symbol of the Christian religion and was developed from the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The American flag uses symbolism in its numbering of 13 stripes to represent the 13 original colonies and 50 stars to represent the current states.

The development of symbols is something mankind does both consciously and unconsciously. Todorov (1985) discussed how humans have been doing this for thousands of years and differentiates between verbal and nonverbal symbols. Verbal symbols are those which are present in language, or written word, while nonverbal symbolism is that which is present in imagery (Todorov, 1985). The most important part of symbolism, according to Todorov, is its interpretation. The ability of humans to understand the representation within something symbolic is necessary both for the survival of the symbol, and for the ability to communicate the meaning of the symbol from one person to another.

Symbolism in tattoos. Tattoos, being an art form, are also representational in that they are a recreated image of an object, experience, or idea. They can also be viewed as a form of both intra- and interpersonal communication. If humans have been using writing to communicate for as long as tattoos have been around, it would make sense that symbolism in tattoos has developed as a form of communication as well. By creating images on the skin that remind an individual on a recurring basis of something they deem important, they person is also incorporating these symbols into their representation of their self. Rush (2005) surmised that symbolism is an inherent trait of tattoos, directly linked to self-definition and the communication of self to others:

Throughout this work I have suggested general symbolic values attached to body modification, for example, rite of passage or transitions. That is to say, they stand for

something beyond themselves. When you watch the commercial for the new car on television, the ad is not the car. The ad is a composite of ideas about movement, from place to place, family, status, sex, and so on. A tattoo is not strictly itself, the ink under the skin. The tattoo (piercing, scar, implant, etc.) is a door that opens to a wonderland of ideas and memories, regrets and successes, and all the fear, hate, guilt, sin, love, sensitivity contained within. A tattoo is more you and is more *you* than perhaps anything else. Why? Because you put it there; it never existed before and it is an expression of you. A tattoo, as a statement about one's self, is not a singular symbol with a narrow frame of reference. (pp. 200-201, original emphasis)

By examining the symbolism present in tattoos, it is possible to learn more about the individual wearing the tattoo, as well as the environment surrounding the individual in the past or present. Sometimes the content of the tattoo is determined by the individual, but sometimes the content is determined by the culture in which the individual resides. Therefore, a tattoo can be a result of the interplay of both the individual and the culture. For example, one family used a Celtic knot (an intertwining system of loops) tattoo to symbolize their unity as a family (A. Mower, personal communication, November 2019). One member of the family got a Celtic knot tattoo and over the course of a few years each family member got a variation of the knot tattooed on them. For this family, the symbolism of the Celtic knot and its interconnectivity reminded each individual of the collective family unit. This is an example of how an individual can select an image, and other individuals receive enough meaning from the symbol that they elect to incorporate it into their family culture, or even onto their bodies.

Another example of how symbolism can be impacted by the intersection of the individual and culture can be seen in the following case study. Rush (2005) interviewed a tattoo artist who shared one story as an example of this interplay. The story is paraphrased as follows:

The client began by telling her about his first tattoo. It came about as a disagreement with his parents, who were described as being strict and devotedly Catholic. At 17 he had attempted to get a tattoo and his parents had found out, which made them furious. They forbid him to get the tattoo and he felt that his maturity and self-efficacy were being insulted. As a result, on his eighteenth birthday he went to a tattoo shop and got a tattoo with content he did not necessarily like, but that satisfied his desire for receiving a tattoo. After receiving this tattoo, the individual was kicked out of his home. Thus, this tattoo served as a rite of passage for claiming his individuality. Upon further inquiry, the tattoo artist discovered that most of the client's tattoos were the result of an emotional reaction to a life event. Each tattooing served as a reactionary catalyst for the client to create a change within himself. Each symbol the client selected mirrored his mindset at the time. The tattoo artist reflected this observation to the client. He had not seen that pattern until it was pointed out to him.

Tattoos and Art therapy

As a field centered around communication, it is important for therapists to be able to understand and communicate with their clients in a variety of ways. As seen in the examples above, tattoos are capable of providing information both with or without verbal associations. Exploring the meaning behind a client's tattoos is a worthwhile task for any therapist to take on with their client; however, because of their training, art therapists are more attuned with the vocabulary of symbolism and therefore can make better observations and assessments while helping clients. A client's tattoos can function as a story they have created about themselves over

the course of their life; therefore, tattoos can be used as a jumping-off point for exploring a client's interior world. For some clients, it can be easier to talk about an exterior object than an interior thought or feeling.

There has been almost no literature to support a connection between art therapy and tattoos until a recent study by Alter-Muri (2019). Her research provided insight into the reasons why people get tattoos, their benefits, and how they can be used within the context of art therapy. She found that of the college students in her study who had tattoos, 52% stated that their first tattoo memorialized something or someone, and 48% reported that their first tattoo was a means of self-expression. Others reported reasons for getting a first tattoo related to group connection (12%) and feeling control of one's own body (11%). These motivations align with therapeutic effects of participating in mental health services, such as increasing self-efficacy, developing and solidifying identity, increasing positive regard, and helping to develop existential meaning in our lives (Alter-Muri, 2019); in fact, 79% of the students said their tattoos were empowering, and 45% reported their tattoos were healing in some manner.

Related to these findings, some art therapists have taken to helping individuals develop tattoos to enact change in themselves and build a sense of empowerment (Alter-Muri, 2019). For example, when working with adolescents, the idea of creating an image to be placed on the skin (even impermanently) can cause a connection to be made between self-expression and identity (Alter-Muri, 2019). Art therapists are also able to utilize their knowledge of symbols to help clients reclaim negative associations they may have with certain tattoos by developing new meanings, or create new tattoo symbols that relate to a more developed view of the self (Alter-Muri, 2019). By helping clients to explore the meaning and symbolism behind their existing

tattoos, art therapists can help explore the meaningful moments in client's lives and create new meanings for the future.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic research is a type of phenomenological research which is centered around the researcher using their own experiences as a source of information, rather than separating them from the data as is customary in many other types of research (Kapitan, 2018). Moustakas (1992) defined the heuristic process as such:

Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance. (p. 15)

In the first stages of heuristic inquiry, the researcher is called out to explore a topic by something they find interesting or worth investigating in a process called *initial engagement* (Kapitan, 2018). This topic may speak to the researcher on a personal level, and motivate the researcher to participate in activities that relate to the topic or talk with individuals that are involved with the topic. By putting themselves in contact with the topic on a more regular basis, the researcher begins to understand what interests them about the topic.

The second stage of heuristic inquiry is called *immersion*, and involves the researcher gaining a deeper understanding of the topic (Kapitan, 2018; Moustakas, 1992). This stage typically involves a process called indwelling, where the researcher begins to examine their inner workings to gain a better comprehension of the topic and why they are drawn to it (Kapitan, 2018, p. 194). This type of constant living-in-the-topic approach leads the researcher to naturally

want to intake multiple types of information that apply to the research question, so that they can work from a masterful point of view on the topic (Kapitan, 2018; Moustakas, 1992).

Stage three of heuristic inquiry, titled *incubation*, involves the researcher taking a break from the research (Kapitan, 2018; Moustakas, 1992). The idea of this break is that the researcher will achieve a spontaneous illumination about the topic when distancing themselves from the topic at hand. *Illumination* is the fourth stage in heuristic research and is multivariate in its factors, but should ideally lead the researcher to an understanding about the topic that they had not gained from all their prior studies. In addition to this, the researcher's understanding of previous information is altered to make areas that are incomplete or distorted seen as needing clarification (Kapitan, 2018).

After the illumination stage is the *explication* stage, where the researcher begins to put into words their newfound understanding, so that it can be communicated with others (Kapitan, 2018, p. 194). Moustakas (1992) explained this stage as being the biggest period of internal reflection for the researcher, because they must organize and use their experiences to process this newfound illumination:

The heuristic researcher utilizes focusing, in-dwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure, and recognizes that meanings are unique and distinctive to an experience and depend upon internal frames of reference. The entire process requires that researchers attend to their own awareness, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgements as a prelude to the understanding that is derived from conversations and dialogues with others. (p. 31)

This type of processing creates a personalized understanding of the topic that provides a deep sense of knowing and allows the researcher to notice new things about their topic that would

have previously been unachievable without the intense processing that has occurred within the researcher.

The final phase of heuristic inquiry is the *creative synthesis* stage, which Kapitan said is a “sense of having mastered the matters that illuminated the question” (2018, p.194). The researcher naturally begins to experience a sense of wanting to create and contribute to the field involved in their topic, to enhance the understanding of the topic. This phase is associated with the researcher tying all the ideas, themes, and understandings of their research into a single entity. Moustakas defines this entity as “usually [taking] the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or some other creative form” (1992, p. 32). As an art therapist, this creative expression being a result of the research makes heuristic inquiry a highly desirable form of data expression.

Method

In completing my methodology, the following were my steps in going through the heuristic process:

Initial engagement. My initial engagement consisted of discovering my passion for tattooing and the meaning people assign to the practice.

Immersion. The immersion consists of two phases: my literature review, as well as a four-week journaling process in January and February, 2020. These two processes allowed for different types of immersion which contributed to my incubation and illumination phase.

Incubation. Incubation was the window of two weeks following the completion of the journal. During this time, I looked through the journal periodically to explore the journal and “feel through” the images, which was a process of attempting to identify what feelings and emotional ties arose.

Illumination. The illumination phase occurred following the discovery of one of these themes in particular, and being able to identify why and how it resonated with me.

Explication. The explication of my illumination phase developed as the description and synthesis of these themes, which was necessary to share them with others.

Creative synthesis. The summarizing creative synthesis was the designing of a tattoo that took form as a result of describing these themes and symbols.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Presentation of Results

The purpose of my research was to discover, through my own heuristic inquiry, how tattoos and their meanings are developed by individuals, and my hypothesis was that people include a variety of factors in the development of tattoo imagery, including personal associations, cultural norms, societal opinions, and emotional meaning. The results of this study indicate that this hypothesis is partially true, as evidenced by my personal experiences as a researcher and their relation to the literature. This chapter will present my results for the following stages of my heuristic inquiry: *initial engagement*, *immersion* (symbolic noticing journals), *incubation*, *illumination*, *explication*, and *creative synthesis*.

Initial Engagement

My initial engagement phase was the driving force behind my interest in the topic of tattoos and exploring the motivations of people who have them. This period consisted of all the time before beginning this project. This stage occurred during the receiving of my first tattoos, as well as when I first moved to Indianapolis. This is when I first understood that not only did I have personal stories behind my tattoos, but so did most people. As I began to ask others about these personal stories, I began to realize it would lead to me learning more about the person themselves. Before long, I caught myself paying more attention to the tattoos of others, and growing angry upon hearing about anti-tattoo regulations in workplaces, which kept the people I talked with from being able to show these expressive images to others. I began studying more about tattoos to find a reason why workplaces may enforce these rules. This phase helped me to identify what subtopics of tattoo culture were important to me, or needed more of my attention.

Immersion Phase 1: Literature Review

In many ways, this project is my form of the immersion phase. My literature review, included above, was my beginning formal exploration of the topics relevant to learning about tattoos, their development, and how they exist as a modern artform. The literature provided me with a foundation for exploring personal views on the subject.

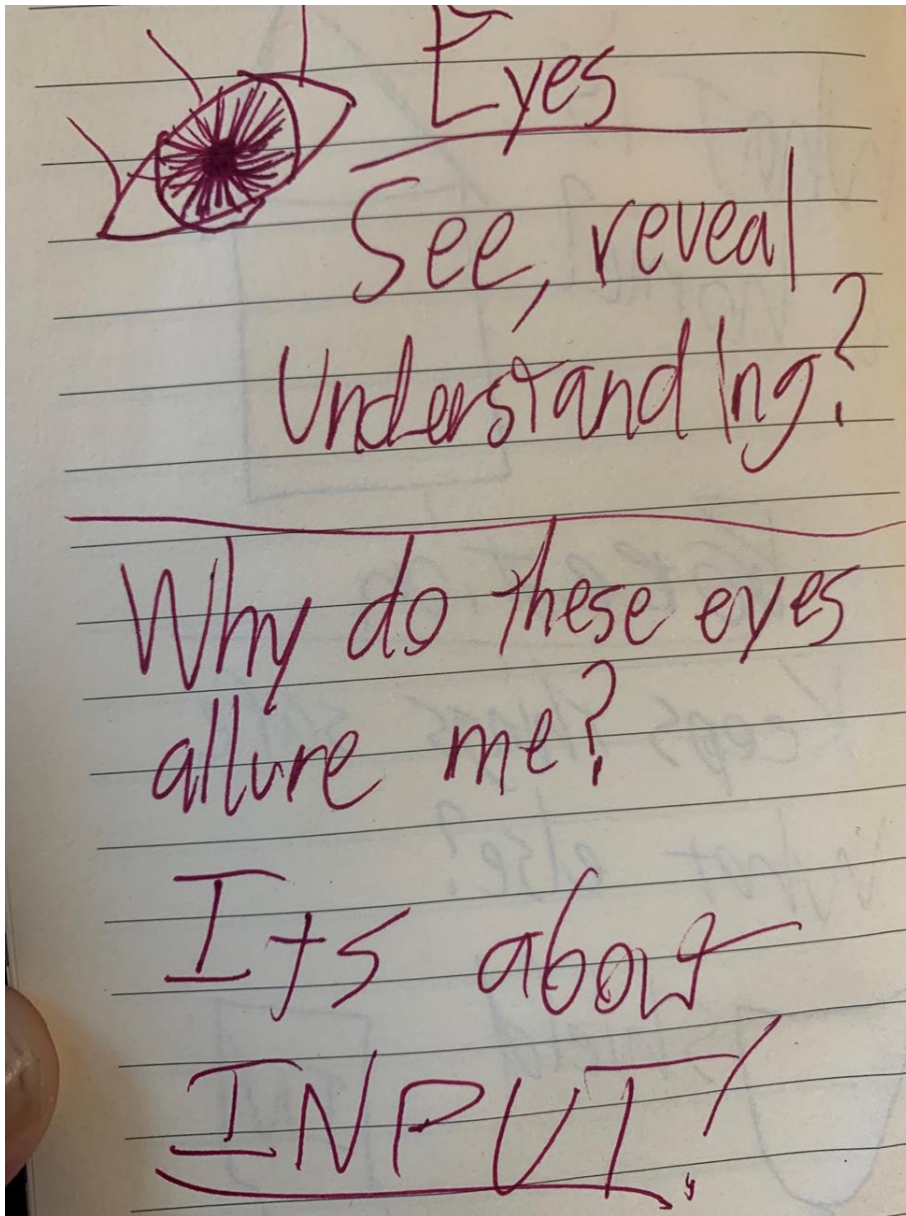
Immersion Phase 2: Symbolic Noticing Journal

My journaling process involved setting a limited time period and simply “noticing” the symbols in the world around me, while simultaneously recording them in a visual and written journal. The four-week long process occurred during my return from winter break and consisted of spending time looking in the world for symbols and documenting them, which allowed for me to notice more about my personal processes for forming symbols. Early pages of my journal simply contained single words or pictures with questions such as “why does this interest me?”, to which I would later write in an explanation as I continued to think about the subject. Most of these observations had to do with known symbolic associations with the images I depicted. Often, these symbols started when I would see something in the physical world that reminded me of them. As the process continued, I learned that noticing is a learnable process.

Weeks One and Two. The first week of my experiences with recording noticed symbols in the journal was difficult and slightly odd, because it was hard to identify what things I should take notice of. As I began to participate in the practice more, the process became easier over time and the “noticing” began to occur naturally.

Figure 1

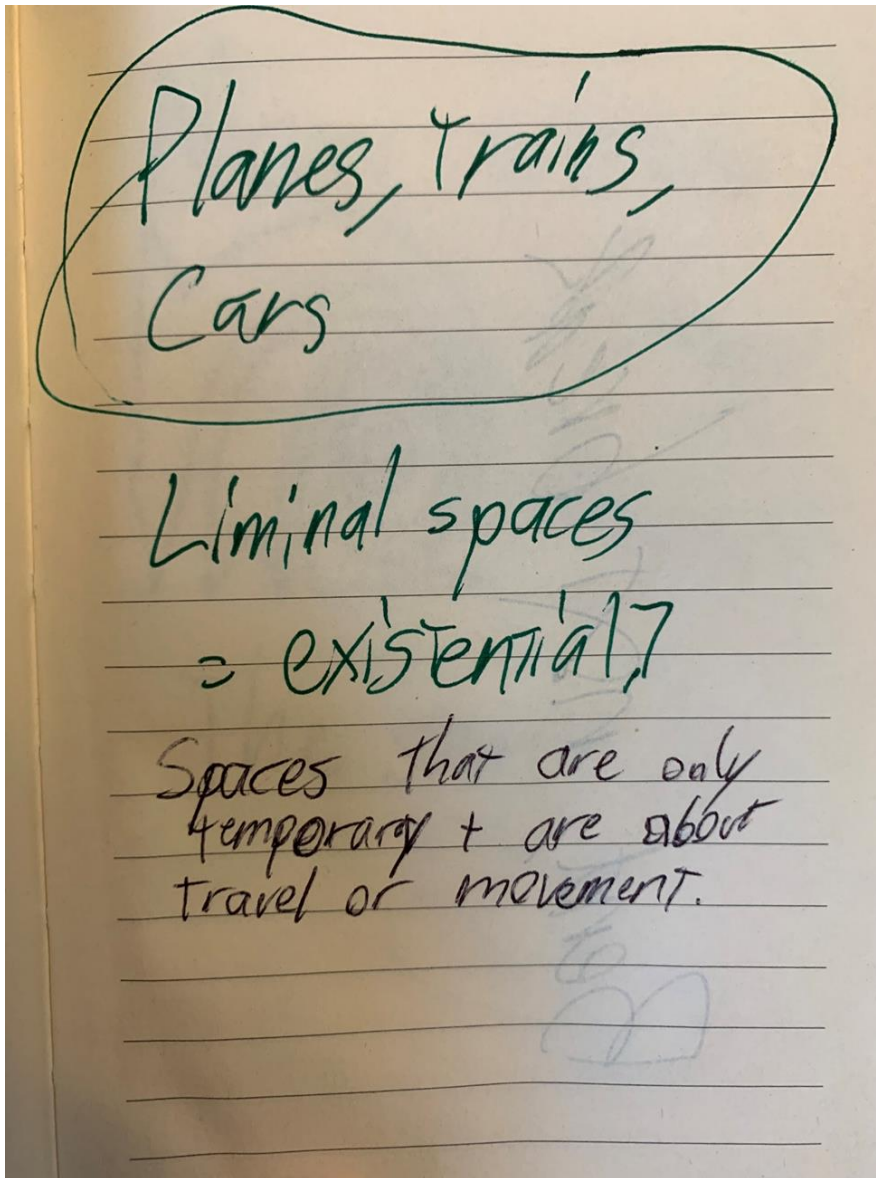
Journal Entry on Eyes



An image of an eye led me to create a list of words and phrases that I associated with eyes, such as input, absorption, or taking something in.

Figure 2

Journal Entry on Liminal Spaces

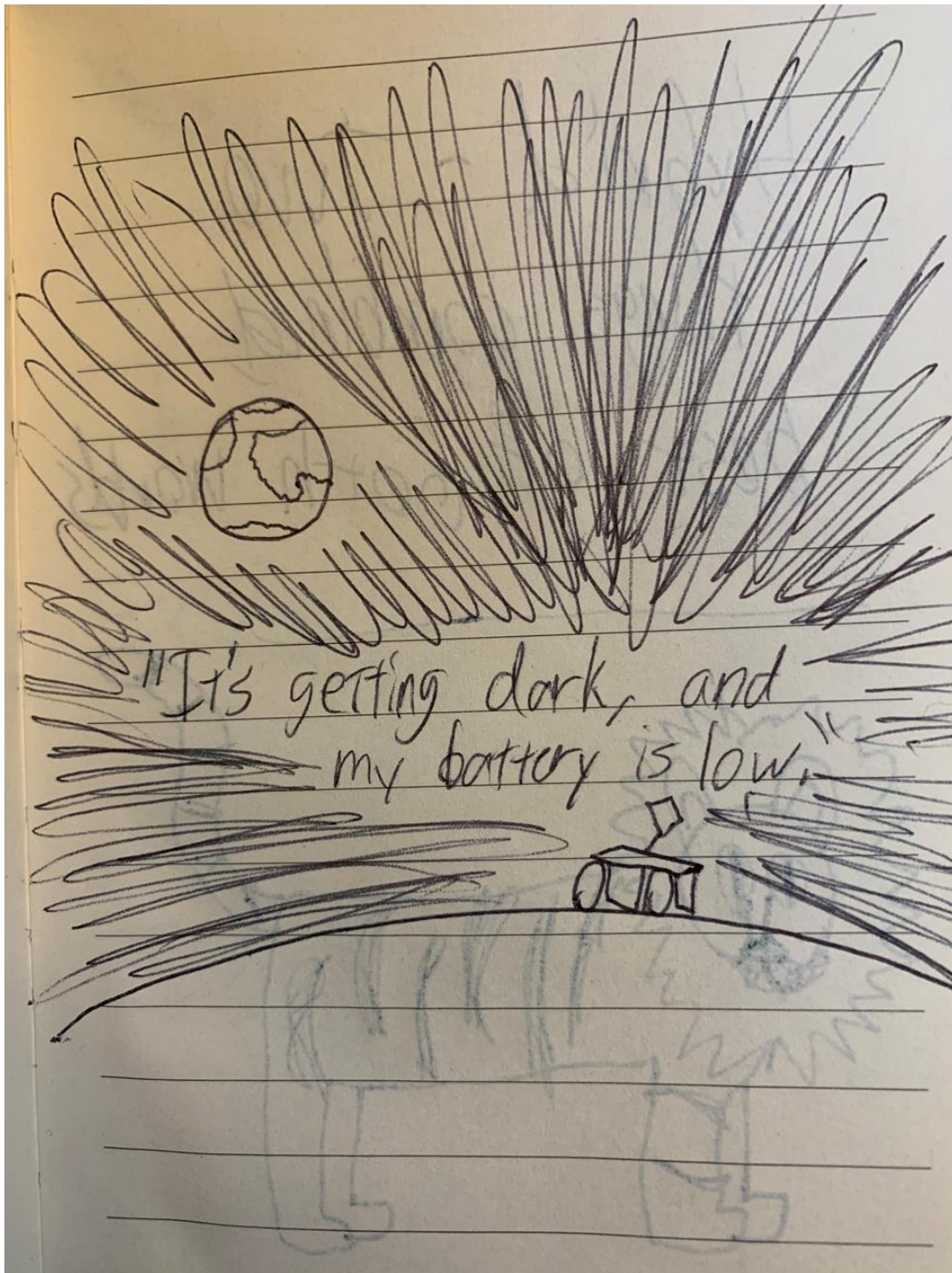


An image of a magnifying glass on a billboard resulted in me pulling my vehicle over to document the moment before I could forget. From this, I explored the concepts of exploration and discovery, which later led me to think of transportation methods, and finally led me to speaking on the enchantment I associate with liminal spaces, like airports or train stations. (Fig. 2)

Week Three. This experience was a notable transition in the way I noticed and processed symbols. From this entry on, I observed that my journal entries became broader in their scope or held simple ideas. It seemed that every hour or two, I was jotting something in my journal. This constant noticing also resulted in some entries consisting of one- or two-word thoughts; in a sense, my journal became a record of more than just symbols I noticed, but thoughts and feelings too. Eventually, I also began to think of more abstract ideas as symbols, such as metaphors. Occasional stories or euphemisms would also catch my eye, which I would record in the journal as words or images. The longer I participated in this “symbolic noticing,” the more I was open to the sources of these symbols, and was able to more readily spot them. A notable entry that occurred during this time was a story I read about the Mars’ Rover’s final transmission to NASA (Fig. 3), which resonated with me enough to inspire me to draw an image of the transmission in my journal.

Figure 3

Journal Entry on the Mars Rover



Week Four. Notably, the fourth and final week of entering things in the journal was the most difficult, because by this point I had seemingly exhausted all of my thoughts on the symbols that presented themselves most readily in the beginning and new symbols were not as easily found. This time was usually spent examining prior symbols for derivative symbols, similar to the above example of the magnifying glass leading to liminal spaces. This period also led to things in the journal that can loosely be defined as poetry or prose-like entries, such as a poem about connection: “Connection, all we long for is connections. Wifi. Tape. Rope. Romance. Love. We crave the things that keep us close to something.” At this point, my four weeks was up, and my journaling process was complete.

At this point, my understanding of the way individuals observe symbols had deepened. Even without the consideration of how I might develop these images into a tattoo, I saw a change in the way I was observing the world simply by increasing my mindfulness. I also gained a sense that the symbols I observed had a different meaning to me than they might to a similar person. On a few occasions, I searched the internet for symbol meanings, simply to see how close my personal meanings matched the known meanings provided by the culture around me. For a couple of my entries my meanings were not the same as those provided by my cultural frame of reference, which meant that somewhere along my development, my personal meanings associated with a symbol diverged from the one provided by my culture. This became the most important key to my research question; by truly understanding the ways people think about symbols on an individualistic scale, it is possible to begin to see tattoos as the intensely private and personal form of expression that they are.

Incubation

The incubation process was a period of two weeks after the creation of the journal, in which I separated myself from the documentation of symbols and writing and simply examined the content that already existed. During this time, I avoided in-depth examination of themes, but periodically scanned the journal for themes and images that popped out at me and relayed some type of feeling to me.

Illumination

My illumination process occurred because of creating the journal and was a mindful process of examining the book for images that stuck out to me. Through this process, I was more able to evaluate the feelings associated with images and evolved from having blind emotional ties to images to understanding how strong (or weak) these ties were. I casually sifted through the journal periodically and examined my personal associations with images, while comparing them to other images and figuring out new associations between the images I had created. This constant noticing helped me to elaborate my thoughts on why certain images stuck out to me more than others. In essence, the more I found symbols to relate to each other, the more I saw connections between the symbols. Of the images contained within my journal, I realized that the image of the firefly invoked the most emotion for me from this process along with a quote used in my literature review, which said “though I know this could hurt me, I want to do it anyway.” I began to notice other themes in my journal which related to this idea. An entry on vines discussed how they grow wildly and are determined to expose themselves to as much sunlight as possible. Another entry on houseplants I had written suddenly seemed relevant, especially their function as a bridge to bring the wildness of nature into the docility of home life. From this, I came to know what images were going to create my final tattoo image.

Figure 4

Journal Entry on Vines

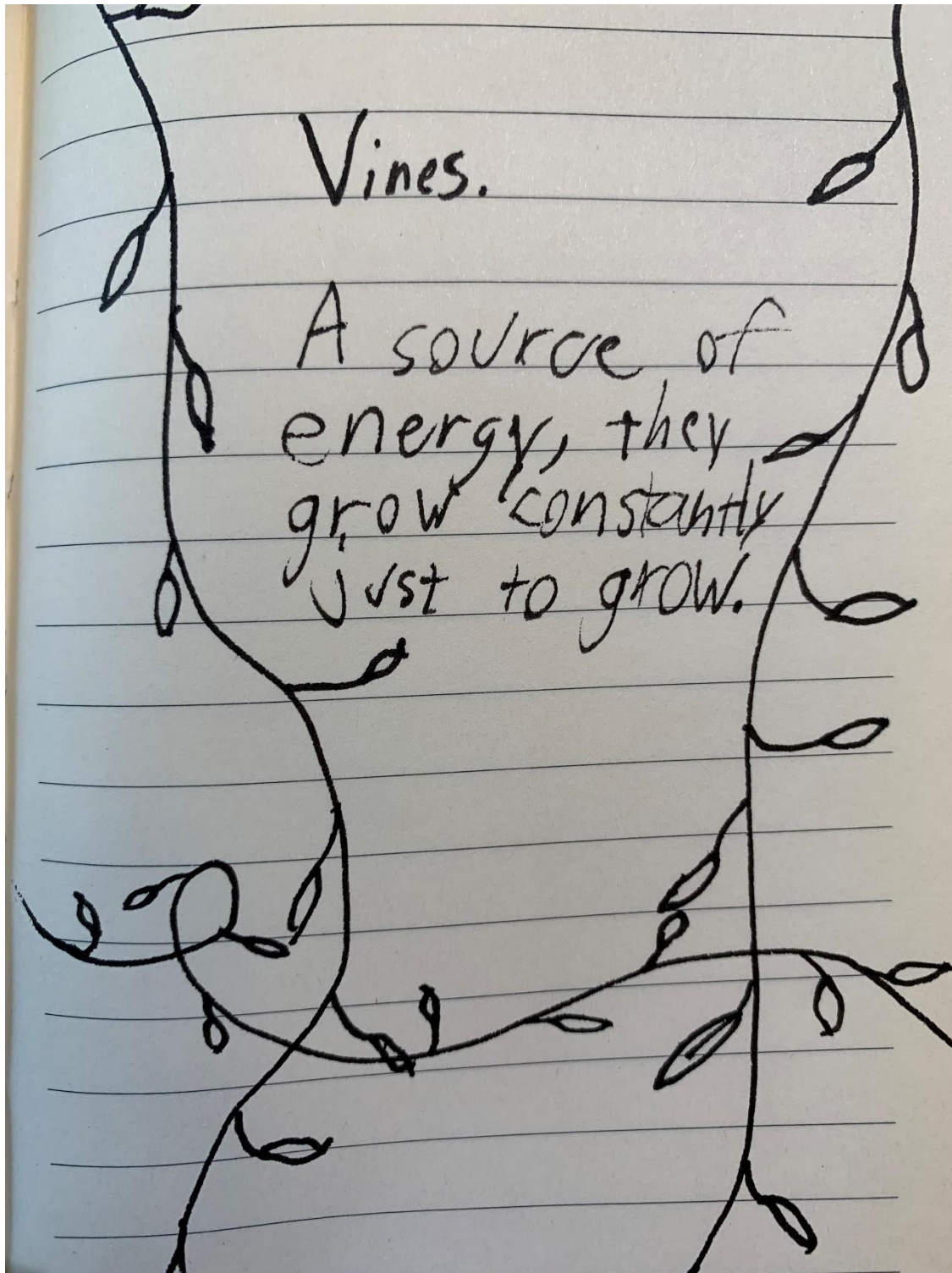
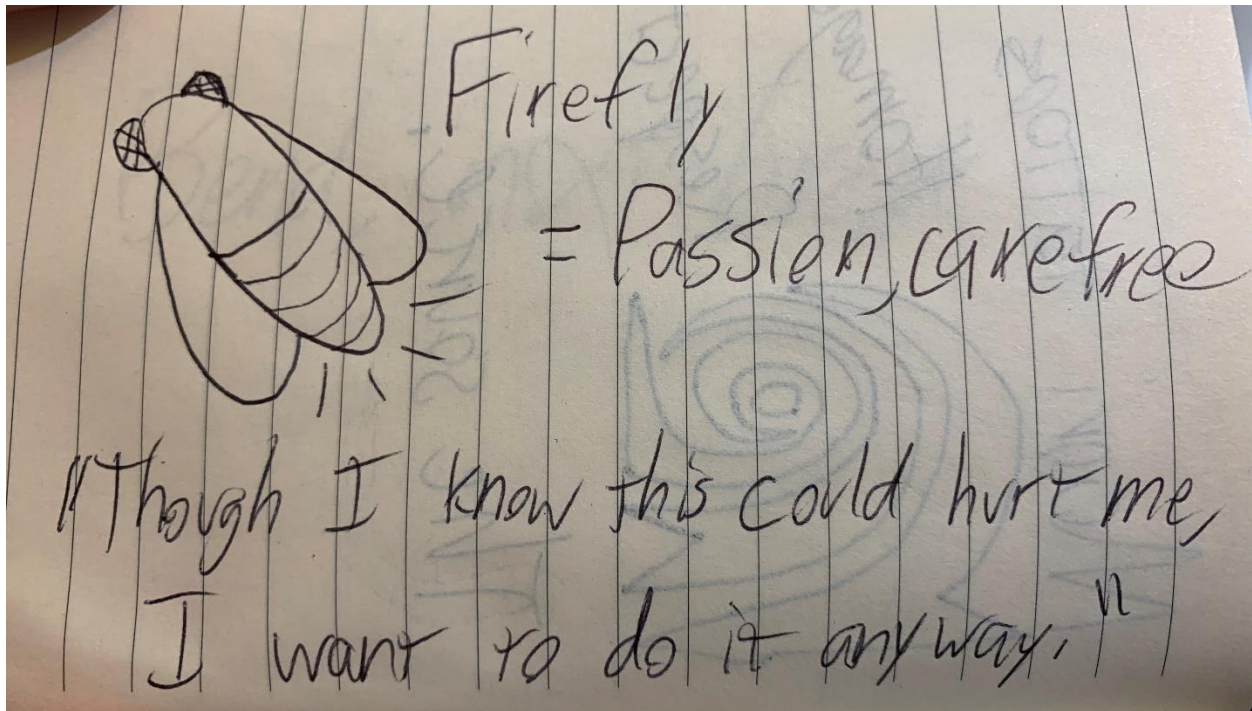


Figure 5

Journal Entry on Fireflies

**Explication**

My explication is formed as a combination of the results section through putting words to my realizations, as well as the discussion section, in which I analyze my major findings and share how these realizations impact my ability to understand tattoos and how I interpret this information as being relevant to the field of art therapy.

Connection of symbols and themes.

The following explicates themes developed through examining the journal, as well as the some of the personal symbols that relate to these themes within the journal.

Wilderness. This theme included the following symbols: plant, vines, hybrids, fireflies, compass, fire, dragons, and worms.

Protection. This theme included the following symbols: shield, home, weapons, caves, maps, eggs, and illusions.

Exploration. This theme included the following symbols: eyes, magnifying glass, transportation, compass, swords, plant, and vines.

Wisdom. This theme included the following symbols: eyes, symbology, sun, peace symbol, ying and yang, astrology/stars, teapot, and owl.

Passion. This theme included the following symbols: spider, fire, sun (light), fireflies, and vines.

Fear. This theme included the following symbols: space, fire, weapons, isolation, and connection.

Growth. This theme included the following symbols: plants, vines, eggs, domes, cells, and sun.

Time. This theme included the following symbols: clock, wrinkles, grapefruit, space, and tea.

Tradition. This theme included the following symbols: tree, tea, clock, and jewelry.

Independence. This theme included the following symbols: firefly, vines, space, and shield.

Connection. This theme included the following symbols: Wifi, tape, glue, rope, romance, and love.

Creative Synthesis

My creative synthesis is the resulting image created through the combination of my images from my illumination phase, the informal processing of the information contained in my images, the events and environments in my personal life, and the understanding I reached as a

result of my explication phase. This image was created knowing the intent behind it is to eventually receive it as a tattoo, to serve as a signifier of my conclusion to the research process.

Figure 6

Final Tattoo Design



CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The heuristic process is one of self-discovery and enlightenment on a specific topic, and mirrors the process of getting a tattoo; a season of thinking and development, followed by a concise assigning of imagery to ideas, with the ultimate result being a piece of shareable art. This reasoning is why I selected the heuristic method to study the tattoo as an object, so that I may reflect on how the heuristic process can be used to develop one by any individual.

Moustakas (1992) defines the heuristic process as such:

Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance. (p. 15)

This process pairs easily with an examination of the literature surrounding the development of tattoo imagery, and the subjective data that each person sifts through when determining the creation of the imagery and logical portions of the process such as where the tattoo image will be placed and by who. Although the heuristic method of inquiry uses the personal views of the researcher in gathering data, it follows a standardized process. Thus, this method allows for a combined examination and comparison of the literature and personal conclusions of the researcher.

Description of Major Findings, Themes, and Outcomes

Major findings. The major findings of this study are comprised of several personal realizations.

Finding 1. There was a surprising number of sources I unconsciously pulled from while creating my tattoo imagery. Alter-Muri (2019) claimed this is likely true for many people, as sources for personal inspiration are plentiful and differ from person to person.

Finding 2. These sources are developed across the lifetime and are a combination of nature and nurture (our environment and our culture). This is once again corroborated by Alter-Muri (2019), who stated this personal frame of view is integral to tattoo development.

Finding 3. There is an enormous amount of informational processing that happens when we see the symbols around us without fully realizing it, happening unconsciously and automatically. The sifting of this “data” in our lives is what helps to develop these personal associations with symbols.

Finding 4. We are capable of using mindfulness and examination to mine this unconscious processing for details about the things that draw our attention. By being conscious of our noticing, we can train ourselves to find extra meaning in things that were previously unknown to us, thus providing new details to the things in our lives which we are already surrounded by.

Finding 5. The process of becoming mindful about our personal associations with symbols is difficult, but becomes second nature once learned. Though it takes time and practice to attune ourselves to hidden meanings, we can begin to become better at it the more we do it, and perhaps encounter unexpected meanings or realizations through this process.

Explication of Findings

Much of the existing literature surrounding the topic of tattoos discusses how they are studied or perceived by others (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Resenhoeft, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008; Zestcott et al., 2018) with a much smaller percentage centering on the experiences of those with

tattoos (Roggenkamp, Nicholls, & Pierre, 2017). Literature centered on the personal, lived experience of those with tattoos is lacking, with what few studies there are being post-tattoo interviews with people who have already obtained their tattoos (Alter-Muri, 2019; Roggenkamp, Nicholls, & Pierre, 2017). Being attentive to the process *pre-tattoo*, or concurrently with the development of the tattoo, can illuminate new meanings for those exploring the possibility of receiving one. The journaling process I created and underwent may assist with that development.

The process of journaling was entirely new to me; I had never been a type of person to keep a journal of any sort. It helped that I approached it systematically, as a scientific pursuit in addition to a personal one, but that did not eliminate the awkwardness I felt at first while documenting my surroundings. As my symbol journal progressed, I noticed I became more vigilant to the symbols in the world around me and more attuned to my personal feelings about them, and was able to more solidly identify what interested me about certain symbols and their meanings than I had ever been able to previously. Throughout the process, I also observed how similar to mindfulness practices the experience was, and at a certain point, it became harder to stop noticing these things than it was to continue to notice them. Images began to present themselves to me continuously, and I did not feel at a loss for inspiration once this began. By being consciously mindful to look for symbols that caught my eye and making sure I was present in the moment, I became able to see symbols hidden within things as well. The simplest things became stimuli for additions to my journal; a stop sign became an entry on shapes, and a broken fence became an entry on the passage of time. It wasn't until the fourth week that the process began to lose steam. This may have meant that I was unable to continue this state of focus or it could have been that I had simply exhausted my sources of symbolic noticing through environment; either way, the fourth week consisted of the lowest amount of additions. In

contrast, the second week of journaling held the most journal entries; I can only take this to mean that week two held a good balance of comfortability with the process and the environmental presence of symbols was there to observe most readily.

My initial impression of the results of this study indicate that there is a society-wide need in the western world for an improved understanding of tattoos. Alter-Muri (2019) found that as many as 97% of tattoo owners claim there is a symbolic meaning behind their tattoos. Even so, there is still a significant cultural gap between those without tattoos and those with them. It is my guess that this gap exists because of lack of understanding about the ideas and thoughts behind tattoos by those without; literature shows that many of those without tattoos understand their permanence, but fail to understand the specifically chosen importance and meaning behind them (Ellis, 2014). It is as if they see tattoos as nothing more but a poorly chosen accessory with which the owner cannot part. On the opposite end of the spectrum, those with tattoos may tend toward stonewalling the communicative nature of their body art due to the perceived negative attitudes they experience by others and the fear that their body art may not be taken seriously or misinterpreted. This thought process can easily continue to develop the rift between the two communities. By showing the process of how those with tattoos may potentially develop them, this rift may begin to shrink as understanding of the art form on both sides takes a more humanistic view.

My final tattoo design is an example of the memories I created through this project, as well as the emotions tied with it. I pulled from the idea of costly honest signals (those identifiers that living beings give off to share something of their intent, even if it may handicap them) and passion exemplified by fireflies, as well as the unruliness of wild vines to create the image. Both of these ideas seemed to relate to each other when viewed through my own personal lens, and

serves as a way for me to physically instill an image with the feelings associated with learning about the passion those with tattoos have about their skin art, even if it may cost them more than money in social interactions. The vines serve as a reminder that continuous growth is possible even with things that may limit you in other ways. By combining the two themes, the image of the firefly surrounded by vines invokes in myself a sense of passion toward something, even when surrounded by adversity.

Clinical applications

Understanding the story behind someone's history is arguably the job description for therapists worldwide. Based on information from both the literature and data analysis, tattoos are valuable tools in understanding an individual's history; whether we want to know about specific memories or broad information about a person's background, tattoos hold a key to unlocking this information. Any tattoo is almost guaranteed to have at least one memory or story stored within it, and therapists are capable of using this as an opportunity to discover more about their clients, the ways they think, and their values or beliefs. In similar ways, a therapist can explore a client's story behind a tattoo by examining the image and dividing it into its separate parts to explore their backgrounds. For example, if a client has a tattoo of a snake wrapped around a tree branch with blossoms on it, the therapist can explore what associations the client has with snakes, trees, and blossoms, separately. Does this specific type of snake have important meaning for the client? What was important about the tree branch having blossoms? Even if these things were selected by the client unconsciously, these types of questions may help the client develop a new insight that they had not previously seen. This is a similar idea to how I came up with my journal process, and its result. By experiencing this process in real time, I felt more able to share the process with others; by going through it forwards, it becomes possible to share with others how

to do it backwards. Once this concept is understood, it is easy to understand tattoos as an amalgam of life circumstances and personal history, even if their outward appearance may not show that as vividly as the selected image it contains.

This realization helped me to understand that although 10 people can have an identical tattoo, all 10 of them will have differing meanings behind it, based on the frame they are viewing the tattoos and its symbols through. This frame was developed innately, and over the course of their lifetimes, and so impacts the ways they view everything from images to ideas. Alter-Muri (2019) confirmed this by stating “Tattooing includes a process comprised of reasons, decisions, designs, and imagery as well as a relationship with the tattoo artist. Like art therapy, both the process and the product of tattooing may hold personal significance to a client” (p. 1). This also means people can have drastically different tattoos with similar meanings, created by the interplay of shared, similar experiences accompanied by different symbolic imagery being present during these experiences. For me, a firefly is a symbol of passion in the face of adversity. For someone else, a firefly might represent danger, captivity, memories of summer, or fears associated with insects. Through the communication between personal experience and perceptions of our environment, we are constantly constructing meaning behind the things around us. Tattoos simply function as a reminder of those favorites among our experiences in physical form, so that we may carry them with us for the rest of our lives.

Limitations

By sharing distinct ideas and circumstances that occurred during this self-study, I want to share about myself as a participant in this study. As the researcher and participant, I acknowledge there is an inherent bias in my approach to both the study and the analysis of data. I attempted to limit myself in the scope of my journaling to avoid having a confirmatory bias in the production,

observation, and examination of data. I also am aware that I belong in a position of power in multiple identities, including race, ethnicity, gender identity, education level, and socioeconomic status. However, the independent nature of this study was designed to include the factors behind a person's upbringing and environment of origin, and so is still applicable to people from all backgrounds and possessing any number of identities.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The overarching purpose of this study was to examine how people perceive tattoos within themselves, based upon my own heuristic inquiry of symbolizing and creating a tattoo. By examining the perceptions of others, we are more able to understand how important a person's tattoos become to themselves, even past the negative messages they receive from the social circles they live within. Using a heuristic study as an example of how a person comes to develop their tattoos, we can see how many introspective and emotional details go into the creation of a tattoo. This highly personal process deserves to be honored for each individual. Although strides are being made in the acceptance of body art in social settings, people with tattoos still experience discrimination based on the sharing of these personal images. Future research should investigate tattoo development experiences across cultures, to understand how people of varying backgrounds approach this process. By studying the tattoo development processes from multiple sources, more information can be obtained on similarities and differences between thinking processes surrounding tattoo design and personal meanings across cultures.

Recommendations

As the field of art therapy continues to grow, it is important that those trained in art therapy know all their sources of information from a client. Art therapists already serve their clients by helping to create and interpret imagery, and by educating themselves on the practice of body art and how it functions as a form of expression, this number of sources for imagery grows larger. In addition, art therapists are naturally able to utilize this art, due to prior training in exploring imagery with clients and a natural aptitude for understanding and interpreting symbols. With proper approach, art therapists can begin to study the ways tattoos are used by people to

communicate messages and utilize them in their practice. As future research is completed, more concentration should be placed on finding correlations between the obtainment of a tattoo and impacts on mood, in order to solidify the understanding of the relationship between tattoos and their ability to promote understanding between clients and art therapists.

CHAPTER VII

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