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**Sub-Cultural Paradoxes:**

**Women Tattoo Artists Negotiating Gender, Labour, Capital and Resistance.**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
(Ph.D) in Women and Gender

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### **Declaration**

I declare that the contents of this thesis are my own original work and no material from the thesis has been submitted for a degree at any other institute of higher education.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of women tattoo artists in what is still a male-dominated tattoo industry. The research is situated within the field of subcultural studies, whilst interjecting the fields of gender and labour. Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in women entering the industry as professional tattoo artists in the West; my research explores the ways in which women have had to navigate their position within the industry and how they have negotiated the industry's response to an increase in women artists.

Using predominantly interviews by email, I talked to 15 women across the US, UK and Australia about their experiences of entering the industry and maintaining their position as a professional woman in an 'alternative' and sub-cultural occupation. Women have previously and extensively been researched as tattoo consumers but not as producers, and therefore my research considers this transition from tattooee to tattooer, exploring how women manage and navigate this shift in status to find space within the industry.

I conceptualise the tattoo industry not only as a sub-cultural space but also as a place of employment and labour. Capital, hierarchies and resistance are problematised by considering them through a gendered lens, with women, femininity and femininities at the forefront of my analysis.

Femininity is first considered in the analysis as something to be managed and as a potential barrier to success in a male-dominated field. However, femininity is then conceptualised as something utilised positively to enable change within the field. This creates a degree of contradiction and I analyse it by considering the paradox that women are considered to be *too* feminine for a male-dominated industry whilst at the same time, need or want to be *feminine enough* to employ distinctive elements of emotional labour associated with dominant versions of femininity.

I also consider ways in which women, and other minority groups are attempting to change the industry and resist the hegemonic masculinities of tattoo culture. I show that women artists place importance on the labour they perform, and ask how queer artists are *queering* certain areas of the industry. I also look, however, at the ambivalence felt by many of the artists surrounding resistance, in relation to both the industry and the mainstream, and the complex dynamic this creates in and amongst artists, the industry and the mainstream.

**Chapter One****Introduction: Do you Tattoo?**

When people learn of my research topic, many presume I am a tattooer. I lost count of the number of times I was asked during my PhD if I tattoo (though not by other artists, incidentally). I am tattooed; I am a woman; but I am not a tattooer. I am intrigued by subcultures and have associated with alternative subcultures since my late teens. When I began researching tattooing, I found that literature on tattooed women was easy to find; the empowering and reclaiming properties of tattoo was a recurring feature and research predominantly focused on the motives behind women's choices in getting tattooed. What was more difficult to find was research and literature exploring the people who tattoo – the artists, the tattooers, the tattooists. For an industry that is growing in popularity, and a subculture that has shifted from the peripheries of the mainstream to becoming popular and commercialised, the lack of research on tattoo artists was somewhat of a surprise, and a noticeable omission. As my research progressed, there was an increase in popular media interest in women tattooers, but there is still relatively little academic research on tattooers, especially focusing upon women artists.

From my experience of being tattooed (mostly by men), and frequenting tattoo studios, I was aware that women tattoo artists were likely to experience the industry in a very different way to men. I also knew that the industry has been a very male-dominated field for a long time. Therefore, I wanted to explore and document women's experiences of an industry I can see changing and developing and which has become so familiar to me over the last decade. I wanted my research to focus upon the producers of tattooing, whereas previous research had primarily focused upon consumers, but I also wanted to focus on gender. I anticipated that using gender as a lens through which to explore the tattoo industry would offer a valuable insight into a heavily masculinised culture. As I will show in the review of existing literature, the effect of the middle-classes on tattooing has been explored, but the effect that women have had on the industry, has not – this thesis seeks to explore

how the increase of women artists has affected the industry, and how women artists experience the industry they now participate in.

Despite the lack of research on women tattoo artists, they are by no means a new phenomenon within the field and their stories are documented and detailed in various histories of tattooing. Although I do not aim to offer a full history of women tattoo artists here, I want to contextualise and situate the research, by exploring a selection of artists and their experiences, to further highlight the (in)consistencies between women tattoo artists' experiences in the past and of their experiences today.

### **Ladies who Tattoo: A Potted History**

Tattooing in Europe and the USA was often a popular side-line for the 'tattooed ladies' of the Circus Freak shows in the 19th and 20th Century and by the early 1900s, some male artists had begun to teach their wives how to tattoo. This was perhaps so that men could then make use of their wives' skills to boost studio business, whilst avoiding the risk of losing her skills to a competing studio (Mifflin, 2013:30). In her history of women and tattoo, Margot Mifflin (2013) reports that although some men disliked the idea of a woman tattooist, others - especially sailors (who perhaps were glad of the female company) - had no objection (Mifflin, 2013:30). The first reported woman artist was Maud Stevens, a circus performer in the US, who became Maud Wagner after marrying her tattooist husband, Gus Wagner, in the early 1900s (Mifflin, 2013:31). Maud and Gus worked together for years, and to appease those clients who were not happy to be tattooed by a woman artist, Maud was listed in advertisements as 'M. Stevens. Wagner' (Osterud, 2009:26).

Although working with a tattooist husband was common at the time, not all women entered the field in this way: Mildred Hull, unlike the women artists before her, did not work with a man but rather set up shop on her own during the 1920s and was reported to have tattooed many women clients (Mifflin, 2013:35, Osterud,

2009:26). This however, did not mean that Hull avoided the difficulties of being a woman tattooist. She once said that ‘remaining a lady in the tattoo industry was strictly a man’s job’ (Mifflin, 2013:35), which I interpret to mean being a successful woman and remaining in the industry requires a degree of ‘toughness’ – perhaps that equated to a typical type of masculinity in her work. Hull had to deal with many challenging situations, usually involving drunk men who entered the shop to cause trouble or take advantage of her. Britain’s first woman tattooist was Jessie Knight, who began tattooing in 1921 and remained Britain’s only female tattooist for decades, encountering similar barriers to Hull and other predecessors (Mifflin, 2013:36). In 1955, Jessie Knight came second in the “Champion Tattoo Artist of All England” contest (Iqbal, 2017) and her family believed that it was being a woman that prevented her from being awarded first place.

By the 1970s, the number of women tattooists had not increased significantly, not as much as the number of women getting tattooed did (Mifflin, 2013:55). Sheila May, who worked in her husband’s shop in 1966, only knew of one other woman artist, and said that it took over 10 years to hear about other women in the trade (Mifflin, 2013:55). In 1972, Vyvyn Lazonga began an apprenticeship in the USA with Danny Danzi and eventually became an influential woman in the field. Lazonga was said to have experienced the difficulties of being a woman in the industry, realising that less experienced men were being taught and promoted over her. She was left with faulty equipment that Danny refused to fix; instead, he would spend time customizing the machines with fake jewels (Mifflin, 2013:57), presumably to ‘feminise’ the equipment for Lazonga. This left her with ‘pretty’ equipment that failed to work properly. Lazonga was well-known in the field, not only for her artistry but for her status as a heavily tattooed woman. She had full sleeves in the early 1970s, which was unusual at the time, especially for a woman, and she won ‘Most beautifully tattooed woman in the world’ at the 1978 World Tattoo Convention (Mifflin, 2013:57). Despite her prestige, however, Lazonga still endured prejudice from male artists, who disregarded her at conventions, on the premise that women should not be *that* tattooed. This is an early illustration of the double standards women had to, and still must, endure: gaining respect and prestige for being

tattooed, but so easily crossing the line of what is deemed acceptable by both the mainstream and the subculture. Lazonga resisted the criticism; she opened her own shop in 1979 and is still a renowned artist in the field today.

Ruth Marten, a New-York based self-taught artist who began tattooing in 1972, avoided much of the sexism experienced by Lazonga by working from a private studio at home. Tattooing had been illegal in New York since 1961 and so a private studio was also crucial in avoiding prosecution. In 1977, Marten completed art school before becoming a tattooist, which was unusual at the time (Osterud, 2009:30). She had planned a project to bridge the gap between fine art and tattooing, by tattooing famous pieces of art onto art collectors' skin (Mifflin, 2013:60). This was an innovative idea, and although it did not take off at the time, it is not as unusual in today's tattoo culture, and maps the beginnings of tattoos association with the world of fine art.

Another important figure in the history of tattoo is Jacci Gresham, who became the first well-known African-American artist in 1976 and remained the only prominent woman of colour artist, reporting that she did not meet any other women of colour in the industry until the 1990s. Gresham's tattooist husband taught her how to tattoo, although ironically (and further to Lazonga's experiences), he imposed a ban on tattooing women in their shop due to the social unacceptability of tattooed women. Gresham, however, abolished the ban and continued to tattoo women (Mifflin, 2013:66).

The stories told by women, highlighting contradictions and hypocrisies, are familiar narratives: male gatekeeping, sexism, male bias and harassment are all consistent with the experiences of the women tattooers of today. One possible difference is the competition constructed and encouraged between women in the 1970s, as Lazonga stated:

A lot of us bought into the idea of divide and conquer. We weren't supposed to get along; we weren't supposed to be friendly to each other. I felt like this lone island.

(Mifflin, 2013:68)

Unlike women visual artists who came together in the 1970s, women tattooists were often so few that they did not constitute a subculture within the subculture, as they might do today (Mifflin, 2013:68). As Lazonga notes, they were very often placed, and placed themselves, in competition with each other.

By the 1990s, the number of women tattooers had increased in the West, although they were not afforded the tattoo media attention given to men artists. Any women featured were often fetishised – showing flesh unnecessarily, photographed in a highly-sexualised manner and objectified (Mifflin, 2013:97). In 1991, a magazine titled 'Tattooing by Women' was published; within the first four issues, 90 women artists were introduced, some of them having been in the field since the 1970s. However, the magazine was criticised for its featuring of advertisements for sex videos, and fetishised photography (Mifflin, 2013:97), and therefore failing to create the safe and inclusive space women had hoped for.

In 1995, an all-women convention was curated in Florida, but again, not without difficulties. Promotional brochures featured women in bikinis and competitions were judged by male judges. There was even an award for men who had supported women in the trade, (in)aptly titled 'PMS' – the award for Professional Male Support (Mifflin, 2013:98). There was ambivalence from artists around the need for an all-women convention; some thought that women did not need a convention of their own, whilst others felt that women did indeed need the convention to showcase their work, so often ignored by the industry (Mifflin, 2013:98).

By the 2000s, Reality TV shows had brought tattooing into the homes of people for whom tattooing had been previously unfamiliar (Mifflin, 2013:101). More

people were becoming tattooed, and training to become tattooers. More women-run shops started to emerge, and Kat Von D, who was made famous by the TV show *Miami Ink* in 2005, soon became the best-known tattoo artist in the world – by both tattooed and non-tattooed individuals (Mifflin, 2013:101-102).

A brief look at the history of women tattooers highlights frequently occurring issues surrounding sexism, prejudice, male dominance, and an ambivalence towards women-only spaces, which brings us to the point at which my research begins. Mifflin suggests, 'For a new generation, the barriers to the profession have been cleared' (2013:107), but is this really the case?

### **Women who Tattoo: My Research**

There has been a sharp rise in women tattoo artists (and women tattoo consumers) since the 2000s, and the visibility of women artists on social media (such as Instagram) suggests that in terms of numbers of women artists, the field *appears* more equal. Having said this, there is no data available to indicate how many women artists are registered within the UK and so although there seems to be more women (due to the increase in visibility), there is no statistical evidence to back this up. I want to explore whether the actual experiences of women artists correspond with the suggested shift in the composition of the industry. Women appear to be represented in terms of numbers, but how is the industry responding to this change? Mainstream media also alludes to an increase in women tattoo artists (Bhagwandas, 2012), but has the industry seen any advances in 'progressive renegotiations of the traditional gender binary'? (Brill, 2007:111).

My research, attempting to address these issues, focuses upon and centres around my research question:

*How do women negotiate their position within a male-dominated, sub-cultural industry?*

Negotiation is key to my analysis, and I have found the following excerpt from Judith Gerson and Kathy Peiss (1985) vital in my consideration of negotiations. My research explores how women not only experience the tattoo industry, but how they negotiate these experiences and subsequently, their place and role within the field.

Domination explains the ways in which women are oppressed and either accommodate or resist, while negotiation describes the ways women and men bargain for privileges and resources. (Gerson and Peiss, 1985:322)

As this quote illustrates, negotiation entails a set of interrelated discussions or subtle and often invisible compromises. My research exposes these, along with the conflict and contradiction that often comes with negotiation. I also explore what these negotiations mean for the women on a day-to-day basis, and the paradox, complexity and ambivalence that accompany these day-to-day experiences.

The research also explores how women are attempting to change the industry, and perhaps offer something different to what the tattoo community has been accustomed to. Along with the concept of negotiation, I wanted to consider agency and resistance, in relation to the idea that women do indeed hold resources which they can manage and utilise (Gerson and Peiss, 1985:322).

This research sits within the field of subcultural studies, whilst contributing to discussions surrounding alternative femininities, emotional and aesthetic labour, conformity and resistance. Although tattooing as a trade has its roots within and across subcultures, the level of professionalism required means that this subcultural practice intersects the mainstream field of bodywork and employment, which offers an alternative lens through which to consider subcultural traditions. Subcultures are often seen as vehicles through which members resist dominant norms and structures. Historically, however, there has been a deep-rooted connection between subcultures and dominant ideologies of masculinity, and subcultures are yet to successfully challenge the dominant boundaries of gender inequalities (Brill, 2007). McRobbie and Garber (2006) identify that women and girls were excluded from

subcultures due to male domination of these subcultures, and further excluded from subcultural studies due to the masculinist bias of early academic studies. I would argue that if girls are excluded from subcultural studies, then *women* are even more so. Therefore, it is important for my research to explore the experiences of women who not only pursue subcultural leisure activities, but who also construct careers within the subculture itself - influencing the construction and reconstruction of the culture. Subcultural theory is noticeably silent on the subject of 'alternative' adult women (Holland, 2004: 148) and I feel that exploring the voices of women tattooists adds valuable insight to work on these experiences by scholars such as Samantha Holland, Maddie Breeze and Lauraine LeBlanc.

### **The Thesis: Chapter by Chapter**

My research focuses on 15 women who, at the time of the fieldwork, were working across Europe, USA and Australia. These areas have similar attitudes (and laws) surrounding tattooing<sup>1</sup>, and this was beneficial to the research.

To situate the research within the field of tattoo and body modification, chapter two explores existing literature surrounding tattoo, body modification, women and gender. There has been extensive research carried out on tattoo and body modification, and therefore my first task was to determine how to engage with the work and what work to engage with. Rather than attempting to map the vast amount of changes within the field of tattooing across time, the chapter focuses upon gender, class, community and the legitimisation of tattooing as an art form. Not only were these the prevalent themes arising from the literature, but they are the themes best placed as a grounding for my own research. Research on tattooing as an art form highlights the shift in how tattoos are being accepted into mainstream

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, in South Korea, for example, tattooing (but not being tattooed) is illegal and although there are women tattooists working in underground studios, the exploration of the illegal, and therefore underground, culture of tattooing would not only focus upon the issues faced by women – surrounding femininity, Korean gendered norms and cultural pressures – but also focus upon legality and how women (and men) strive to avoid arrest. This requires a wider focus than my research questions allow.

culture. It illustrates how an association with fine art is used to legitimise tattoo, and is considered an effect of the shift in class dynamics, namely, the middle-class appropriation of tattooing. Existing research also, through this focus on class, also highlights the need for an increased focus on how gender has affected the tattoo culture and the tattoo industry.

As the 1990s brought an influx of women to the sub-culture, there was an increased academic and feminist focus on power, agency and resistance within literature on tattooing. Because of this, I pay particular attention in my review of the literature, to the research and literature from the 1990s to the present day. Narratives around 'reclaiming' the body are frequent throughout the literature, along with a focus on how tattooing has subverted, and is subverting, societal beauty norms and ideals. In relation to this, and contributing to discussions around community and culture, Atkinson (2003) questions whether tattooing should be considered an individualistic or collective act, and explores the challenges to, and conformity with, ideals of femininity, questioning levels of conformity and resistance. The chapter concludes by exploring the communities within tattooing culture, with specific focus on hierarchies, and how these are constructed and maintained by the members of the community and influential actors within the industry.

Whilst chapter two focused primarily on tattooing, chapter three will explore empirical research on subcultures. I begin with a discussion of the terminology I use throughout the thesis in relation to subcultures and communities. I argue for the use of tattoo 'sub-culture' rather than 'subculture' and use the term 'industry' to describe the field in which tattoo artists work. I then continue to situate the research within current conversations surrounding women and subcultures. Like tattoo, literature on subcultures is vast; I look specifically at the role, position and experiences of women in subcultures; highlighting the similarities between and across previous research and illustrating the recurring issues that arise for women and girls in alternative subcultures. Although initially, different subcultures may appear to be unrelated to tattoo culture, music and sport cultures present similar issues surrounding the negotiation of femininity and gender, hierarchies and capital.

Familiar paradoxes and negotiations arose, which will be discussed throughout the subsequent chapters. The chapter focuses in particular upon Sarah Thornton's notion of subcultural capital and uses this as a basis from which to explore gendered capital, asking how both versions of capital work to construct and maintain hierarchies within subcultures. The chapter concludes by considering the ways in which subcultures have had to navigate a relationship with the mainstream, regardless of whether this is welcomed by the subcultural participants.

After evaluating the existing literature in the fields of tattooing and subcultures, chapter four focuses on my own research and the decisions I made surrounding methods and methodologies. As with all feminist research, I strive to explicitly situate myself within the research, discussing analytical, personal and political motivations behind the research aims, the research methods, and the methodologies employed. With a focus on feminist methodologies, I offer reflexive insight into the research process and a subjective look at myself as the researcher with specific attention given to power relations and ethics of the research. Research methods are explored in detail and I discuss the difficulties I encountered throughout the process. I also discuss the limitations of the project, and how I might address these in the future. The chapter also introduces each participant via a collection of vignettes, offering a little background information on each artist, and how I interviewed them.

Chapter five is the first of the analysis chapters, and it is here that I begin to explore women tattoo artists' experiences of a both male-dominated and overly masculinised industry. I examine how women have navigated the transitions from subcultural consumer to sub-cultural producer and subsequently, how they have negotiated their post-transition space within the tattoo industry. The data brings to light questions surrounding who holds capital, who is deemed authentic, and how capital is legitimised. Whilst considering the nuanced experiences of the artists and the conflicts that arose within and across their narratives, a range of paradoxes emerged.

Problematizing these paradoxes encouraged me to consider how the imagined experiences of subcultural employment compared to the lived reality of working in a highly-masculinised sub-cultural field. I use *male-dominated* and *highly-masculinised* as two distinct terms, because the industry is both male-dominated in terms of numbers of men artists, but also highly-masculinised in the way in which it produces and reproduces certain masculine norms. I utilise work by Sarah Thornton (1995) on subcultural capital, to explore industry hierarchies. I also explore the relationships between the sub-culture and the mainstream, examining the effect that media representation of tattooing has had upon this dynamic. I develop ideas on capital to include gendered capital; and by drawing upon Maddie Breeze's (2015) work on roller derby, I focus on how gendered capital influences negotiations of gendered authenticity, and seriousness. I also consider the relationship between femininity and gendered capital, and consider how women tattoo artists' versions of femininity are sometimes considered as something to be downplayed, managed and always negotiated.

If femininity was something to be downplayed and moderated in the previous chapter, chapter six continues, develops and extends the discussions surrounding femininity, examining how some of the participants spoke about utilising their femininity in a more positive way. Making use of research by Skeggs and Huppertz on the care industry, I consider the employment of feminine and female capital and how the women use, experience and make sense of this in their role as tattooers in tattoo studios as a workplace. I identify and introduce conflicts between displaying signs of dominant versions of femininity, and utilising the traits associated with these dominant femininities – exploring the artist's opinions around using femininity in appropriate or acceptable ways – and their critique of artists who cross these boundaries.

Here, I look at the work of Carol Wolkowitz, with a focus on body work and the emotional and aesthetic labour attached to work on the body. I interlink gendered capital and emotional labour, along with notions of aesthetic labour and the tattooed body as a symbol of professionalism. I also consider the pressures that

this brings in terms of performativity and how artists navigate this in relation to clients, and mainstream attitudes towards them as artists. The chapter asks questions around how gendered capital has the potential to disrupt the masculinised culture of the industry.

Chapter seven then builds upon both chapters five and six, developing further the idea of resistance within the industry. I explore how women tattoo artists are doing and thinking about tattooing differently: intervening, interrupting and disrupting the masculine culture of the industry. I ask what effect this is having upon the industry, and the community. The chapter also explores the contradictions in resistance, outlining the conflict and ambivalence that arises when a subcultural participant is not only resisting the mainstream, but elements of the subculture also. This chapter not only uses data drawn from the interviews, but from online media articles also, as a way of supplementing my empirical data and further illustrating the changes to the tattoo industry. Focus is placed upon all-women studios, conventions and exhibitions, and illustrates how women artists are attempting to change the industry, making a safer space not only for them, but also their clients and consumers.

By revisiting the previous chapters, and drawing upon the key concepts, paradoxes and conflicts discussed throughout the analysis, chapter eight collates, summarises and concludes the key findings of the research. This, for me, was the most difficult chapter to write. I became increasingly aware of the need to do justice to the participants and their stories, and felt panicked at the thought of misinterpreting their experiences. It felt very final, and rather a daunting task. I revisit the original research question, and by summarising the research data, attempt to answer it. Subcultural capital, gendered capital and femininity are all concepts further problematised, in order to identify how my research contributes to conversations about alternative femininities, counter-culture and the complex and contradictory interrelations of differing forms of capital.

It is evident from research cited above that women have a long history in the world of tattooing, although their stories and experiences are fragmented through and within the sub-culture itself. My research aims to create a space in which to centre women's experiences whilst exploring the nuances, paradoxes and complexities that being a woman in the tattoo industry brings. My research will bring women out of the circus side-show, and consider what it means to place women tattoo artists at the centre rather than on the peripheries of an influential sub-culture.

## Chapter Two

### Gender, Class and Tattoo: Contextualising the Research

The historical narrative of tattooing in the West is anchored in well-rehearsed and somewhat over-used rhetoric surrounding romanticised tales of sailors and criminals. Women have been largely written out of tattooing history despite their integral role in the cultural development of western tattooing (Braunberger, 2000:4). 'Freak shows' and circus side-shows of the 1880's usually featured heavily tattooed women displaying their decorated skin and sharing exoticised narratives of how they came to be so extensively tattooed (Braunberger, 2000:9). Stories were fantastical, often involving deprivation of control and agency (women being captured and forced into being tattooed, for example), with the tattooed female body representing the reprimanded woman who once enjoyed 'too much' freedom and paid the price for it (Braunberger, 2000:9). Interestingly, however, these stories did not reflect the reality of these women's lives. Women lived off money earned through their tattooed bodies, and this often meant increased independence and money, as well as more opportunity for travel than would have been the norm for women of this time (Braunberger, 2000:10). Tattooed women of the 1800's played with levels of social acceptability: they made their living as exotic objects of fetish and wonderment, yet had freedom in public because their 'deviance' was hidden by clothing (Braunberger, 2000:12). Women like Betty Broadbent and Artoria Gibbons are notorious in tattoo history for their appearances in the 'freak shows' of the 20th century, and used tattoo to earn a living, taking control of their lives and income (DeMello, 2000:174). Numbers of tattooed men outweighed the number of women involved in tattooing at the time of the freak shows, and male-centred historical narratives perpetuated the idea that tattooing was something done by men, to men (Braunberger, 2000:4). However, as I noted in the previous chapter, work by Braunberger, DeMello and Mifflin identifies the prominent and important female figures in the world of tattooing; and although Centuries apart, parallels can be drawn between the tattooed ladies of the circus side-shows, and the women tattooers of today. The negotiation of femininities and challenging the boundaries of social acceptability, at

the same time as using tattoo as a vehicle for independence, can be mapped throughout the 19th Century to the present.

Tattooing has faced barriers throughout history, being socially labelled as marginal or deviant work (Wicks and Grandy, 2007; Watson, 1998; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Since the time of the circus side-show, tattooing as a cultural and aesthetic custom has undergone significant changes throughout its vast and varied history, both in its practice and in its perception by (some) members of society. The result has been notable shifts in who is getting tattooed, why they are getting tattooed and who is doing the tattooing. In turn, this shift has led to an increase in academic interest and a growth in research around tattooing and body modification. The purpose of this chapter is not to map every change within Anglo-American tattooing culture, of which there have been many; but to draw attention to the changes most relevant to my own research – with specific focus on women, gender and class. The chapter will also identify recurrent themes within existing research on tattooing, which in turn will highlight the under-researched areas, and as discussed previously, will reposition women from the peripheries to the centre of the sub-culture. The chapter not only provides a brief historical framework to mine and existing research, but contextualises the voices of my participants presented in the forthcoming chapters. Although the research appears to be focusing upon a niche sub-cultural setting, the thesis opens up discussions that can also be applied to gender relations in other sectors.

### **Tattooing, Women and Feminism**

As numbers of tattooed women in Western countries increased throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there was a surge in academic research focusing upon women and body modification, situated within a wider context of feminist debate surrounding the body in both feminist theory and activism (Pitts, 2003:10). Tattoos were embraced by some feminists as subversions of traditional notions of ‘feminine beauty’ and seen as a way for women to regain control over their bodies (Pitts, 2003:55). Braunberger describes the transgressive opportunities women have found

through tattoo: working-class women in the early 1900s subverted the image of the pale, quiet woman by using tattoos, tattooed women in carnivals made money and gained the opportunity to travel, and hippies in the 1970s joined a counterculture (Braunberger, 2000:18). The issue of control over women's bodies has been central to feminist thought (Morgan, 1991; Pitts, 1998), with body projects such as dieting and (some) exercise being critiqued for placing pressure upon women to conform to mainstream ideals of what it means to be a 'woman'. The notion of the 'body project' was developed by sociologists as a concept framing the body as something to be worked upon, explored and transformed as part of an individual's self-identity and mode of self-expression (Shilling, 1993; Pitts, 2003:11). Feminist scholars have focused upon a variety of body projects, including dieting (Bordo, 1993, 1997), cosmetic surgery (Davis, 1995, 1997; Gimlin, 2006) and bodybuilding (Monaghan, 1999). Body projects are considered integral to the construction of the self and offer the body as a vehicle for displaying one's identity to others (Pitts, 2003:31).

Western Empirical research on women's tattoos and body modification often focuses upon women's motivations behind getting tattooed and shows tattoos being used to reject the pressures of societal norms and mainstream standards of femininity (Pitts, 1998, 2003; Atkinson, 2002; Braunberger, 2000). Body modifications not only challenge conventional beauty norms but have the potential to subvert mainstream ideals – challenging normative hegemonic constructions of a passive femininity and 'beauty myths' (Craighead, 2011:43; Wolf, 1990), in turn providing opportunity for a 'revolutionary aesthetic for women' (Braunberger, 2000:3); as well as offering the opportunity for women to 'reclaim' their bodies after physical or symbolic victimisation (Pitts, 2003:15). In her ethnography of the tattoo community, *Bodies of Inscription*, DeMello (2000) argues that women are more likely than men to explain their tattoos in terms of healing, empowerment and control. Through the process of getting tattooed, and by constructing a narrative around the tattoo, women are 'working to erase the oppressive marks of a patriarchal society' and can begin to take control over their own bodies (DeMello, 2000:172-173). 'Control' is a recurring concept throughout the literature on women and tattooing, and the idea that being tattooed increases the opportunity to 'take control' of one's

body is a common narrative. However, what does 'control' mean for the person getting tattooed and does getting tattooed really mean more control over one's body? Does the tattoo consumer truly feel in control during the process of getting a tattoo or is the idea of 'control' something which is more associated with the outcome of the tattooing process? The subsequent chapters explore how the tattoo artists feel about power and control during the tattoo process, and what part they play in how the client feels during the interaction.

Along with concerns over control, central to the research narratives and feminist literature on body projects is the relationship between body modification and social structures of power, authority and agency (Atkinson, 2002:221). There are, of course, feminist analyses that do not see tattoos as liberating or empowering. Sheila Jeffreys (2000) for example, argues that body modification of any kind is a form of self-harm and only serves to perpetuate the pressures put upon women by a patriarchal society. However, much of the feminist analysis on tattoo and 'alternative' modification, as noted above, uses liberatory language, often referring to practices as empowering and agentic. In contrast to this, work on cosmetic surgery often argues that this form of body project is disempowering and a symptom and indication of a lack of agency (Davis, 1995). These debates highlight the complex issues surrounding modification, agency and the individual, bringing into question who has agency, and who has the power and the right to presume the agentic nature of one practice over another. However, debates about the agentic vs disempowering nature of body projects may also have problematic effects on the theorisation of such practices. They can create a false binary between what is agentic and what is not, and contribute to the over-pathologising of women's practices, a well-documented subject amongst feminist researchers (Bordo, 1993, Morgan, 1991, 1998). Women's mental health is often questioned, blamed, and demonised across and throughout society, in various guises and, as seen in the work of Sheila Jeffreys for example, tattoos and piercings have also been associated with women's mental ill-health. In her article, *Body Modification, Self-Mutilation and Agency* (1999), Victoria Pitts explores the attention given to body modification by popular media sources. Pitts (1999:293) identifies a heavy reliance upon a 'mental health discourse', with media

accounts presenting an image of the passive modifier as victims who mutilate themselves due to underlying mental health or psychological issues. As Pitts argues, the 'framing of body modification as mutilation makes the prospect of agency dubious and theoretically impossible' (Pitts, 1999:296). Clare Craighead (2011) also criticizes a body of academic literature for pathologising the issue of women and tattoo in her paper (*Monstrous) Beauty (Myths)*. However, instead of critiquing the presumption that body modification and mental ill-health are inherently linked, Craighead argues that academic research on tattoos and piercings focus too much upon women who have experienced psychological trauma and use modification to remedy this (Craighead, 2011:43).

There was an emphasis in both academic research and mainstream media on the reclaiming properties of tattoo, especially in the 1990s, which DeMello explains in terms of the middle-class influence on the culture, and a 'self-help' discourse which became increasingly popular at the time. Although there may be a focus on women overcoming trauma by getting tattooed, much of the research focusing upon this is based upon empirical fieldwork and data collected from personal narratives and therefore the discussion was data-driven. Academics such as Pitts and Atkinson were merely reflecting the common discourses evident among participants at the time of the research.

Other critiques of tattooing literature discuss the emphasis on the individualistic nature of the process. Atkinson's *The Sociogenesis of Body Art*, critiques existing research for its recurring narrative of tattooing as a "highly individualistic practice" (Atkinson, 2003:120). Much of the research on tattooing focuses upon the individual, self-identity and the individual's body project (Sweetman, 1999), whereas Atkinson describes tattooing as pro-social and an 'affectively regulated act of communication' (Atkinson, 2004). He suggests that tattooing and body modification are not practices carried out in isolation of the people around the individual, but should instead be considered more of a group experience. There is, Atkinson argues, a community around any individual who undergoes tattooing or any modification, and it is important to explore the interrelations and relationships that form, and continue to exist, around the

individual (Atkinson, 2003). People are often influenced by peers during the tattooing process, and may also take a friend or get tattooed together, thus including other enthusiasts in their tattooing experience (Atkinson, 2003:120). There is also, as I discuss in subsequent chapters, often a collaboration between client and artists during the design process, and so in addition to the client and their peers, there is also a vital and integral inter-relation at play between the tattooed and the tattooer. Collaboration may also serve to legitimise the practice, by associating tattooing with fine art – not only by ‘collecting’ art on their bodies, but by collaborating in the artistic process – perhaps by providing inspiration for the design, and ideas for the artist to then execute (Irwin, 2003:44). Collectors may construct themselves as ‘well-educated artistic consumers’ likening themselves to art collectors (Irwin, 2003:44). The collaboration between artist and client was something that my participants identified as important, and is discussed in more depth in chapter seven. Additionally, both Pitts and Atkinson have explored the influence of the non-tattooed mainstream society who, whether consciously or not, impacts upon how the tattooed individual experiences their own tattooed body.

In his article, *Pretty In Ink: Conformity, Resistance and Negotiation in Women’s Tattooing* (2002), Atkinson identifies numerous ways in which established constructions of femininity are reproduced, rather than challenged, through tattooing (2002:225). Atkinson, as other scholars have done, describes tattooing and body projects as a tool for exploring femininity in a culturally fragmented, postmodern world, with a focus on empowerment and identity-exploration. He then, however, argues that although the narratives of tattooed women present ‘nouveau-hip sentimentalities about “girl power” and freedom of choice’, they in fact reproduce established ideas about femininity and the feminine body. Although I would argue his claim could be deemed somewhat judgmental and patronising, Atkinson’s analysis of the images chosen by the women, the location/placement of the tattoos on their bodies and the sizes of the tattoo chosen, does show that these choices may sometimes reproduce dominant feminine norms rather than subvert them (Atkinson, 2002:226). It would of course be inaccurate and generalising to suggest that all women use tattoo as a vehicle for either reclaiming or subverting.

Indeed, more recent research (such as Kosut, 2013) shows that since Atkinson's research was conducted in 2002, there has been a shift in what tattoos are being used for, and that motives behind getting tattooed are varied and nuanced. Tattooing can be associated with resistance, conformity and aesthetics, and not always in isolation but rather a complex interconnection of purposes. Some of Atkinson's participants described their gender resistance as being far subtler than participants in other research, perhaps a private resistance rather than a public or spectacular display. What is important to recognise is that Atkinson's participants were aware that tattoo was sometimes used as a subversive tool, but that they themselves did not want to be labelled as a 'deviant female' through their participation in tattooing (Atkinson, 2002:229). Braunberger suggests that women who get tattooed to subvert norms and expectations, still must face other women whose tattooing adheres to the norms and values of dominant 'femininity' (such as Atkinson's participants, for example) (Braunberger, 2000:18).

As Atkinson's research suggests, it is not only non-tattooed women creating boundaries surrounding femininities, but tattooed women are also creating, constructing and enforcing the norms, values and boundaries associated with femininities. Gerson and Peiss identify boundaries as an important place to observe gender relations, revealing the normal, acceptable behaviours and attitudes as well as the deviant, inappropriate ones (Gerson and Peiss, 1985:319). The idea of the 'deviant female' also illustrates the continuous negotiation at play when constructing an identity. Women who use tattoo as aesthetic adornment, rather than a subversive practice, often remain aware that tattooing the 'wrong' part of the body or having the 'wrong' design could result in the body being read as purposefully deviant by mainstream society (Atkinson, 2002), in relation to social norms and expectations surrounding 'acceptable' versus 'unacceptable' femininities. (Gerson and Peiss, 1985:321).

Atkinson suggests that body modifications are replete with cultural messages about conformity and resistance, and this is illustrated through the nuances involved in the analysis of women and body modification (Atkinson, 2002:230). He argues that

in most sociological enquiry, conformity and resistance are marked as 'polar opposites', but in relation to body projects, he recognises that they are inexorably linked (2002:224). A woman might enter into modification practices as a form of personal and private resistance; however, women often then develop 'stocks of knowledge' relating to other people's attitudes towards tattooing and the female body. For Atkinson's participants, these social reactions were often taken into consideration when making decisions on the body project (Atkinson, 2002:230). Atkinson found that reactions of employers and colleagues were of primary concern for many women, some fearing that the association with deviance (and any subsequent negative reactions) would interfere with their status within the workplace<sup>2</sup> (Atkinson, 2002:231). Some women feel that they compromise a part of their resistant philosophies by putting on a 'conforming front' (Atkinson, 2002:231). Resistance to established gender norms therefore exists on a sliding scale. Some women's tattoo body projects are obvious violations of established norms and dominant images of gender, femininity or masculinity, others are privately negotiated acts of dissent (Atkinson, 2002:231). This is addressed by Samantha Holland in her work on alternative femininities (2004), which is discussed in the next chapter; it is addressed in chapter five of my own research where I consider the negotiations at play between subcultural employment and mainstream ideals of femininity. Pitts also addresses issues surrounding negotiations of femininity, arguing that although women use tattooing and modification to subvert and challenge societal expectations, this resistance is carried out in a context whereby body projects are 'read', viewed and perceived in conditions beyond the control of the individual; we may engage in a range of body projects as 'post-modern body-subjects' but we do not always do so in 'conditions of our own choosing' (Pitts, 2003:36). The act of transgression does not in itself reverse the embedded cultural inscriptions (Braunberger, 2000:20) and therefore, some level of negotiation and compromise is both required and expected. This negotiation is largely ignored or

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<sup>2</sup> Tattoos in the workplace are an issue for many people (not only women), and are a contentious topic for many employers and employees (Baumann et al, 2016; Williams et al, 2014)

neglected by scholars. Although gender, it seems, is somewhat of a focus for many academics in the field, more attention is afforded to women's motivations for getting tattooed, rather than the negotiation that is required when they have been tattooed.

Ferreira (2011), in his work on young people's body projects, found that the participants used these projects as a way of attracting the gaze of others, purposefully exhibiting themselves as 'different' in the hope that others would notice this difference (2011:314). Ferreira suggests that 'by choosing to radicalize this body regime through its exaggeration, some young people are trying to push forward the social visibility of their personal existence through the violation of the dominant standards of bodily direction, respectability, and integrity' (Ferreira, 2011:315). Braunberger, too, discusses tattooed bodies as bodies that 'look back' when they are objects of the gaze (Braunberger, 2000:14). This is certainly something familiar to some of the participants in my research, as I discuss in chapter five. It relates to Pitts' discussion on how body projects are 'read' by mainstream society, and illustrates, along with Atkinson's work, the importance of considering tattooing in a wider context beyond just the individual. Tattooing and the tattooed do not exist in isolation from each other or mainstream culture and society. Therefore, if we are to gain a better understanding of tattoo culture, it is important to explore the dynamics of the relationships within and outside of the community, as well as the influencing factors affecting these relationships. This illustrates how tattoos are used purposefully for subversive and deviant purposes, but again, that tattooing is not an individualistic practice, but rather a set of complex relations, whether fully conscious or not.

### **Shifting Class Dynamics**

One of the most notable changes throughout the history of Anglo-American tattooing is the shift from what was once a working-class trade, to a profession built upon skill, artistry and middle-class sensibilities. The 'middle-class turn', as DeMello describes it (2000:43) has had an influence on various factors within the tattooing

sub-culture, including the increase in women getting tattooed and the ‘artification’<sup>3</sup> of tattooing as a practice. Before attitudes towards tattooing in the West started to change in the 1960s, the world of tattooing was reserved mainly for working-class men, both in terms of the clientele and the tattooist. Skills were gained through an apprenticeship with an established tattooist and they were more likely to be motivated by economic gain, rather than the desire to produce highly aesthetic pieces of art. In contrast to the world of tattoo today, there was little association with the more traditional art world (Sanders, 1989:18). This class shift became a central focus for academics exploring tattoo culture; research spanning the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s highlights the effect that the middle-class turn has had upon tattooing. Tattoo artists wanting to legitimise tattooing is a significant factor throughout the existing research, and it appears that legitimisation can be achieved through both the artification of tattooing as a practice, and the medicalisation of the industry, both are discussed below.

DeMello’s (2000) *Bodies of Inscription* is an ethnographic account of the tattoo community with specific focus on the shift in class dynamics. DeMello uses the term ‘middle-class’ to refer to ideas rather than people (DeMello, 2000:7), and the research focuses upon the ways that middle-class participation in the tattoo community has changed the nature of the community and the meaning of tattoo itself (DeMello, 2000:160). DeMello suggests there is a significant class divide within the community – for example, she found terms such as ‘biker’ and ‘scratcher’ were used to define certain working-class practices from newer practices deemed ‘professional’ or ‘fine art’ (DeMello, 2000:5). DeMello suggests that these terms mask class differences within the tattoo community and act as a rhetorical social distancing tool – using ‘biker’, for example, as a lifestyle description, but meaning ‘working-class’ and therefore inferior to more middle-class practices (DeMello, 2000:5). DeMello argues that these terms create a caricature of certain types of tattooist and genre of tattoo and are used to define an ‘alternative, better tattoo’

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<sup>3</sup> Artification is a term generally used to describe the transformation of non-art into art (Kosut, 2013:3) and is discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

(DeMello, 2000:6). They are used to define what the other class *is not*, or in constructing an 'other' to distance themselves from. This process of 'othering' was a recurring narrative during my interviews, and is something analysed further in chapter five.

The route into tattooing has, like the community itself, changed significantly over time. Traditionally, tattooists would learn the trade through a mentor and apprenticeships, and although this is still the most desirable method of learning, today there are machines available for non-tattoo artists to purchase and 'teach' themselves how to tattoo (DeMello, 2000:94) The apprentice system was a successful way of reproducing skills and techniques, while at the same time ensuring only a certain amount of people were entering the trade (Adams, 2012:157). This illustrates the gatekeeping that is used to manage the artists coming into the industry and relates to Wicks and Grandy's work discussed below. It may be even easier to 'teach yourself' tattooing now with the introduction of YouTube video tutorials and 'tattooing kits' being sold on websites such as eBay. TV shows such as *LA Ink* and *Miami Ink* might also play a part in the rise in people wanting to tattoo, and are met with mixed opinions from tattooists already working in the industry, as I discuss in chapter five. The new generation of tattoo artists surfacing throughout the 1980s and 90s saw an increase in tattooists and apprentices with art degrees, which also had a significant effect upon the industry (Kosut, 2013, DeMello 2000, Sanders, 1989). There was often internal resistance from first generation tattooists who saw newer artists as increasing competition within a field that was once relatively narrow and 'secretive' (Shapiro and Heinrich, 2012, Kosut, 2013:7).

Along with self-taught artists and how people enter the industry, the other significant transformation within the industry is *who* enters the industry. From Sanders in 1989, through to DeMello in 2000 and then Kosut in 2013, we can see how the tattoo industry, in the UK and USA, has increasingly become more aligned with the more traditional worlds of art. The shift from a working-class trade to one more focused upon aesthetics and artistic ability is thought by scholars to have been due to the influx of younger tattooists with art-school backgrounds who became

interested in tattooing as a form of expression, and an alternative medium for their art (Sanders, 1989:19, DeMello, 2000). The rise in tattooists with fine art degrees brought a new aesthetic and set of skills to the industry; although young people had always been attracted to the culture, the new tattooists were coming to work with knowledge of art theory and as DeMello states, a desire to transform tattooing (DeMello, 2000:84). Sanders argues that the younger artists, in comparison to some older, more traditional tattooists, place more importance on the creative value of the tattoo (Sanders, 1989:19). Tattooists often specialise in large pieces of custom work and are selective about the work they create (Sanders, 1989:19). However, as discussed in chapter seven, this is not the case for all artists and is somewhat of a privilege for the select few, dependent upon capital and status within the sub-culture. Sanders argues that for many of these artists, turning to tattooing was a way to avoid or distance themselves from the more traditional art world, which holds limitations in its career opportunities (Sanders, 1989:19). Kosut also notes that academy-trained artists are choosing to tattoo to support themselves and their struggling art careers, or are becoming full-time tattoo artists rather than attempting to enter the over-saturated and often impenetrable contemporary art world (Kosut, 2013:9). This was evident in some of the narratives within my own research, and may be of specific relevance to women artists, who may find that like so many other creative industries, the art world holds fewer opportunities for them than their male colleagues (De Montfort et al, 2016; Firestone, 1979); tattooing as a career may offer more opportunities and appear to be an achievable alternative. However, my research explores a different angle on this now that the tattoo industry is becoming saturated with artists, perhaps competition between artists and a struggle for authenticity within the mainstream means that tattooing does *not* provide women with an alternative to the art world at all?

In her paper *The Artification of Tattoo: Transformations within a cultural field* (2013), Kosut extends the analysis of class and its effect upon the artification of tattoo. In comparison to DeMello's 'middle-class turn', Kosut describes the industry as going through an 'academic turn' and argues that tattoo as an art form is now a commonly accepted idea inside of the tattoo community. For some, making efforts

to align with the art world brings legitimacy, respect and financial reward, although this may be met with resistance from other artists within the industry. The artification of tattoo reveals a literal and symbolic change in the medium of tattooing (Kosut, 2013:4). It is not uncommon for second-generation tattooists to produce art in other mediums such as oil, acrylic and watercolour and much of this artwork is displayed in studios, and in some cases, in specialist exhibitions in traditional art galleries. These artists have bridged the gap between the art world and tattoo culture by conceptualising the two realms as extensions of each other rather than as polar opposites (DiMaggio, 1987, Kosut, 2013:13). As a group, second-generation tattoo artists have been quite successful in redefining tattoo culture from inside of the field – terms such as ‘tattoo art’ rather than ‘tattoo’, and the classification of ‘tattoo artists’ rather than ‘tattooist’, are commonly used throughout the contemporary sub-culture and provide evidence that fine art ideologies and practices have been widely integrated and accepted (Kosut, 2013:14). However, the cultural status of tattoo remains in flux outside of the tattoo community, just as Pitts, Atkinson and DeMello have previously identified. Many of society’s non-tattooed mainstream still ‘read’ tattoos in the context of its marginalised and deviant reputation. At the same time, certain cultural gatekeepers have begun to popularise and elevate tattoo via exhibitions and shows at cultural institutions, meaning that as a cultural form, tattoo hovers between high, low and popular culture, depending upon the tattoo itself and the context in which it is produced and displayed (Kosut, 2010:3).

Kosut identifies, as do I in chapter five, that many tattooists have begun to construct their careers as tattoo *artists*, rather than tattooists, and by doing so, are positioning themselves closer to the art worlds via traditional practices and ideologies. This has resulted in an elevation of the practice from inside the field, as well as aesthetic innovations and new tattoo styles (Kosut, 2013:3). Kosut argues that there is evidence of a process of disassociation with the historically blemished role of the tattooist and a decided, conscious identification with that of the more traditional artist (Kosut, 2013:3). Kosut’s research demonstrates how individual actors can influence change within institutions, identifying how tattoo artists with cultural capital are able to use this power to redefine the field (Kosut, 2013:4). Kosut

notes that some artists purposefully align with the art world whilst distancing themselves from tattoo culture in order to gain art-influenced legitimacy and respect (Kosut, 2013:4). This was certainly evident in my own data – two of my participants specifically identified themselves as artists rather than tattooists. However, I understood their distancing from tattoo culture as being more complex than wanting to align with the more legitimate art world, and I would argue that their motives were in fact gender related; as I explain in chapter five. During my research, I found that some of the participants did indeed make attempts to distance themselves from the traditional tattoo culture – both symbolically through language, and physically through their choice of work place. However, in chapters five and six I also discuss the possibility of this not being an attempt to distance themselves from the deviance and stigma of tattoo culture, but instead an attempt to distance themselves from something more established within the industry itself – the dominant masculine norms of the sub-culture. The middle-class or academic turn has seen some artists attempt to distance themselves from the more traditional tattoo culture, and DeMello, Sanders and Kosut explain this in terms of artification and legitimacy: however, my research explores this dissociation through an original gendered lens.

### **Media Conflicts**

DeMello (2000:98) argues that the mainstream media and the discourses it produces were an integral part in the shift from tattooing being considered a working-class trade to a middle-class art practice. DeMello explores how mainstream media influences public perceptions of tattoo and the tattoo community. She argues that by repeating certain discourses around who is getting tattooed, and what images are being produced, they create the impression that tattoo is moving away from its 'undesirable' working-class roots, and is now more of a middle-class, respectable, art-orientated movement (DeMello, 2000:99). This creates a divide between 'sailors and bikers' - the undesirable groups previously associated with tattoo - and educated professionals. The media, DeMello argues, assists in creating a binary between two supposed opposite groups of tattoo consumers, on the one hand, an imagined lower-class, 'trashy' and undesirable consumer, and on the other hand, a new group of

tattooed people often portrayed as educated, professional and of higher class (DeMello, 2000:99). The media construct and retain these binary representations by being selective in who they interview or feature. Middle-class interviewees might use the more middle-class rhetoric which conveys the idea that tattoos 'mean' something to them. These narratives are well thought out and rehearsed, meaning they are 'acceptable' to the middle-class sensibilities and legitimised by a link to middle-class cultural capital. DeMello identifies the 'self-help' discourse and the new-age movement apparent in many tattoo narratives, suggesting that interviewees often draw upon therapeutic discourses, new age narratives or feminism to narrate their experiences (DeMello, 2000:100). DeMello has found through her research that many tattooists 'market themselves as modern-day therapists' (DeMello, 2000:144), and I will be considering how this observation relates to my own research in the analysis of my data.

DeMello wrote her ethnography in 2000 and there has since been an increase in television programmes focusing upon tattooing, in a variety of formats. Many of these TV programmes focus on people who regret their tattoos, or who have made seemingly 'bad' tattoo choices. The typical plot-line of the programmes usually centre around presenting tattoo wearers as foolish, uneducated and of a lower class than the middle-class consumers DeMello identifies in her ethnography. As DeMello describes in her ethnography and as discussed above, the producers of the television programmes are purposefully selective in who they present, and this often means the people presented are those who have chosen tattoos of supposedly poor quality, questionable subject matter, or 'unusual' position on the body. There is, therefore, a conflict and contradiction in media portrayals in relation to what DeMello identified in 2000. A paradox emerges here: at the same time, we see tattoo media focusing increasingly upon middle-class tattoo consumers – with some arguing that this silences the working-class roots of tattoo - and mainstream media showcasing the more comical or hyperbolic tattoo stories, presenting the idea that tattoo consumers are irresponsible subjects, worthy of ridicule. Underpinning this is a significant class divide, one with notable undertones of what is deemed authentic and legitimate, and by whom. This in turn influences not only the way tattoos and tattooed people are

considered in society, but relationships, hierarchies and capital within the community and subculture, as I discuss in chapter five.

### **Legitimising the Stigmatised**

Since the 'middle-class turn' as DeMello identified it, the issue of legitimisation of artists as individuals and the industry seems to have become a prevalent issue within the sub-culture and this is likely to be exacerbated by negative media representations. As noted above, from my exploration of the literature and research, there appears to be two strategies for legitimisation – one being the artification of tattoo as a cultural artefact, as addressed by Kosut, and the other being the medicalisation and subsequent professionalisation of the industry, which is addressed, for example, by Josh Adams in his paper, *Cleaning Up the Dirty Work: Professionalization and the Management of Stigma in the Cosmetic Surgery and Tattoo Industries* (2012). The paper focuses upon the tattoo and cosmetic surgery industries, exploring how both industries have undergone a transition from a reputation of deviance and disrepute to gaining varying degrees of mainstream acceptance and success (Adams, 2012:149). Adams refers to tattooing and cosmetic surgery as 'deviant labour' and refers to the 'dirty work' involved in each role. Adams explains the term 'dirty work' as referring to the physical work involved in tattooing (bodily contact, often involving blood, for example) and the stigma attached to tattooing (Adams, 2012: 150-1). These terms provide a grounding for Adams' research to explore the legitimisation of the tattoo industry and offers an explanation as to why artists feel they need to legitimise their role and position within the industry. Adams argues that it was not only the tattoo industry that was stigmatised, but as DeMello has described, it was the artists themselves, via negative historical associations with marginal and deviant groups (Adams, 2012:150).

Adams describes the tattoo industry and the cosmetic surgery industry as specialising in the modification of bodies with varying degrees of social acceptability. Although both industries, on some degree began as 'disreputable fields', they have achieved new levels of acceptability (Adams, 2012:150). Sanders also argues that

since the tattoo 'renaissance'<sup>4</sup>, notable changes have occurred within and around the tattoo sub-culture, such that although some of the mainstream public still define tattooing as a deviant activity, there have been vast changes in the perception of tattooing as a practice (Sanders, 1989:18). Between Sanders writing in 1989 and Adams in 2012, there has been a documented shift in mainstream perceptions of tattooing. However, I would argue that the negative perception of tattooing as a deviant practice has not disappeared completely; one only needs to read 'below the line' on online tattoo-related media articles to realise that prejudice and negative attitudes still exist. This goes some way in explaining why artists feel the need to legitimise their careers amongst mainstream circles. Adams argues that the apprenticeship system functions as an internal means of socialisation that may lead to an improvement in the industry but does little to communicate the improvements or level of professionalism to the more mainstream public (Adams, 2012:158); therefore, although internally, the industry appears more professional and legitimate, this is not always conveyed to people outside of the sub-culture. Practitioners in both the tattooing and cosmetic surgery fields have worked hard to renovate their image in the eyes of the mainstream public (Adams, 2012:149).

Although many artists are celebrated and treated as celebrity-like figures *within* the tattoo community, they have had to strive to achieve social legitimacy, engaging in impression management to enable the industry to grow inside and outside of their niche fields, reducing the stigma within the mainstream (Adams, 2012:152). Legitimacy, for tattooing, as previous research demonstrates, is attempted not only through artification, as discussed above, but through the medicalisation<sup>5</sup> of tattooing as a practice. Adams argues that it is important, in

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Tattoo Renaissance' has been used by several academics to describe the period in which Western tattooing shifted from its association with sailors and 'deviant' practices, to become popular in subcultures and increasingly mainstream society. The dates of the renaissance are however slightly conflicting between texts: Sanders identifies the renaissance to mean the 1970s, whereas Pitts suggests it began in the 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> Medicalisation is used in this context to describe the way in which tattooists and tattoo studios adopt medical-like procedures and practices to increase their professional appearance – for example, visible sterilising equipment, visible health

legitimising industries, that they are 'reframed' from potentially deviant cultural practices and focus is drawn to the 'non-stigmatized aspects of the work' (Adams, 2012:158). The conflict between the medicalisation of the industry and needing to adhere to specified standards of safety and hygiene mean that to be a 'good' artist, there is a level of conformity needed, regardless of how 'alternative' the artist wishes to remain. Adams identifies strategies used to reduce the stigma, creating a tattooing culture which appears to be consistent with the mainstream and dominant norms and expectations (Adams, 2012:152). Irwin (2003) also explores how artists may conform to mainstream sensibilities to ensure a fluid position within both the sub-culture and the mainstream. Creating more positive associations, improving the standards of the work involved and focusing on the non-stigmatised aspects of the work are all strategies employed to reduce the stigma once attached to the industry (Adams, 2012:152). This shows a negotiation between the mainstream and the sub-culture and is discussed further in chapter five.

Adams discusses the medicalisation of what used to be deviant industries – according to him, using the 'cultural authority of medicine' can help 'normalise and legitimate' what might otherwise we seen as deviant (Adams, 2012:161). Although this probably does not apply to tattoo as much as it does the cosmetic industry, the increase in tattoo hygiene standards certainly has made a difference, and studios are always keen to promote and display their high levels and standards of hygiene and technology. Adams calls this 'medical façade' – the use of medical terminology, structure and aesthetics to symbolically associate themselves with medical practice (Adams, 2012:162). Also, as DeMello (2000) identifies, some artists refer to themselves as 'therapists', which further medicalises, and therefore legitimises, the role of the tattooist as something 'more' than a tattooist.

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and hygiene certification. Although many of these procedures are a legal requirement, studios can purposefully make them more prominent and visible to further legitimise the studio.

Medicalisation and Artification are two strategies that tattooists within the industry have deployed in order to legitimise their trade amongst the mainstream. However, what Adams' research does not consider, is whether gender plays a role in this legitimisation process. This could be considered in two ways: has the increase in women had an effect upon tattooing being accepted and increasingly legitimised within mainstream culture? And, what do women have to do to gain legitimacy and authenticity? Do women have to work harder than their male counterparts to obtain social and sub-cultural respect?

### **The Tattoo Community**

DeMello suggests that the notion of a tattoo community is a relatively new thing. Previously, tattooists were secretive, would not share information or socialise with fellow tattooists because they were regarded as competition in the trade (DeMello, 2000:21), as we saw in chapter one, namely through the quote from Lazonga who said a 'divide and conquer' ethos was encouraged between artists, discouraging friendly relationships. DeMello also argues that since the middle-class turn in the community, values of competitiveness, individuality and aesthetics have been 'grafted onto a working-class tradition that, while never fully egalitarian, was not preoccupied with status as the current community is' (DeMello, 2000:43). DeMello's observations are somewhat contradictory here. Firstly, DeMello argues that prior to 1976, when the first tattoo convention was held, there was no sense of community amongst the tattoo industry and artists were fearful of giving away their 'secrets' of the trade (DeMello, 2000:21). Secondly however, DeMello suggests that the influence of the middle-classes on tattoo has seen an increase in competitiveness, something which was not deemed important in the previous working-class industry. What DeMello is perhaps suggesting is that today's industry is built upon status, in contrast to the past, where artists were less distracted by status and instead focused upon not giving away trade and losing paying customers. For DeMello, the community has been affected by class changes within the community: both in terms of tattoo consumers and tattoo artists. She argues that there is evidence suggesting rifts in the community exist (although she also argues

that there were rifts within the industry before the middle-class influence), showing the hierarchical nature of the sub-culture (DeMello, 2000:5).

Katherine Irwin's *Saints and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Positive and Negative Deviants* (2003), and David Wicks and Gina Grandy's *What Cultures Exist in the Tattooing Collectivity? Ambiguity, Membership and Participation* (2007) both explore and identify the micro-communities that the artists move in and out of during their time within the industry and community. Irwin conducted participant observation of tattoos and tattooing between the 1990s and early 2000s; the research included a 5-year ethnographic study of professional tattooing and tattoo collection, in-depth interviews with collectors, and interviews with non-elite collectors (people with only one or two tattoos) (2003:31-33). Irwin identified two social 'types' within the 'elite tattoo world' (Irwin, 2003:29). The first group Irwin identifies is the 'elite collector': members of this group not only collect a large number of tattoos, but they 'desire the best art available', which may involve paying large amounts of money for work by well-known artists and travelling across the world to reach them (Irwin, 2003:29). Irwin argues that this makes this an exclusive group as few people can afford the work or the travelling. However, as this research was conducted in 2003, I would argue that this group of 'elite' collectors has grown – this may be due to the increase in artists, the quality of the tattoos by a larger number of artists, more widespread circulation of information about artists through social media and tattoo media, and the rise in tattoo conventions, meaning the movement between international artists. Irwin argues that elite collectors often see themselves as experts in the field and therefore boundaries between collector and artist are blurred (Irwin, 2003:29). However, I would disagree with the suggestion of blurred boundaries between artist and client, and in chapter five I discuss legitimacy and the 'right' kind of consumer, exploring the relationship between client and artists in relation to capital and authenticity, suggesting that for some artists, firm boundaries between themselves and clients *are* maintained.

The second group Irwin identifies is the artists themselves. Irwin suggests that artists make up the majority of the elite collector group, because they are amongst

the few that can afford the artwork by well-known, well-respected artists (Irwin, 2003:29). I would however suggest it is more complex than this. Not only can artists afford work by popular tattoo artists, but they also have an increased knowledge base on the artists available, and more of an 'authority' on who is 'good' and who is not, and so are more likely to know who to go to for their tattoos. This obviously brings into focus the 'good' and 'bad' tattoo binary which so many artists and consumers prescribe to, and is something I explore throughout my analysis chapters – what does it mean when tattoos are labelled good or bad? Who has the authority to label tattoos as either good or bad?

Irwin suggests that elite collectors and artists sit at the top of the tattoo hierarchy and are the trendsetters for the tattoo subculture and community (Irwin, 2003:30). Irwin also suggests that members of the elite tattooing community embody 'ideological conflicts' –they are 'deviants' in the sense that they are crossing boundaries and societal norms, sitting on the margins of society; however, they are also 'elite' and occupy a privileged position within the tattooing community (Irwin, 2003:33). Irwin uses the terms 'negative' and 'positive deviants' to describe the fluid relationship that the artists have between the subculture and the mainstream, and this introduces the paradox experienced by tattoo artists in relation to status and capital; this is an important area of my own research and I will in subsequent chapters explore how status and capital are negotiated within and outside of the industry, and importantly, how gender affects these negotiations.

Irwin found that collectors and artists often see the popularisation of tattoos as threatening tattoo's 'fringe status' and with that, a threat to the sub-culture too (Irwin, 2003:38). Being part of something that was once marginal but is increasing in popularity within the mainstream is problematic for some who have chosen to express their non-mainstream beliefs and attitudes. Irwin suggests that many members of the community were waiting for a time when tattoos are not fashionable – interestingly, this article was written in 2003 and since then, tattoos have grown rapidly as a mainstream interest and activity, and are more popular and common now than they ever have been. Tattoos did not 'go out of fashion' as hoped or

anticipated by some of Irwin's participants. One of Irwin's participants described being embarrassed by the popularity of tattoo in 2003 and in their interview, talked about how due to information being disseminated into the mainstream, non-tattooed people come to believe they have the knowledge and expertise to discuss tattoos with artists and collectors (Irwin, 2003:38). However, is the relationship between artists and mainstream society as simple as artists feeling negatively towards the popularisation of tattoo, or is there an element of the industry that benefits from the mainstream adoption of tattooing?

Irwin describes how some artists benefit from being able to 'pass' in mainstream culture by adhering to 'core mainstream symbols and behaviors' (Irwin, 2003:41), meaning they might hold status within and outside of the subculture, some even constructing themselves as 'high culture icons' (Irwin, 2003:41). Irwin suggests that members of the tattoo elite 'occupy a varied status in society' due to their conformity as well as their deviance (Irwin, 2003:49). This suggestion is, however, at risk of creating an unnecessary binary between conforming and rebelling, one which I believe we must analyse in more nuanced ways, as I hope to do throughout my analysis.

Elite members of the community often travel the world to fulfil guest spots in international studios or work conventions, and are sometimes seen as living glamorous, celebrity-like lifestyles (Irwin, 2003:47). Some collectors share this celebrity-like status, especially with the emergence of tattoo magazines featuring 'cover girls' and social media (Irwin, 2003:47). This celebrity capital was something discussed throughout the narratives of my participants, and is discussed in my analysis, where I look at the complex and nuanced dynamics of status and capital, and again, ask what effect gender has upon this dynamic.

In their paper, '*What Cultures exist in the Tattooing Collectivity?*' David Wicks and Gina Grandy (2007) explore notions of collective membership, participation and ambiguities amongst tattoo artists. This is one of the first and few pieces of research to focus solely on tattoo artists. Although this piece was written in 2007, I have found

that over ten years later, research which focuses solely upon artists is scarce. The authors argue that exploring the voices of tattooists allows for a different appreciation of the profession and industry, as much of the tattoo literature focuses upon consumers (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:352). The paper explores tattoo artists and the profession as a 'cultural structure', looking at how the artists construct their own professional identities within this structure, or structures, looking at the socialisation processes of the tattooing profession as a collectivity (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:351). Wicks and Grandy focus upon the ambiguities between the individual's participation in a cultural collective, rather than the individual's stories behind their tattoos (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:350). Like my own findings, the paper recognises that artists categorise themselves into groups or collectives - often in relation to whether they are apprenticeship-taught or self-taught - and that this identification influences how artists relate to, and engage with the rest of the collective (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:350). In chapter five, I explore how artists might construct the 'other' artist in comparison to themselves to distinguish their own place and position within the collective. Wicks and Grandy explore the ways in which socialisation of artists influences their participation and their engagement with the cultures that exist within the tattoo collective – illustrating how personal (agentic) and social (group) identity construction influence the members of the subculture (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:351). Wicks and Grandy identify subcultural socialisation as a predominant factor in how the cultural values and norms of the subculture are maintained, and therefore their research focuses on artists who are self-taught, and those who learned through an apprenticeship (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:351). Socialisation is not only a prominent factor in the tattoo subculture, but it has been researched as a significant influence in other alternative subcultures, which will be explored in the next chapter. My own analysis in the following chapters will explore the role of gender in socialisation: is socialisation into the tattoo subculture different for women? And if so, what effect might this have upon their position within the industry?

Wicks and Grandy's research found participants who constructed their professional identities around notions of respect, tradition and sacrifice and this was

consistently aligned (by apprenticed artists) with learning through an apprenticeship (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:354). Self-taught artists construct their identities as 'good artists' through narratives attached to their artistry skills and exclusive designs, rather than their membership to what Wicks and Grandy term the self-taught collectivity (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:356). Like DeMello (2000:192), the paper identifies respect as a highly-regarded and important aspect of being a tattooer – and suggests respect manifests in 2 ways: firstly, respect for experienced tattooists by apprentices and secondly, respect from peers, which is only achieved via an apprenticeship (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:358). My research, as discussed throughout the subsequent chapters, identifies a third manifestation of respect: respect from clients or customers. Unlike Wicks and Grandy's research, however, I look at this in terms of capital within and throughout the industry and community. Interestingly, Wicks and Grandy also identify (as I do), the existence of gatekeepers in the industry and suggest that an apprenticeship serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, determining who can hold a respected position in the industry and who cannot (Wicks and Grandy, 2007:358). Yet, it is Wicks and Grandy's male participants who identify gatekeeping as a potentially positive aspect of apprenticeships. This raises a crucial question: but how do women artists experience apprenticeships? Wicks and Grandy have only one woman participant, and they do not address gender issues. My research will expand on questions raised by Wicks and Grandy, asking how socialisation and respect are influenced by gender relations within the industry and beyond.

### **Race and Racism within Tattoo Culture**

Margot Mifflin, in her book *A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (2013) suggests that the mainstream acceptance of tattoo has not only broadened the culture in terms of class, as discussed above, but also in terms of racial diversity (2013:119). However, Mifflin then uses the example of Roxx, a mixed-race woman tattoo artist who founded her own studio in San Francisco in 2004, who describes herself as feeling like an outsider in an industry 'comprised of outsiders' (Mifflin, 2013:120). Mifflin argues that one group noticeably absent from the emerging

community of new artists is black women (2013:120). In chapter one, I noted Jacci Gresham, the first woman of colour to become a tattoo artist; Mifflin notes that since Jacci, there has not been one woman of colour who has gained the same level of recognition as Jacci, for their work as a tattoo artist. She states that although there are relatively high numbers of African-American women getting tattooed, not many women of colour become artists (Mifflin, 2012:120). Mifflin does interview a small number of black women artists for her research, and all speak of the lack of black women artists in the industry and the difficulties they have had in finding apprenticeships and studios to employ them (Mifflin, 2013:120-1). Mifflin's research offers a brief look at women of colour in the industry, and the barriers they may face within the industry, it is not an in-depth exploration of the racial inequalities within tattoo culture, and this, it appears, is something lacking within academic research on tattoos and tattooing.

The relationship between race and tattoo could be divided into three overarching and related issues: Racial inequality and racism within the industry; the appropriation of cultural or tribal tattoo imagery and practices;<sup>6</sup> and racist tattoo imagery. However, research on any of these issues is hard to find.

Victoria Pitts addresses the appropriation of tribal bodily practices by contemporary Western culture and argues that this is most overtly seen in the 'modern primitivist'<sup>7</sup> movement (Pitts, 2003:119), which, Pitts states, 'plays on the modern West's long-held ambivalence toward indigenous bodies and cultures' (Pitts, 2003:119). The appropriation of culturally specific body modification, seen as

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<sup>6</sup> As I write this, the cultural appropriation of tattoo imagery is becoming an increasingly debated topic. As people become more aware of cultural appropriation, the wearing of tattoos such as 'tribal' designs popular in the 1990s, Mexican Day of the Dead designs and Maori tattoo is under scrutiny and criticism for being culturally insensitive if worn by anybody outside of the respective culture.

<sup>7</sup> The modern primitive movement is a subculture within tattoo culture, believed to have been created in the 1980s in the USA. Fakir Musafar, who claims to have coined the term 'modern primitive', describes it as 'a non-tribal person who responds to primal urges and does something with the body' (DeMello, 2000:174).

somehow both abject and appealing, has been used to create the image of the 'exotic other' and in turn, further reproduces the notion of an 'us and them' (Pitts, 2003: 120). On the one hand, non-indigenous people might voyeuristically look on at 'other' cultures and their body modification practices with fascination and disgust, and yet on the other hand, might appropriate parts of these modification processes for their own body projects. In the 1990s, Modern Primitives criticised the fashion industry for their co-option of tribal body art, unhappy with the fashionisation and subsequent popularisation of the modern primitive aesthetic (Pitts, 2003:143). Polynesian black-work tattoo, and block-colour black 'tribal' designs were increasingly popular throughout the 1990s, and soon became a rather mainstream symbol of masculinity and rebellion. On the one hand, therefore, we have the Modern Primitive movement, appropriating certain cultural body modifications, and yet, at the same time criticising the mainstream for the commercialisation of this appropriation – highlighting yet another paradox between the subculture and the mainstream, and the intersection of race and appropriation. Of course, the individuals engaging in appropriation, or the modern primitive movement, cannot be considered as a homogenous group. However, very often, it is the white Westerner's body that appears as a blank canvas, ready for reinvention of the self through the appropriation and consumption of 'exotic' otherness (Pitts, 2003:149). Non-Western bodies are, marked as exotic rather than blank and are read under a privileged Western gaze (Pitts, 20013:149). There have been an increasing number of media articles focusing upon cultural appropriation of tattoo imagery (Coles, 2016, Richards, 2015), but academic research is yet to fully address current discussions. Although Pitts, as discussed here, explores race in terms of appropriation and 'modern primitivism', her focus is on racialised tattoos, cultural symbols and tattooing practices rather than looking at race and racism within the tattoo industry as a potentially structural and institutionalised problem.

### **Conclusion**

As this chapter illustrates, there is existing research on collectors and consumers of tattoos that explores hierarchies and status within the community and

sub-culture, rather than the individual's motive behind getting tattooed, foregrounded so often in previous tattoo-related research. This research provides useful insight into the interrelations of the sub-culture, and relates to my own analysis with regards to status and capital. However, unlike my own research, analyses such as Wicks and Grandy's do not label or identify capital as such and, more importantly, does not address the issue of gender or use gender as a lens through which to explore hierarchies.

Although gender has been approached in terms of tattooed women as consumers in much of the research, there is a notable lack of focus upon women tattooers, which places women in a position of passive consumer rather than active producer. Research has also neglected to explore how women and gender relations have influenced the tattoo industry; although the complexities of the industry in terms of internal relations and dynamics have been, in some ways, investigated in terms of hierarchies, this is often not through a gendered lens. With an increase in women artists in the industry, research needs to acknowledge the importance of this shift and represent the women who are purposefully and inadvertently changing the nature of the industry.

When I was conducting a search and review of existing literature, one of the first papers I read was Mary Russo's, *Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory* (1997). Although Russo was not referring to tattooing specifically, this quote resonated with me, and somehow embodies what my research is striving to achieve:

Women circulate as signs but are not theorised as sign producers.  
(Russo, 1997:328)

As Braunberger's research on tattooed women suggests, tattooing in Western culture was historically thought of as something men did for or to other men, with the exclusion of women (Braunberger, 2000:4). The situation has changed, but tattooing as an industry is still predominantly male dominated and societal perceptions may still be influenced by this. During my research, I went on a camping

trip, and when explaining my research to a fellow camper, the first question he asked was 'why would a woman want to become a tattooist?'. Somehow, I think for much of the non-tattooed mainstream, tattooing is still seen as a 'man's job'. Research that has focused upon tattoo artists has largely neglected and ignored the issue of gender. Research has tended to focus upon the subversion of femininity but not the negotiation of these femininities and the compromises women are faced with. The focus upon reclaiming and subverting is so central to much of the existing research on women and tattooing, that negotiation or conflict is somewhat overlooked. Gender has not been explored in terms of gender relations within the industry. What effects are women having upon an industry that has been male dominated for such a long time? How is the industry responding to an increase in women artists? Are women having to work harder or differently than their male colleagues to be respected in the industry? What do femininities and masculinities mean for the sub-culture and how do gender dynamics affect and influence the industry? Does the fact that the industry is less male dominated make it less highly masculinised?

The effect of a shift in class dynamics (specifically middle-class appropriation) on the industry has been researched previously. However, the effect of a shift in gender dynamics, and the potential this brings to disrupt the masculine nature of the industry, has not been researched explicitly, which is where my research contributes to existing knowledge. Race and tattooing is another significantly under-researched area within academia. Although scholars such as Victoria Pitts acknowledge the whiteness of tattoo culture, there is a lack of research exploring and problematising this, or representing people of colour within tattoo culture.

Current and previous research on tattoos and tattooing shows that there are contradictions, tensions and ambivalence experienced by members of the sub-culture. My research will build upon and develop an exploration into these paradoxes, in relation to women in the industry and their role as artists. The next chapter will look at literature on women and subculture, a field which unlike tattooing literature, has focused more upon the negotiations between femininity and

hegemonic masculinities within and across subcultures.

### Chapter Three

#### Gender and Subcultures: Bringing Women to the Front

When, aged 18, I walked into a tattoo studio ready to get tattooed for the first time, I felt like I was entering a different world. A world that I had been peering into from afar until that moment – reading magazines, studying the tattoos of my musician idols, planning and drawing designs on myself with a pen. When I stood outside the studio with the tattooist, post-tattoo, I felt like I'd finally made it into 'the club' and, like the participants in Ferreira's (2011) research discussed in the previous chapter, I could not wait to show my tattoo off, declaring both my 'difference' to the mainstream and my affiliation (and therefore similarities) with a subculture. As my tattoo collection grew, and my affiliation with the world of tattooing developed, the feeling of belonging to *something bigger than myself* was amplified. I was also developing a connection with alternative music, specifically grunge, punk and subsequently, riot grrrl culture. Once again, I was experiencing the emotions of being on the peripheries of the mainstream and yet, a sense of belonging to something offering an alternative; being part of a subculture meant I was living and experiencing what I later became interested in studying from an academic perspective. It was only when I began to think about subcultures as a sociologist, that I started to consider the composition of various subcultures; as the popularity of tattooing increased across, amongst and outside of the traditional 'subculture', I began to wonder if the world of tattooing could be considered a *subculture* at all.

This chapter explores subcultural research, with a specific focus on women in subcultures and notions of agency, structure and resistance interjected with negotiations of femininity. Although there has been work by early feminists on girls and subcultures (Mc Robbie and Garber, 1991; McRobbie, 1993), my work focuses more upon *women* and subculture – specifically utilising the work of scholars like Samantha Holland, Lauraine LeBlanc and Maddie Breeze.

The chapter will begin with a discussion on terminology surrounding subcultures and communities; utilising DeMello's and Atkinson's research, I make

decisions on the terms I will use throughout my analysis. The chapter focuses upon capital as a significant concept in all research on subcultures. I look at subcultural and gendered capital specifically, and how this capital is used to create and maintain hierarchies within subcultures. I focus upon research on punk, skateboarding and roller derby as these subcultures, because of the way women are placed within the subcultures, are most relevant to my own work. I explore resistance as a subcultural characteristic, introducing the complex and nuanced negotiations of performing resistance, providing a grounding for my discussion on resistance throughout the forthcoming chapters. Samantha Holland's (2004) work on femininity is a vital influence on this chapter, and the subsequent analysis of my own data. Maddie Breeze's (2015) work on seriousness highlights the importance of acknowledging and exploring the ambivalence felt surrounding subcultural membership and what that means for subcultural participants.

### **Industry, Community and a Sub-Cultural Field: A Note on Terminology**

Whilst I aim to avoid the distraction of an in-depth debate around the nuanced terminology and definitions of subculture, I do need to clarify the terms I have chosen to use for the purpose of my research. As my work focuses largely on the artists themselves, it is especially important that I can clearly differentiate between tattoo collectors as a generalised group, and tattoo artists as an interdependent but distinct collective.

The tattooed community has never been a homogenous group and with the appropriation and popularisation of tattooing through popular culture, I feel it would be inaccurate and unhelpful to use the term *subculture* to describe it. Both Atkinson (2003) and Muggleton (2000) have acknowledged that the term subculture is no longer empirically valid or indeed an appropriate term to describe tattoo collectors. As Muggleton suggests, it has become more difficult to show resistance through style and symbols due to the blurring of boundaries between what is deemed 'alternative' and what is deemed 'mainstream' (Muggleton, 1998, 2000). However, tattooing as an aesthetic practice is still used by members of many subcultures to display

subversive style and acts of resistance or affiliation. In his research, Atkinson describes meeting 'riot grrrls, goths and psychobillies' who all used tattoos to demonstrate their subcultural membership and subsequent 'dislocation' from mainstream culture (Atkinson, 2003:99). Tattooed people do not constitute a subculture, but tattooing as a practice intersects numerous subcultures and therefore is what I would call, *trans-subcultural*. The formation of the tattooed community means that there are sub-communities within the bigger tattooed collective, and there are subcultures which transcend the tattooed collective. The collective is fluid and transient, rather than fixed and easily definable.

The tattoo artists, being the trans-subcultural practitioners within the tattoo community, form a distinct but interconnected group within the community. My research will show that although artists should not be deemed a subculture per se, as a group they undoubtedly display subcultural-like attributes whilst working in the tattoo *industry*. To explore the relationships, hierarchies and other subcultural-like aspects, I need to retain a link with the term subculture and with subcultural theory. I therefore propose that tattoo artists constitute and operate within a *sub-cultural field*. The introduction of the hyphen retains the link with subculture as a structural and theoretical term, at the same time as denoting a collective that if not a subculture of its own, is certainly sub-cultural in many ways and is certainly on the peripheries of mainstream culture. It also allows me to use subcultural theory on some levels, to analyse the aspects that *do* mirror a subculture, but at the same time, provide a distinct marker to illustrate the degree of separation between the terms. I will also therefore, use the term *sub-cultural capital* with the addition of the hyphen to indicate capital that has transferred, or transfers between the mainstream and sub-culture, meaning it is no longer specifically *subcultural* but yet retains some elements of being counter-cultural. *Sub-cultural capital*, therefore, describes the capital that fluctuates between, and permeates both the mainstream and the sub-culture, yet strives to retain its subcultural-like status, namely to preserve 'authenticity'. I will also continue to use *subcultural capital*, without the hyphen, when referring to capital present exclusively within subcultures.

I have chosen to use the term *community* to describe the collective of tattooed people in which the artists work. In her ethnography, *Bodies of Inscription*, DeMello (2000) explores the creation of a community around the appreciation of tattoos. DeMello explains that although the term community could refer to any tattooed person, she uses the term to mean those tattooed people who 'actively embrace the notion of community and who pursue community-orientated activities (like attending tattoo shows)' (2000:3). She acknowledges that although the tattoo community is open to all tattooed people, it is indeed hierarchical and is largely defined by elite tattoo artists and middle-class tattoo magazine publishers (DeMello, 2000:3). DeMello admits that community is a contested term in relation to the tattoo collective, and that it may hide the significant variation and conflict within the tattoo culture; indeed, within the community there are many over-lapping, intertwining groups and sub-communities (DeMello, 2000:3). DeMello recognises that the group is not homogenous, and there is a hierarchical nature to the internal relations of the community, but her work focuses upon how the community itself is defined, constructed and maintained. As Atkinson states, the tattooed collective may not be one homogeneous group, but having and getting tattoos does mean you share something with other tattooed individuals, and it provides a talking point (Atkinson, 2003: 109). Therefore, for the purposes of my research, I will use community to describe the collective of tattooed people. Although it may be a community that is transient and fluid, with members opting in and out of involvement over time, I would argue that in certain contexts (studios and conventions, for example), there is certainly a sense of community that being tattooed can offer.

Atkinson (2003) has criticised DeMello's work for overlooking sociality within the tattoo community, and suggests that we may need to consider tattoo enthusiasts as more of a 'figuration', in line with Elias' conceptualisation of social figurations (Elias, 1991).

Atkinson provides a detailed discussion of the structural framework and the interrelations of the collective, contesting the 'postmodernist theoretical understanding' (2003:108) that tattooing is a highly individualistic practice. He states that his research shows narratives alluding to tattooing are understood in terms of

interdependent social interactions and relationships (Atkinson, 2003:109). Atkinson states that the narratives he has encountered in his own research do not suggest that 'mainstream theoretical constructions of subcultures readily apply to the group of tattoo enthusiasts in Canada' (Atkinson, 2003:95). He therefore suggests that if we consider tattoo enthusiasts to be a figuration rather than a subculture, we can explore the ways in which individuals experience tattooing in highly interdependent ways (Atkinson, 2003:109). From choosing the design and the studio, to visiting the studio and getting tattooed, there is a series of interdependent processes which may not be the same for every tattooed person, but are nevertheless common experiences, shared by most tattooed individuals (Atkinson, 2003: 109). Tattoo enthusiasts are therefore linked by these common corporeal and interactive processes, and this, Atkinson argues, is how the figuration is formed (Atkinson, 2003: 117). Further to this, Atkinson suggests that the participants' lives are not organised around tattooing, and that there is no central ideology around becoming tattooed; every individual's story and experience is different, and this is another factor in why the collective should not be termed a subculture. My research explores the experiences of those who may need and want to organise their lives around tattooing (because it is their career) and therefore it is important to acknowledge this difference between Atkinson's work and my own.

Similar to my research, Atkinson discusses the interpersonal relationships between artists and how these develop within the figuration. He states that previous research has implied a level of competition between artists - sometimes affected by class, stylistic preferences and territory. In contrast to this, Atkinson's own research shows artists (Canadian artists specifically) to be much 'friendlier' than previous research has suggested – exchanging business cards, recommending each other to clients, sharing hints and technique tips (Atkinson, 2003:120).

There is certainly evidence to suggest a level of interconnected community and sociality within and throughout the collective of artists. However, there are still subcultural-like aspects at play, such as hierarchies and capital, as I will discuss throughout my analytical chapters. Therefore, although there are similarities

between Atkinson's findings and my own, I would argue that the sense of competition and inequality between artists is still evident to some degree, amongst some artists, and this has influenced my exploration of the collective of artists as a sub-cultural-like group, if not a definite subculture.

If *figuration* can be used to describe and explore the interactions and the practices that members of the collective engage in, then perhaps community can be used to describe the formation in which the figuration exists? I am sure Atkinson would argue that to place the figuration he describes within the confines of the term 'community' is somewhat debilitating to the fluidity and the interactivity of a figuration. However, for the purposes of my research, I require a somewhat generalised term in order to differentiate the community *in general* from the collective of tattoo artists. The figuration, in Atkinson's terms, includes collectors and artists and the interrelationship between them – this is an important aspect of Atkinson's definition of the figuration, but for my own research, I need to clearly differentiate between collectors and artists. Thus, 'community' and 'industry' seem more apt.

### **Subcultural Women: What is Missing?**

Research by Hebdige (1979) and Jefferson and Hall (2006), and work criticising the traditional Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) approach to subculture, including Muggleton (2000), and Hodkinson (2002) are all important examples of subcultural theory and research. There is a conflict between the CCCS work on subculture, and the more recent focus on agency and the individual in 'youth culture' and post-subcultural studies (Hodkinson, 2016). The CCCS tradition has been criticised for its lack of ethnographic research, and a failure to give a voice to the groups they sought to explore (Haefler, 2004:408, Muggleton, 2000). More contemporary theorists have used ethnographic research to explore and acknowledge the fluidity of subcultures, and to interrogate the notion of resistance through the subjective accounts of participants (Haefler, 2004:408). Poststructuralist theorists have further complicated the notion of resistance, arguing for the

exploration of subcultures from the participants' point of view and suggesting that many narratives can be true simultaneously, due to the complex, fragmented nature of subcultures (Haefler, 2004:408; Muggleton 2000; Rose 1994; Grossberg 1992). I will pick this thread up throughout my argument in chapter seven surrounding agency, structure and resistance: although the tattoo collective is not a subculture per se, its structural workings and characteristics in terms of capital and hierarchy mean it is important to explore the collective as a structure of some kind, with agents acting *within* it but not necessarily always *independently* of it.

It is well documented that women and girls have been largely ignored by much of the previous research on subcultures (McRobbie, 1991, 1994). If women and girls were included in research, they were likely to be placed in a position of silent by-stander or girlfriend. To return to Russo's quote used in the previous chapter, girls are theorised as signs but not sign producers (Russo, 1997). It is not only important therefore, that girls and women are written into subcultural research, but equally important that they are researched as subcultural *authors* and credited for the roles they play in the *creation* of community and culture, rather than just consumption of it. Another important critique of previous subcultural research is its focus on youth, and neglect of any older subcultural members. 'Youth' subcultures have been an important part of sociological research (Hall, Jefferson, 1993), but subcultures and subcultural lifestyles are not reserved for the young, and this, like gender, has been largely ignored throughout empirical research. Early feminist writers including McRobbie (1991, 1993); Lees (1993) and Thornton (1995) worked on redressing the balance by researching girls in subcultures, but there remains a lack of research on the continuing practices and participation of adult women (Holland, 2004:24).

My research seeks to address both omissions, and to contextualise the themes of the interview data, I found it useful to look at research and literature on a varied selection of subcultures. Looking at women in subcultural sport such as roller derby and skateboarding raised themes similar to those in my own research; although sport may seem to hold very few similarities to the world of tattooing, the subcultural characteristics, the hegemonic masculinities and the effect these have

upon the women within the subcultures show significant parallels. Research on music subcultures also provided useful theoretical tools and comparable themes to frame my research. My research focuses upon women and subcultures to explore the dynamics that often mean women's experiences are different from men's. Very often, alternative subcultures are male-dominated and typically 'masculine' in their presentation, traits and practices and therefore, the way in which subcultures are experienced is very different for men and women, boys and girls. Literature specifically on roller derby and riot grrrl is slightly different, because these subcultures are inherently women-led and therefore, not male-dominated; but this literature does offer insights into alternative versions of femininities, resistance, and the creation of women-only spaces – all themes relevant and evident throughout my own analysis and discussions.

### **Subcultural Women: Resistant Women**

Lauraine LeBlanc's *Pretty in Punk* (1999) researches girls and women in the punk subculture. LeBlanc looks at resistance, arguing that too often researchers depict girls as 'passive victims of female socialization' and 'dupes of the cultural forces that degrade them' (1999:13). Punk, although being male-dominated, did have active and visible women members in the scene; however, like tattooed women in the tattoo community, they were largely forgotten or ignored by academics and written out of punk history (Reddington, 2003). Women were visible members of this spectacular subculture, and yet forgotten by academics writing about punk. LeBlanc's research shows punk to be a male-dominated subculture, where girls and women are at risk of emulating the norms and roles of femininity expected within the mainstream (LeBlanc, 1999:68). She describes girls being portrayed as 'toys for boys', but also argues that focusing solely upon this aspect of the gender relations within the punk culture does not allow for a discussion of girls' resistance, and risks portraying them as passive 'victims' (LeBlanc, 1999:68). LeBlanc argues that researchers, as well as exploring the difficulties of socialisation, must present girls as agents in their construction of gender identities, in order to properly document the strategies of resistance to dominant ideals of femininity (LeBlanc, 1999:13). Research

should focus upon the voices of the subcultural members, and therefore the subjective accounts of the individuals who are actively resisting the structures and ideas (Leong, 1992). As noted previously, the CCCS has been criticised for their research, and LeBlanc argues that with this lack of attention to the first-hand experiences of subcultural members - and the focus instead on semiotic readings of symbolic cultural aspects such as music, language and dress - voices are lost (LeBlanc, 1999:15). LeBlanc suggests that feminist concepts offer important insights into how resistance is constructed, and how it can be explored and identified through research, most notably by the exploration of discursive accounts (1999:17). Importantly, resistance is often situated by subcultural studies between conflicting (and false) binaries of conforming to the dominant order, and sitting in opposition to it, the individual resister remains in the social system they contest (LeBlanc, 1999:17). This is an important aspect of my own research: it was noted in the previous chapter that tattooed women resist dominant norms of beauty and femininity, but remain within the society that constructs these norms, which also relates to my discussions surrounding negotiation, compromise and ambivalence throughout my analysis.

LeBlanc identifies three distinct moments in the act of resistance: a subjective account of oppression (real or imagined), a desire to counter the oppression, and an action (defined as word, thought or deed) (LeBlanc, 1999:14). It is this account of resistance that provides the grounding for chapter seven, where I explore in more detail the ways in which my participants are making attempts to resist the hegemonic order of the industry. The punk scene, and punk acts of resistance, explored by LeBlanc have influenced many subsequent subcultural movements, and some originated as a reaction, or resistance against punk itself, and the male-dominated, aggressive nature of the culture. Riot grrrl and Straightedge are both subcultures born out of a resistance to punk, and research around these cultures offers useful analytical themes in relation to my own work.

The Riot Grrrl movement began in 1991, emerging from the punk and independent music communities of Olympia and Washington, DC. 'Riot grrrl encouraged women and girls to take control of the means of cultural production'

(Schilt, 2004: 115). Girls became producers of their own music and zines, with a focus upon their own subjective experiences (Pavlidis, 2012:167). Riot grrrl began as a women-led alternative to the 'violent and misogynist tendencies growing within the punk scene at the time' (Pavlidis, 2012:167-8). Women actively resisted hegemonic subcultural norms that historically positioned women as silent bystanders. Resistance was gained by appropriating traditionally male roles, as well as tackling issues around gender and sexuality through the disruptive positioning of their bodies – through music performances, conventions and gigs (Piano, 1994:258). The riot grrrl movement, based on politics and activism, helped shift women's position within punk from consumer/observer to that of producer – enabling and encouraging women's resistance, involvement in subcultural feminist networks, and the creation of spaces for feminist cultural production (Piano, 1994:254). The movement saw women sustaining their resistance to men's dominance by controlling the production, distribution and promotion of their creative activities (Garrison 2000; Klein 1997; Moore 2007; Mullaney 2007). Although women tattoo artists appear not to face this challenge in taking control of the production and output of their creativity per se (many artists are self-employed, for example), they do however have to manage and negotiate the gender dynamics within the industry that formalises this creativity, which ultimately may affect this creative output.

During my research, it became apparent that the numbers of tattoo zines and blogs published was increasing, and that many of these were created and managed by women. When I started to get tattooed, the internet was not as easily accessible and therefore I relied on magazines for my sub-cultural knowledge and expertise. Magazines were only available from a small number of newsagents and were not as culturally rich as some are now. Although not exclusively *for* women, blogs such as *Inkluded* were created because the author, Rebecca Rimmer, did not feel she fitted with the tattoo community, and the in-print zine *Love/Hate* by Katie Thirks was created to tackle and discuss the sexist attitudes towards tattooed women. There is a desire to create a space for women to share their experiences and it was important for me to acknowledge the efforts made by the women creators, in shifting the dynamic of the tattoo culture. This changing sub-cultural landscape shows the shift

within the tattoo community, towards greater acknowledgment of the sexism and hegemonic masculinity experienced by so many people, and is a direct result of action taken by women to highlight and disrupt the hegemony within the sub-culture. The ability to 'talk back' means women can talk about, address and challenge dominant and subcultural discourses, raising questions about normalised inequalities and increasing opportunity for resistance and change (Piano, 2004:258-9).

Another subculture to emerge from punk was Straightedge, a movement which emerged on the East coast of the United States in the early 1980s, adopting a 'clean living' ideology as a response to punk's more nihilistic tendencies (Haenfler, 2004:409). Ross Haenfler's research *Rethinking Subcultural Resistance: Core Values of the Straight Edge Movement* (2004) explores the subjective experiences of participants within the movement, using participant observation and structured interviews (2004:413). Haenfler argues that resistance is contextual, multiple and layered, not static or uniform, and because of this, it is vital to explore how individuals express and understand their involvement in resistance (Haenfler, 2004:408). Haenfler (2004:408) also suggests that individuals hold both individual and collective meanings of resistance, and express this via personal and political methods. Resistance should be explored through the ways in which subcultural members construct their resistance depending upon the context, not just how the subculture itself resists dominant culture (Haenfler, 2004:408). Haenfler's analysis complexifies resistance in a way that I found useful. The tattoo community may or may not be resisting mainstream culture at any given time, but what became apparent in my research was women artists resisting elements of the industry, from within. My research asks: what it is that the women are resisting? What does this resistance look like? How does the resistance affect women's position within the industry? What happens when we broaden our understanding of resistance, to consider not just the sub-culture's resistance to the mainstream, but also forms of resistance *within* the sub-culture itself? There seems to be a substantial amount of negotiation, both within and across subcultures or sub-cultures, and the mainstream. This was another significant theme throughout the literature and research.

**Negotiating Femininities: Negotiating Gender**

'Nonconventional subcultures' such as alternative music, sports and art networks are contexts in which women often find the opportunity to challenge conventional femininities (Finley, 2010:365; Holland 2004; Klein 1997; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005, 2006; LeBlanc 1999; Messerschmidt 2002; Mullaney 2007; Moore 2007; Wilkins 2004). However, unlike the male participants of a subculture, women must contend not just with dominant, mainstream culture but also the patriarchal structures replicated within the subculture itself (Holland, 2004:23, Evans and Thornton, 1989:17). Therefore, the femininities they challenge and new femininities they create exist amongst structures that drive the women into negotiation and compromise. To explore these negotiations, I will focus upon Samantha Holland's *Alternative Femininities* (2004), Nancy J Finley's *Skating Femininity: Gender Maneuvering in Women's Roller Derby* (2010), Maddie Breeze's *Seriousness and Women's Roller Derby* (2015), and I will return to LeBlanc's work on girls in punk.

Samantha Holland's *Alternative Femininities* (2004) uses interviews with women who were actively resisting traditional femininities, to explore their feelings and experiences around femininity, dress and appearance. Holland describes the resistance performed by the women as being 'rife with discrepancies and tensions...there were both angry defiance and careful negotiation' (Holland, 2004:139). Holland summarises these tensions into two overarching questions: 'Did being alternative erode femininity? And did being feminine negate being alternative?' (Holland, 2004:140). It is important therefore, to explore these tensions and negotiations, and to ask how the issues faced by Holland's participants relate to my research and the experiences of my own participants. This prompted me to think about the tensions that may arise throughout the participant narratives in my own research, and how they may differ within a male-dominated sub-culture. Does working in a male-dominated sub-culture add another dynamic to how an 'alternative woman' displays her femininity?

Holland explains that her participants see femininity and masculinity as 'two separate poles' which 'offered no opportunity for anything other than the narrowest of definitions' (2004:140). The participants described their identities using narrowly defined categories rather than creating what could have been a sliding scale of femininity (Holland, 2004:140). This saw some of the participants compare and equate their alternative femininities to masculinities, rather than 'other' forms of femininity (Holland, 2004:140). Holland also states however, that when explicitly asked by her, the women could place themselves on a continuum of femininities, and therefore contradicted, and created a tension in, what they had said previously. Holland suggests that - along with negotiation, adaptation, acceptance and resistance - these contradictions were vital in the participants' creation of their alternative identities (Holland, 2004:140). This illustrates therefore, the complex nature of creating not only alternative identities but femininities also.

Holland's participants discursively located their own femininities as different to mainstream versions of femininities by, for example, using the term 'girly' with negative connotation. The women talked about conventional femininities as being oppressive and restrictive, so that their own femininities might appear more positive, creative and 'free' (Holland, 2004:143). Holland identifies this as a 'recuperative strategy', which allowed the women to present their own femininities in opposition to dominant norms of femininity, and at the same time frame these alternative femininities as desirable rather than 'other' (Holland, 2004:144). Holland also identifies 'flashing femininity' as another strategy (Holland, 2004:144). The women, when fearing their alternative appearance eroded their femininity, would also use items associated with more traditional femininity to recuperate their feminine identity (Holland, 2004:144). The participants spoke about their use of traditional feminine items such as perfume and make-up, false eyelashes or carrying a 'feminine' handbag, to 'reassure' others that they were indeed feminine, 'despite' their outward appearance suggesting otherwise (Holland, 2004:46). When women appear large, strong or powerful (usually traits reserved for men) in comparison to displaying more feminine traits such as being small and weak, women take up more 'space', and are more visible. This can threaten the normative order of gendered spaces and

sometimes women are faced with negotiating and appeasing interactions within these spaces (Holland, 2004:99). This is an important consideration throughout my research – how are women who are ‘taking up space’ in a masculinised industry and threatening the gendered norms of the culture, received by the industry? Women tattoo artists are often (but not always) heavily tattooed, and therefore ‘visible’; they are also taking on the role traditionally associated with their male colleagues - are there consequences to this, and if so, what are they and how do women artists manage them?

Compromise was one example of how Holland’s participants dealt with ‘taking up space’; the participants described making compromises around their appearance, usually for work, which included taking piercings out, covering up body modifications or wearing clothes that differed from their usual style (Holland, 2004:88). Holland’s participants were aware of the ‘rules’ and when it is and is not appropriate to push the boundaries of dress and appearance – some women were happy to compromise as it meant they were able to carry out their job more effectively and this was important to them (Holland, 2004:89). LeBlanc’s research on punk girls<sup>8</sup> and women also explores the negotiation between subcultural femininities and the mainstream. LeBlanc argues that whilst girl and women punks challenge conventions, they do so within a ‘spectacular subculture’ which means their challenges are highly visible – the mainstream public’s reactions to this resistance often has an influence on the girls and women, on their identity and the level of negotiation ‘needed’ to ‘manage’ their identities (LeBlanc, 1999:167). Interactions with the mainstream public play an important part in consolidating a subculture, establishing its boundaries and compelling its members’ commitment – and so it is important that research acknowledges the relationship between subcultural participant and the mainstream public.

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<sup>8</sup> I use girls *and* women because LeBlanc refers to both women and girls in her research

The relationship and interaction between subcultural women and the mainstream, along with the negotiations at play, also highlights how boundaries are created and maintained by women within the culture as well as outside of it. My research sets out to explore how women negotiate their femininities within a male-dominated sphere, and will ask what, if any, compromises are made. Holland discusses a participant who kept her work identity and home identity purposefully separate, not only wearing different clothes, but storing them separately at home to create a distance between her work self and 'real-life' self; do women working in an alternative industry avoid this need to separate their identities? Some of Holland's participants had found or created jobs that allowed them to be their 'true selves', meaning they dressed how they wanted to dress, made no sacrifices or compromises around their appearance, did not have to 'tone down' their look and felt lucky that they were able to do this (Holland, 2004:91-2), and my research will ask if my participants had similar experiences.

It was important for many of Holland's participants to feel both alternative and different, and yet feminine and womanly at the same time. They did not want to be one or the other and were keen to express this. Their resistance was not always a resistance to being feminine, but a resistance to 'culturally bound ideas of traditional femininity' (Holland, 2004:146). There was a tension between their alternative selves and their desire to be feminine, but at the same time, not wanting to be considered 'girly' (Holland, 2004:146). Holland describes a paradox evident in the narratives, which seemed to be linked to ageing, between the participants wanting to be alternative and 'out there' but also wanting to avoid feeling judged (about being 'too old' to be alternative, perhaps) and therefore vulnerable at the same time (Holland, 2004:124). As Holland suggests, femininity is still reliant upon and defined by constraint, and the appearances of alternative women are often not 'restrained', signalling disdain for traditional femininity and mainstream rules, norms and ideals (Holland, 2004:46). However, there is a paradox between the lack of restraint that the alternative appearance portrays, and the control, care, time and effort that goes into producing and creating an alternative look. Therefore, an 'alternative' identity does not necessarily 'free' women from the time-consuming rituals associated with

traditional 'beauty' regimes (Holland, 2004:46). Holland's exploration of compromise and negotiation has prompted important questions for the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

### **One of The Boys?**

A lack of women-dominated subcultures means girls and women who want to reject the hegemonic expectations and norms of mainstream femininity sometimes turn to masculinised subcultures to enable them to adopt an alternative set of rules around feminine identities (LeBlanc,1999:142). However, due to male domination, subcultures often develop masculine normative standards (LeBlanc,1999:106); women often find themselves having to 'fit in' and exist amongst those standards, negotiating between masculinities and femininities in both the mainstream and the subculture. As LeBlanc suggests of girls entering the punk subculture, they must engage with and negotiate the discrepancies between subcultural masculinity and mainstream femininity (LeBlanc, 1999:101).

LeBlanc further examines definitions of femininity within the punk subculture and argues that male-dominated subcultures support masculine identification in boys and men, while challenging feminine identification in girls and women, meaning the process of gender construction within subcultures is very different for girls and boys (LeBlanc, 1999:105). LeBlanc explores how the masculinities within the subculture affect the women and girls' constructions of both their feminine identities and their identities as punks – in a similar way, in chapter five, I ask how the dominant masculinities of the tattoo industry affect and possibly shape women's experiences of the industry.

Culture seen as 'overly' feminine, or associated with girls and women, is often devalued as 'imitative and passive' in comparison to masculinised culture which is deemed 'authentic' and worthy (Thornton, 1995:105). Therefore, not only are women in subcultures fighting to be accepted into the often male-dominated community, but they are also striving to be taken seriously outside of the subculture.

LeBlanc identified her participants as exhibiting a “trebled reflexivity” in their rejections or reconstructions of femininity: they challenge the norms of the dominant culture, as well as the feminine norms of both culture and subculture (LeBlanc, 1999:160). The tattoo industry also presents a complex dynamic and negotiation between the mainstream and the sub-culture, which is further complicated by looking at how gender affects this dynamic. In chapter five, I address the issue of women artists being taken seriously, exploring whether it is essential to be ‘one of the boys’ to remain successful in the tattoo industry, and asking how does the negotiation of femininity affect the success of an artist in a male-dominated field.

Like Holland, LeBlanc argues that a rejection of mainstream femininities does not mean a complete rejection of a feminine identity per se, but rather the creation of different and somewhat new identities (1999:148). However, in her ethnographic research on Women’s Roller Derby, Nancy J Finley (2010) argues that if the new femininities are organised around the male dominance of the subculture, the ‘new’ femininities risk re-establishing and reinforcing hegemonic gender relations (Finley, 2010:366). Negotiating between ‘acceptable’ femininities within and outside the subculture does not necessarily mean women transform the unequal dynamics between masculinity and femininity (Finley, 2010:366). Similar conclusions were reached during research on music cultures: Jamie Mullaney’s (2007) study of the hardcore straightedge scene found that since the straight edge hardcore music scene was disproportionately dominated by men, ‘boundaries can shift while leaving systems of domination as a whole intact’ (2007:404). LeBlanc also identifies that the constraints of the masculinised punk subculture meant that women’s forms of gender resistance ‘are tempered by the accommodations they make to the masculinity and male domination of their chosen surroundings’ (1999, 226).

Finley’s *Skating Femininity* (2010) explores hegemonic and alternative femininities through an ethnographic study of women’s roller derby in the US, with specific focus on the dynamics between femininities, specifically how women feminise their participation in the sport through resistance, adaptation, mockery and parody of hegemonic femininities (2010:359). Finley concludes that intragender

relations between women create the possibility for shifting femininities, in ways that do not reconstruct hegemony (Finley, 2010:382). Finley suggests that research on the internal relations of gender in subcultures will enable us to see the varying types of power available for those in subordinate groups (2010:383). Although my research does not look specifically at the contrasting femininities within the sub-culture, what Finley's research helps me to question is whether women within the tattoo sub-culture do in fact shift femininities to reconstruct the hegemonic gender relations, how they might do this, and what effect this has upon the culture itself. Unconventional femininities vary in the degree to which they have the resistive power to challenge relations between masculinity and femininity. How do women produce new "femininities" in negotiation with hegemonic femininities without reproducing hegemonic gender relations between masculinity and femininity? (Finley, 2010:366). How does (or can) this relate to women's role within the tattoo industry? Chapter six expands upon this and explores the ways in which women artists often embrace their own femininities, with some participants able to utilise elements of traditional femininity in their role as tattooers.

Maddie Breeze's ethnography (2013, 2015) of roller derby expands upon work by Finley and considers how femininities and gender relate to negotiations of seriousness and authenticity, focusing upon how roller derby strives to be *taken seriously* within the broader cultural field of sport (2013:2-5). Breeze builds upon the idea that authenticity and legitimisation is heavily gendered. Roller derby typically opposes the dominant discourses of sport, which leads to a struggle for power and authenticity in the field of mainstream sport. It is also seen predominantly as a 'woman's sport' and therefore, becomes a site of gender contestation, which amplifies the struggle for power, authenticity and seriousness (Breeze, 2015:22). Breeze discusses the idea of a 'feminine apologetic', whereby an emphasis on dominant and 'conventional feminine attractiveness' is utilised as an 'apology' for the transgression into the masculinised field of sport (Wughalter, 1978: 12, in Breeze, 2015:23). She explains how 'feminisation' in women's sport devalues any achievements, and in turn reduces the threat to the masculine dominance of the sporting field (2015:23). This could be compared to Holland's discussion of 'flashing

femininity' noted previously – overt symbols of dominant femininity are used as a recuperative strategy, or as Breeze argues, an apology, to over-compensate for any behaviour deemed masculine (Breeze, 2015: 23). Breeze also notes Broad's (2001) concept of the 'feminine unapologetic' – whereby sportswomen take on a supposedly masculine sport, but do so in, for example, hyperbolic feminine dress – as Breeze suggests, sportswomen's performances of femininity are interpreted as both subverting and colluding with a broader set of gendered norms (Breeze, 2015:23); this is of particular relevance to my own research findings and further highlights issues surrounding compromise, compensating and negotiation.

### **Better than 'Them': Capital and Hierarchies**

Capital is perhaps commonly associated with money, wealth and assets and although financial capital and earning a living is paramount in the world of tattooing, the most significant and influential type of capital to tattooers and their clients is not monetary. It is apparent as soon as one enters the sub-culture that one's position in it depends upon the *sub-cultural capital* earned. From working in, and spending leisure time in and around tattoo studios, I have seen how individuals are treated differently on the grounds of their capital, or lack of. Some are ignored, scoffed at and disregarded, whereas others are celebrated and treated with respect. This section of the chapter explores capital in relation to subcultures and focuses upon three main aspects: subcultural capital, gendered capital and the appropriation of capital by the mainstream.

Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (1995) is an essential text when considering the effects of capital upon intra-subcultural dynamics. Thornton's research explores how middle-class clubbers use subcultural capital to distinguish themselves as insiders of the subculture, at the same time as distancing themselves from 'outsiders'. Thornton uses Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) work on capital to guide her investigation of social relations and power dynamics within the dance and clubbing subculture (Dupont, 2014:558); this offers a way of understanding how subcultures create, structure and maintain identities within

subcultural hierarchies, and thus expands the scope of work which focuses solely on how hierarchies are created (Dupont, 2014:558). Although Thornton has been criticised for ignoring class in her work (Jensen, 2006), I have found her work on subcultural capital of significant value to my own research.

Thornton has also been criticised for not exploring how subcultural structures and hierarchies are affected by outside societal structures and hierarchies. Sune Qvotrup Jensen, in their article, *Rethinking Subcultural Capital* (2006), argues that not only is it important to understand subcultural capital, but we should also re-think the way in which we look at subcultural capital to include how capital relates to outside socio-structural differences and forms of power. This would increase the understanding around positions of power inside and outside of the subculture by exploring the intersections between class, gender, ethnicity and race of the participants and the capital they are afforded within the subculture (Jensen, 2006:265). This is an important consideration, especially perhaps when exploring *sub-cultures*, because of the interplay and fluidity between and across the mainstream and the counter-culture.

Subcultural capital can be, Thornton states, objectified or embodied (1995:11). Objectified capital is described as artefacts such as books and art or even haircuts, something that can be displayed to demonstrate capital. Embodied subcultural capital is, for example, using language specific to the subculture to demonstrate being 'in the know' (Thornton, 1995:11). Thornton argues that subcultural capital is the 'linchpin' of an alternative hierarchy; the club cultures in Thornton's research embrace their own hierarchies of what is *authentic* and *legitimate* inside and outside of the subculture which develops into an embodied understanding of what makes one 'hip' or not (Thornton, 1995:3). Thornton identifies three distinctions: 'the authentic versus the phoney, the "hip" versus the "mainstream" and the "underground" versus "the media"' (Thornton, 1995:3-4). These distinctions are created and maintained by groups of insiders, by establishing what they like and dislike and what they *are* and *are not* (Thornton, 1995:105).

Thornton describes this constructing of an 'us' and 'them' as creating the 'imagined other' (Thornton, 1995:101) and it is a significant concept when considering subcultural capital and how it 'works' within a given subculture. Thornton suggests that although in her research, clubbers do not constitute a homogenous group, they are happy to identify a homogenous crowd that they *do not* belong in - mostly, in opposition to the 'mainstream' (Thornton, 1995:99). The categorisations identified by the cultural insiders do not necessarily offer insight into the reality of the culture, but reveal more about the values, the relations and the social world of the individuals who create the categorisations (Thornton, 1995:101). Thornton argues that one of the reasons for creating the 'other' is to contribute to the feeling of community and sense of shared identity (Thornton, 1995:111). Members of the dance community used dichotomies such as mainstream/subculture and commercial/alternative to categorise different elements of the culture they placed themselves within; Thornton suggests that this is not necessarily the way dance cultures are organised but that it is more to do with how members of the community imagine/see their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995:96). Along with the 'imagined other', the creation of subcultural-specific categories and dichotomies is an important question within my own analysis, and I will look at how these categorisations are created and the purpose they serve for the individuals who construct them. Although, like Thornton, I would argue that the *actual* organisation of the community is more nuanced than the division between the self/the other, it is important to explore how some of the artists describe the community and maintain their place within it. Who is the 'other' and what purpose do they serve in the narratives of my participants? What constitutes subcultural capital in the tattooing field? How do artists gain subcultural capital and what does that capital look like/consist of?

Another key premise in the work on capital is that capital is only useful if it can be successfully converted into other types of capital (Jensen, 2006:268); for example, Thornton explores the conversion of subcultural capital into economic capital, and argues that although it does not convert as easily as perhaps *cultural* capital does, there are financial rewards for the possession of subcultural capital in

some subcultures (Thornton, 1995:12). In her own research, Thornton uses the examples of DJs, club organisers and music journalists, to illustrate members of the subculture who hold a significant level of subcultural capital, and who successfully convert this into economic capital. Thornton suggests that individuals who gain economic capital from working within the dance subculture not only gain respect through their high volume of subcultural capital, but also through their role in defining and creating the culture (Thornton, 1995:12). In my own research, I will explore the relationship between subcultural capital and the economic capital of artists within the industry.

Thornton's work has influenced subsequent research on subcultures, one of them being Tyler Dupont's ethnographic research with skateboarders in Phoenix and New York. Dupont skated with members of an established group of skaters, carrying out 38 weeks of participant observation over a 2-year period and conducted interviews with 10 of the participants (Dupont, 2014:562). The research uses Thornton's work on clubbing and Fox's work on punk (1987) to explore and examine how skateboarders distinguish themselves from (and maintain boundaries between) both the "mainstream" and from one another within the subculture (Dupont, 2014:559). Authenticity, identity and status are discussed, with a focus on socialisation, boundary maintenance and the social structure maintained by the skaters higher up in the subcultural hierarchy (Dupont, 2014:559).

Dupont discovered that a skater's claim for status within local skateboard scenes was based upon their subcultural capital, social capital and commitment, all interwoven with race, class, gender and position within the dominant social fields – the hierarchy is not static or 'real' but malleable (Dupont, 2014:561), and pressures from both within and outside of the subculture may lead the social structure of skateboarding to shift (Dupont, 2014:561). Dupont argues that core<sup>9</sup> skaters were

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<sup>9</sup> Dupont describes 'core skaters' as being predominantly white and male. Although they made up the smallest group within the subculture, they were the most powerful – skating nearly every day, they showed a high level of commitment and because of this, held high levels of subcultural and social capital (Dupont, 2014:564).

not 'trying on' a subcultural identity, their membership was more permanent and had lasting effects upon their general lifestyle (Dupont, 2014:565). Through positions in local skate shops, control over skateboard websites and visibility within local and national skateboard media, core skaters had the ability to strongly influence the values and attitudes of other skaters (Dupont, 2014:565). Their status within the scene allowed them to influence the dominant understanding of 'authenticity' and maintain the hierarchy within the subculture (2014: 565). Dupont found that elite skaters had the power to influence others' perception of reality, label others within the subculture and define the boundaries of being a skateboarder (Dupont, 2014:561). Similar to my own socialisation into the tattoo subculture discussed in chapter four, this socialisation into the subculture was key not only in passing on knowledge from experienced members to newer members, but in turn, this reproduced the hierarchy and power structures within the culture. Media is also used by subcultural participants to gain knowledge and understanding around culturally-specific information. However, this is used as another medium through which to distinguish the insiders and the outsiders. Dupont found that within the group, core skaters could recognise an inauthentic performance by somebody who had merely gained their information from media sources rather than being an active member in the subculture (Dupont, 2014:571). These 'randoms' as Dupont termed them, were unable to present an authentic performance of a subcultural identity, and lacked subcultural competence to filter out inauthentic messages or information gained from media sources (2014:571). In my own research, I will explore how authentic or inauthentic performances and media influences are managed by the artists in relation to clients and colleagues.

According to Dupont, much like influential tattooers, for core skaters the performance of the skateboarder identity was continuous (2014:565) – every trip to the park, shop or social event was, as Dupont identifies, a 'micro-performance'. This may include actively skateboarding, discussing skating, unconsciously socialising others or (re)-defining the ideological boundaries of the subculture (2014:565). This work provided opportunities to increase social and subcultural capital and status within the community rather than economic capital (2014:565). This level of

involvement in the culture also demonstrates commitment, which was considered vital in establishing one's position in the scene. Commitment is a concept which has recurred throughout my research – both in my empirical work, and in my review of the literature. Although demonstration of commitment differs between subcultures, there are similarities in the way in which commitment is considered as paramount to subcultural participation. For Breeze (2015), commitment was a factor in roller derby being taken seriously. In skateboarding, commitment may be measured by how often members skate, or how long they have been skating for and contributes to levels of capital, and status within the culture. (Dupont, 2014:564). For my own participants, discussed in chapter five, commitment looks slightly different because tattooists who earn a living through tattooing most days of their working week, and so merely spending *a lot* of their time tattooing cannot constitute commitment in the same way as skateboarding.

#### **A Note on Women in Skateboarding**

Skateboarding is, as identified by Dupont, 'intensely male-dominated' (Dupont, 2014:575). When Dupont's research was conducted, there were not many girls or women involved in the subculture. There were some girls who visited the skate parks and social events, but only if they were girlfriends of skaters (and therefore perhaps, the 'silent bystanders' discussed previously), and even then, they were not always welcomed by other members (Dupont, 2014:575). The heteronormativity of this observation is clear, and although Dupont does not address this in the analysis, this would suggest the skating subculture is a heteronormative culture. Dupont explains that there was a 'rigid division between the genders...as the core constructed their masculinities in relation to the absence of women' (Dupont, 2014:575; Atencio, Beal and Wilson, 2009:15). One explanation for the absence of girls was the lack of media interest in female skateboarding perhaps creating an uninviting space for women (Dupont, 2014:576). The mainstream media rarely presented skateboarding as a subcultural option for women and local skate media rarely featured female performances or representations of women as established members of the subculture in their own right (Dupont, 2014:576; Atencio et al, 2009).

These factors made the path to core skater more difficult for women and increased gender segregation within the community (Dupont, 2014: 576). Women's role in the scene as silent by-standers or girlfriends of skaters reinforced traditional gender roles and inequalities (Dupont, 2014:576). Dupont's work also acknowledges however, that the numbers of women skating in the US are increasing, and media attention (in the US) is rising, which challenges the male dominance within the scene and may influence how men perform their masculinity. This is an interesting question to consider throughout my own analysis, and to ask how women tattoo artists experience men's performance of masculinity within tattoo culture, especially after the rise in women to the industry.

Asa Backstrom's ethnographic research is more focused upon gender and explores *gender manoeuvring* in Swedish skateboarding. Backstrom uses the concept of Gender Manoeuvring, a term introduced by Mimi Schippers in her research on gender and hard rock music (2002, 2007). Backstrom defines it in relation to her own research as 'manipulations of the relationship between masculinity and femininity in the patterned beliefs and activities of Swedish skateboarding' (2013:29) and 'a way to explore collective strategies to transform sexist culture into non-sexist and, at the same time, encourage others to follow' (Backstrom, 2013:29,33). Gender manoeuvring can be both cultural (for example, masculinity and femininity as 'patterned beliefs') and interactive (for example, the negotiation of masculinities and femininities situated in interaction) and acknowledges that the relationships between genders are often actively negotiated in face-to-face interactions (Backstrom, 2013: 33).

Backstrom notes that all-girl skateboarding events have increased in recent years, and this makes it important to explore how girls and young women talk and act in these settings, showing how gender is performed and negotiated on both a cultural and an individual level and how power relations are established and disrupted (Backstrom, 2013:31). The participants in Backstrom's research talked about 'female skateboard culture' and described it as being 'more appreciative, more encouraging and more accepting than "male skateboard culture"' (Backstrom,

2013:39). Backstrom argues, however, that by discursively separating female and male skateboarding culture, identifying one as encouraging and accepting, and the other as aggressive and competitive, relies on traditional and hegemonic versions of femininity, which ultimately preserve the hegemonic gender order (Backstrom, 2013:39). This paradox is one familiar to my own research, and will be discussed in chapter seven. As Backstrom argues, 'still, contemporary young women struggle to make room for female participation in male-dominated spaces' (2013: 29). It is therefore important for my research to explore the participants' versions and definitions of femininity, how they utilise these within the industry, and how this might lead to a reproduction of the hegemonic gender order of the sub-culture.

### **Gendered Capital**

Due to the masculine nature and gendered structure of many alternative subcultures, male knowledge is often considered authentic and legitimate, whilst girls and women are faced with a questioning of their knowledge and position within the subculture. It seems, therefore, that although subcultures are presumed to reject mainstream norms and ideals, they in fact often replicate and reinforce the structural inequalities present within wider society. Research on the heavy metal subculture illustrates the complex gendered dynamic of gendered capital with alternative cultures. Krenske and McKay's *"Hard and Heavy": Gender and Power in a heavy metal music subculture* (2000) explores gendered structures of power within the heavy metal subculture. The research shows that many of the women involved participated within the culture to reject hegemonic norms of femininity. However, the research also found that, in reality, heavy metal culture does not position women as equal to men, and they are very often 'kept in place' by oppressive structures (Krenske and McKay, 2000). The research showed that, 'both the forceful corporeal practices of men and the highly-gendered structures of power meant that women "did" gender on men's terms' (Krenske and McKay, 2000:287). Similarly, in Haenfler's research on the straight-edge scene, he argues that despite the movement claiming to be inclusive and active in its quest for equality, women were outnumbered by men, and

felt that the culture was inherently hyper-masculine. This led to women feeling unwelcome and unimportant as members of the scene (Haenfler, 2004:428).

Nordstrom and Herz also conducted research on gender and the heavy metal scene. Their paper *"It's a matter of eating or being eaten": Gender positioning and difference making in the heavy metal subculture* (2013) uses interviews and focus groups to explore gender negotiations within the subculture. The participants in the research described the culture's image as inherently male; therefore, women within the culture were often faced with refining or exaggerating their identities to maintain their heavy metal personas, at the same time as distancing themselves from the mainstream (Nordstrom and Herz, 2013: 461). The other prominent aspect of the research findings showed women in the heavy metal subculture being tested on their knowledge, representation and authenticity in a way that men are not (Nordstrom and Herz, 2013: 462). This further illustrates how men are often regarded as knowledgeable 'experts' within a field whereas women have to 'work' hard at gaining the same level of respect and authenticity, and may not ever be considered as authentic as men. Women who played heavy metal were afforded more capital than women who did not, but were still compared to male musicians. Women are consistently compared to men's presumed authenticity, and rather than being judged on their own merit are judged against men's skills and termed 'not bad for a girl' (Nordstrom and Herz, 2013: 464). This also highlights the similarities between capital in and amongst subcultures and the dynamics of how this capital operates. Women may hold more capital if they are active producers of the subculture, but they are continuously ranked against the credentials and authenticity of the men producers of the subculture.

### **Mainstreaming Capital: A Paradox**

For the tattoo industry, and the sub-culture, the 'mainstreaming' of tattoo as an aesthetic practice has had a complex and nuanced effect upon the culture. Ryan Moore, in his research *Alternative to what? Subcultural capital and the commercialization of a music scene* (2005) explores subcultural capital within the

alternative rock subculture, with specific focus upon how the culture industry of media and entertainment might profit from subcultural capital through the commercialisation of subcultural artefacts and marketing them to a larger audience (Moore, 2005:232). As discussed above, in terms of non or new subcultural members gaining knowledge from outside sources, subcultural capital can be marketed to large numbers of consumers outside of the subculture who want to appear associated with the subculture, or to be following the latest fashions (Moore, 2005:232). For example, Dupont (2014) explores the appropriation of skateboarding merchandise by the mainstream; the marketing of tattoo-related merchandise has also increased worldwide. This can be seen not only in the celebritisation of tattoo, but most notably, perhaps, in the use of tattooed models in advertisements and tattoo design and imagery in non-tattoo related marketing and design. The boundaries between subculture and mass culture are often more fluid than subcultural participants believe. Often, when style, music or other distinguishing markers of the subculture are marketed in the mainstream, subcultural members 'experience a sense of alienation because they no longer own or control the culture they have produced, and their expressions of rebellion are now consumed by the "mainstream" audience they define themselves against' (Moore, 2006:233).

Chapter five explores how the dissemination of subcultural capital to the mainstream impacts upon the artists' capital within and outside of the sub-culture. As discussed previously in relation to Sarah Thornton's 'imagined other', subcultural insiders' identities depend upon an opposition to the mainstream and therefore, commercialisation of the subculture can lead to feelings of a loss of identity (Moore, 2005:233). Members of a subculture who embrace commercial exposure to increase their own commercial success are often accused of 'selling out' (Moore, 2005:233). It is also vital, therefore, for the subcultural participants to distinguish between insiders of the subculture, and the outsiders who appropriate the subculture's symbols and artefacts. This ability to distinguish between the two also serves to 'validate one's claims to autonomy and authenticity' (Moore, 2005:245). Subcultural participants who identify with a subculture to demonstrate their resistance to the mainstream and consumer ideals are faced with the same mainstream consumer

culture claiming the subcultural style and artefacts as *their own*. The ability to distinguish between who is authentic and who is not serves also, therefore, as a defence against this appropriation and lack of authenticity (Moore, 2005:249). Subcultural capital involves displaying attention to every detail, but doing so in ways that appear effortless and not as though one is 'trying too hard' (Moore, 2005:233). As noted earlier, this is also used as a method of authentication within the skateboarding subculture between 'core' skaters and newcomers or outsiders to the culture. When subcultures and the mainstream intersect, a complex set of relations is established between members of the subculture and members of the mainstream who adopt the aesthetic, style and symbols of the subculture. When tattoo knowledge seeps into the mainstream, the relationship between the alternative, the mainstream and capital is complexified, especially for tattoo artists. The relationship between subcultures and the mainstream is further complicated if members of the subculture benefit from a positive relationship with the mainstream. What happens when subcultures want, to some extent, to be considered legitimate and authentic by mainstream culture, but at the same time want to remain on the peripheries?

As discussed previously, Breeze (2013, 2015) explores this dilemma in relation to roller derby participants, who enjoy the non-conventional elements of roller derby yet at the same time want it to be taken seriously as a sport (2013:4). The world of sport is heavily gendered – in it, 'femininity is traditionally and stereotypically positioned as the antithesis to sporting prowess' (Breeze, 2013:8). Therefore, roller derby's DIY ethic, and its identity as a non-professionalised 'women's sport', means it holds a subordinate position in the cultural field of sport. Women in music share similar experiences; for example, riot grrrl as a genre of music struggled to be taken seriously by the masculinised culture of the alternative music scene, and women and girls were consistently accused of not being able to *play their instruments properly*.

Inspired by these insights, my analysis in the forthcoming chapters will ask questions such as, what effect does the mainstreaming of tattoo have upon an artist's subcultural, cultural and economic capital? How does gender relate to this shift in capital and how do tattoo artists negotiate issues of seriousness? Breeze's

work has prompted me to consider not only how the industry as a whole negotiates being taken seriously, but also how issues surrounding seriousness are different for women – what do women tattooists have to do to be taken seriously?

### Conclusion

Although the tattoo industry, in many ways, cannot be considered a *subculture*, research on subcultures provides useful analytical and theoretical tools through which to explore the intricacies of the tattoo industry as a community and structural body. This chapter has focused specifically on women in skateboarding, women in punk, alternative women and roller derby. Having reviewed a vast body of subcultural research and literature, skateboarding and music were most relevant to my own research not only in the way the research placed gender at the forefront of the investigation, but in terms of how women within the subcultures empirically negotiated their femininity amongst the hegemonic masculinity of the cultures. Subcultural research shows women consistently having to prove themselves, their knowledge and their authenticity within the subculture. Pitted against male subcultural participants, women must ‘earn’ their place and are constantly tested by members of the subculture who hold more capital and are deemed more authentic, and are usually men. Research on roller derby differs slightly in that it is a culture dominated by women, however, issues of ambivalent investments in seriousness, authenticity and legitimacy explored through a gendered lens were integral to the development of my own analysis and will be utilised throughout the subsequent chapters.

The dynamics of the tattoo industry as a sub-culture differ in some ways from many of the subcultures researched previously, due to its leisure/employment status. Many of the subcultures studied previously are embedded within leisure pursuits and industries. Although getting tattooed is itself a leisure activity, my research focuses upon tattooing as *employment* and this therefore adds another intersection through which to explore the interrelations of the sub-culture. Research has been conducted on occupational and organisational subcultures (Trice, 1993),

but these also differ from the tattoo industry as this research focuses upon subcultures *within* organisations or employment fields, whereas the tattoo industry *is* the sub-culture at the centre of my exploration. This provides a unique standpoint from which to explore tattooing, subcultures and labour.

Subcultural relationships with the mainstream are complex and nuanced and through my review of existing research, and during my own analysis, it became evident how vital it is to acknowledge, interrogate and problematise the fluidity of these relationships between mainstream and subculture. Discussions on subcultural relations with the mainstream include notions of resistance, agency and conformity along with mainstream appropriation of subcultural artefacts and the idea that subcultures are at risk of 'selling out'. This fluid and sometimes contradictory relationship is often accompanied by feelings of ambivalence in subcultural members, and by utilising previous research, I can interrogate the paradoxes within my own research narratives, identifying the ambivalence expressed by the participants.

### Chapter Four

#### Researching Sub-Cultural Authors: Methodologies, Methods and The Importance of Being Reflexive

This project initially began as a study of *heavily tattooed women*, and yet when I started conducting my literature searches and reading around the subject, I realised that there was already a wealth of research on tattooed women, but hardly any exploring tattoo artists – especially women artists. Although I did not know for sure, I assumed (an assumption grounded in my own experiences of tattoo culture) that women would have a very different experience of the industry to their men colleagues. I am not a tattoo artist, but I have worked in and frequented tattoo studios – heavily male-dominated studios – and I have therefore been privy to the ‘banter’ clients endure whilst getting tattooed, and have experienced this ‘banter’ whilst getting tattooed myself. An example of this would perhaps be (men) tattooists aiming sexist jokes at me because they know this is likely to provoke a reaction, but doing this in a ‘jokey’ manner so if I take offence and challenge this, I might be seen as the ‘killjoy’ who couldn’t ‘take a joke’. Or, another example might be (men) tattooists making slightly sexualised comments that have a double meaning and so I wouldn’t call them out on being inappropriate, just in case they argued that they ‘didn’t mean that’.

The term ‘banter’ does not always sit comfortably with me as it is often used to excuse offensive comments and teasing behaviour not enjoyed by the recipient. By labelling comments as ‘harmless banter’ (predominantly) men expect to be excused of their inappropriate and unwanted comments and behaviour. I use it here as it best explains the exchanges I have described above, and the situations described by the participants. Sometimes these exchanges are equal and welcomed, and sometimes they are not. For me, these experiences happened a long time ago, but reflecting on them now, I realise how masculine that environment was and how intimidating it may have been for some clients (especially women, or those who did not ‘fit’ with the hegemonic masculine ideal).

The artists involved in these exchanges were friends of mine, and any challenge I did offer to anything I found offensive, sexist or just overly masculine, I presented in a light-hearted, 'jokey' manner to ensure I still 'fitted in' and got along with people. I did not want to be the one who questioned or 'called out' sexist remarks, even though I identified as a feminist and had been (and still was) heavily influenced by riot grrrl. I realise now how contradictory and conflicting my personal politics and my practice were in comparison to my wish or need to fit in and conform, to an extent, to the masculine nature of the studio. I spent a short time body piercing at the studio, and I remember now when a woman client of mine commented on the black latex gloves I was wearing – 'I bet the men love them' – I told her none of the men had ever said anything, to which she replied, 'of course they haven't said anything, but you can bet they're thinking it'. It seems there was, and still is, an acknowledgment, a realisation and quiet understanding that women body workers were fetishised and this was almost an expected part of the role, and remained unquestioned and unchallenged.

Having reflected on these experiences, and on themes within the literature, my project changed from one focusing on heavily tattooed women, to one that aimed to document women's experiences of the tattoo industry through a feminist lens, providing insight into how women tattooers experience, manage and negotiate the industry. This chapter will discuss the characteristics of the feminist methodological approach I used in this project. I will explore the importance of reflexivity within research, and consider my own reflexive observations throughout my fieldwork, analysing the data and writing up my findings. I use this chapter to discuss my own place within the research, and examine how my position, background and knowledge may have affected the process. This leads me to explore the limitations of the research and how these could be addressed in future research projects. Placing myself within the research also allows for an exploration of the complex and nuanced power dynamics experienced during the research process and this is discussed throughout the chapter with specific reference to my fieldwork.

The chapter presents the methods I employed, detailing how and why I utilised them. It ends with a collection of vignettes, offering a brief outline of each participant's connection to the tattoo industry.

### **Feminist Methodologies, My Methodology**

Feminist knowledge production is grounded in the daily experiences of women, and with this focus, can challenge hegemonic and malestream knowledge production (Letherby, 2013:62). As Letherby suggests:

Male-defined epistemologies deny the importance of the experiential, the private and the personal (Letherby, 2013:42)

Feminist research on the contrary, tends to focus upon the personal, and an exploration of women's experiences (Maynard, 1994:12). Although debates about what constitutes feminist research are varied and vast, feminist researchers all begin with a political commitment to 'produc[ing] useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives through social and individual change' (Letherby, 2003:4). 'Feminist research practice' is recognised as distinguishable from other forms of research, with focus on the questions asked, the position of the researcher within the process of the research, the intended purpose of the work produced, and the political and ethical issues raised throughout the research process (Letherby, 2013:5; Maynard, 1994:14). More specifically, from my reading of various texts surrounding the intricacies of feminist methodologies and epistemologies, influential factors and key characteristics of feminist research include: women's voices to be brought to the forefront; reducing or eliminating exploitation; women should not be treated as objects for the benefit of the research; and efforts should be made to ensure the emancipatory goals of feminism are realised through the research, such that the research contributes towards reducing the conditions of oppression (Maynard, 1994; Letherby, 2013,; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Skeggs, 2001). The political nature of feminist research, and its potential to bring about change, is, however, potentially problematic – is research that does not bring about political change therefore not

feminist? (Glucksmann, 1994). And how as researchers, do we know if the research has brought about change, especially for the individuals involved in the research?

With this in mind, my own theoretical framework is also influenced by feminist poststructuralist thought. I wanted my research to focus upon women's experiences and how women make sense of these experiences. I do not strive to expose the 'reality' of the tattoo industry and this is not something I would claim possible for this project. Instead, I centre the experiences of the participants (who often have their experiences decentred by the industry they work in), whilst exploring and interrogating the differences and ambivalence in the narratives. These contradictions can become an integral part of the research, and should not be considered a drawback or potential problem. Through the research, I value and appreciate the subjective experiences of the participants, and their accounts of these experiences and hope that my analysis reflects this. I cannot and would not speak for all women, all women tattoo artists or all of my participants and understand that this research is a brief glimpse into the experiences of a very small proportion of women in the industry. As Holland (2004) suggests, rather than creating and constructing a universal body of truth, research provides an opportunity to discover what is important to the women interviewed (Holland, 2004: 4-5). Holland (2004:5) also talks about research validating women's experiences, which is something I can relate to my own feelings about my research. As women, I think we all too often have our voices, opinions and experiences devalued and belittled, leaving many women feeling as though they are alone in many of their experiences. By collating these experiences, feminist research can in some ways validate individual experiences and go some way to assure women that they are in fact not alone and their experiences matter.

In her research on the tattoo community, Margo DeMello (2000) argues that tattoo narratives are an important way of creating meaning around tattoos, by creating an emotional and intellectual context for the tattoo (2000:12). DeMello also suggests that writing about tattoos and their meanings produces the cultures and communities surrounding contemporary tattooing (2000:12). Each time a tattooed

person talks about themselves as tattooed people and about their tattoos and experiences, discursive accounts of the community are formed, performed, constructed and reinforced (DeMello, 2000:18). Therefore, by conducting this research on women tattoo artists, this work is contributing not only to academic knowledge surrounding tattooing, subcultures and labour, but it is also, in some ways, aiding the re-construction of the industry. Women are reflecting on, and voicing their experiences and in turn, are shaping and influencing a less masculine culture.

### **Reflexivity and Theorised Subjectivity: Making the Researcher Visible**

It is important for feminist researchers to place ourselves within the research: acknowledge what we bring to the research, the effect we have upon the research, and perhaps the effect the research has upon us. The research process might tell us about ourselves, as well as about the participants (Letherby, 2013:8). During the research, I became increasingly aware of the prejudices I had been socialised into throughout my involvement with the tattoo industry. Spending time in traditional, male-run studios meant my knowledge of the tattoo industry was shaped by 'old-school' male tattooers who favoured apprenticeships as a way of learning the trade, and consistently conjured a 'good' vs 'bad' tattoo binary. As I became more involved in my research, I could recognise my own personal bias and prejudice with regards to what constitutes a 'good', or 'bad' tattoo and artist, and my views have changed significantly. This illustrates not only the importance of reflecting upon what we bring to the research and how the research affects us as researchers, but it also provides insight into the perils of being an insider in the research field. My initial views were very much influenced by me being previously involved in tattoo culture, and this was a challenge for me as a researcher. This is something I address further in chapter seven.

I have consciously included personal anecdotes within the analysis of the project, not only to illustrate and contextualise certain points for discussion, but to locate myself within the body of the research, exposing my personal interest in the

research subject. As a feminist and a researcher, I feel this is an important aspect of any research project – to recognise the significance of our ‘intellectual biography’, framing the research process, methods and findings in relation to ourselves as knowledge producers (Letherby, 2013:9). Being open and reflexive about why and how we do research, and how this might affect the knowledge produced, allows others who read the work to understand the circumstances in which the research was conducted and produced (Letherby, 2013:6). Bias is unavoidable and inevitable within research, and rather than ignore or deny this, research should acknowledge, discuss and make it as visible as possible (Letherby, 2013:71). Letherby calls this ‘theorised subjectivity’ (2013:72). Not only does it mean being honest and open about possible personal bias, but it reveals emotional attachment to the research and a level of empathy and understanding also. As a feminist researcher, I believe and welcome the idea that researchers cannot be completely detached from their research and emotional involvement cannot be controlled by ‘mere effort of will’ (Letherby, 2013:68). Research should also acknowledge that participants are also likely to have an emotional involvement in, or attachment to, the research, and thus construct their own ideas about the researcher and the purpose of the research. This will shape how they present themselves and their narratives (Letherby, 2013:68). It is therefore vital that the researcher provides insight into their personal investment or background to the research process (Letherby, 2013:68), not only for the reader, but also the participants. This may also help to break down and reduce the power imbalance between researcher and participants during the process.

### **Power Relations in the Research Process**

The need to address an imbalance of power between researcher and participant is central to any feminist research project. There are ways of reducing this imbalance, such as informed consent, ensuring the participant has the option of leaving the process at any time, and being open and honest about the aims of the project. However, is it possible and desirable to eradicate the unequal power relations completely? And are the ‘unequal’ power relations as simple as this researcher/participant binary might suggest?

Power in the research relationship can often be fluid in nature, and it is wrong to assume that the researcher continually holds the power in comparison to the 'powerless' participant. Some women, of-course, have access to and hold social power and privilege, and some women do not 'need' empowering by us as researchers and it would be patronising to think otherwise (Letherby, 2013:116). During my analysis of the fieldwork data, the nature of the fluctuating power dynamic became increasingly evident and there were several examples of how the dynamic between the participants and myself was in constant flux. Initial email responses from artists often ended with the artists asking me if their answers were 'ok' or helpful.

I hope this is of some help to you Emma

Karen

I hope this information will be helpful to you

Isobel

Is that any help? Please excuse any spelling mistakes, I've been typing like a banshee!!! Xxx

Becky

Most of the initial email responses ended in a similar way to this. This could be explained as being a typical, standard way to end an email – open, friendly and ensuring that the sender has 'done the right thing'. However, I think these responses also illustrate the nature of the exchange and how the artists felt about the interaction. Not only did they want to 'help' and be helpful - which suggests an almost instant emotional attachment to the research project - but it felt in some ways as though they wanted to check that they were providing the right answers, which alludes to the power dynamic in the research interaction. At the same time, I also felt that this desire to 'help' also placed the participants in a position of power – they hold the information that I need to carry out my research, and therefore by sharing this information with me, they are *helping me out*, and thus, more powerful than I in

the research process; this further illustrates the complex power relations at play during the feminist interview process. My responses to the emails I received were also personal and somewhat emotional - on looking back over the email exchanges, I found myself apologising for being a potential 'nuisance' to one participant, to which she replied,

You aren't a nuisance and I am happy to answer your questions.

This is also helping me to sort out where I want to be and what I like/dislike about the world of tattooing.

I hope this helps

Toni

I think it is somewhat of a default position of a feminist researcher to feel a degree of guilt for taking up somebody's time, and feeling as though you are 'putting them out' in a lot of ways; expressing this in the emails and apologising for it is, I suppose, an attempt to acknowledge this for the benefit of the participant, and for one's own 'peace of mind'. Toni's response is also an illustration of how the research can at times benefit the participant, and also highlights some of the limitations of literature which describes the researcher and participant relationship as one of exploitation of the latter by the former.

Another example of the fluid nature of the research relationship power dynamic, is the sharing of knowledge between researcher and participant. There were instances during the interviews where a participant might inform me of resources or information that I was not previously aware of, for example, Clio told me about a tattoo magazine especially for artists of colour and Kirsty also shared interesting and useful resources. Although as a researcher I may hold power within the research process and interview exchange, in terms of sub-cultural capital, the artists I interviewed hold more capital than I do. Therefore, although I am the person collating the information ready for interpretation, during the interviews the participants are the experts in the field, and in this respect, are very powerful. I found myself feeling an element of self-doubt arise during the fieldwork, because although

I was involved in the tattoo scene and subculture in the 2000s, I have not been tattooed since 2013 and the culture has changed considerably since I was more active within it. I keep myself updated with magazines, websites and social media, but I am nowhere near as involved as I used to be. This, at the beginning of the research, sometimes led me to question if I was writing about something I now knew very little about experientially. Maddie Breeze, in her research on roller derby (2015), talks about her transition from insider to not-so-insider. Although Breeze's shift was far more immediate than mine, with an injury leading to her having to give up skating, I can relate to the feeling of doubt in belonging to the group, and questioning where I fit into the subculture, and of course how the interviewees would view me – not as an insider at all? I was reassured that other researchers sometimes feel the same!

My email exchange with Clio is another good example of the collaborative potential of the feminist interview process. When Clio wrote to me identifying herself as a feminist, this had a significant effect upon how I felt about the path of the research, and I felt able to write back and be open about the effect she had had upon my thoughts on the project. I had been contemplating whether to bring feminism into the research in a direct way, for instance, ask the participants if they identified as feminist and probe whether this affected the way in which they worked. However, I was hesitant to do so, and I have since reflected on why this was, and I think that, as a feminist, I am so aware of 'feminism' being a 'dirty word' in many circles that I did not want to offend the participants, or discourage them from participating in the research. I wanted to ensure I maintained a rapport – and perhaps mentioning the dreaded F word, I thought, risked disrupting the interactions between the participants and me. That said, my main motivation for conducting the research was my feminism and looking back at this hesitation, I realise just how contradictory my thinking was. How could I come to the research via my feminist politics, and yet be worried about being open about my politics? I also realise how this contradicts my aims for a feminist methodology, too – on the one hand, I empathise with feminist researchers' attempts to be open and honest about our place in the research, and yet, on the other hand, I was keeping my main motivations from the participants in order to keep rapport and get 'good' data. When, therefore, Clio described growing

up in a punk feminist community, and explained that she identified as feminist, this reminded me that it was 'ok' to be direct and explicit about one's feminism. I thanked Clio for inspiring me, and giving me answers to a question she did not even know I was grappling with! Clio's interview highlighted her feminism; it was clear from her responses that feminism was a huge part of her identity and her practice, and her responses were enveloped in a feminist consciousness, which in turn, authorised me to replicate this within the research and reminded me how important feminism was to the project – both in terms of the research topic, and the research methods.

This interaction with Clio illustrates not only the effect the participant can have upon the researcher and the research, but also how problematic the sharing of information can be. It was important for me to tell the participants that I am tattooed – DeMello also discusses doing this when contacting potential interviewees (2000:160). Like DeMello, I felt this would break down any initial boundaries and ensure that the artists knew I was a participant in the tattoo community and therefore was not coming to the research as an outsider. I also sent an overview of the research aims, and a little bit of information about myself as a woman and a researcher. Developing a non-hierarchical relationship during the research process is important to feminist research, and this can be achieved by the researcher sharing some information about herself, answering questions and sharing knowledge (Letherby, 2013:83), and therefore reducing the objectification of the respondent, and nurturing more of a two-way interaction. Lauraine LeBlanc, in her research on women and girls and punk (1999), also discusses how she found her punk identity, and therefore similarities to the participants, vital in building rapport between her and them (1999:22). Talking about my tattoos may have been an easy task, but talking about my feminism, however, was not.

What to call 'participants' can also be a difficult decision, and something which can make a difference to how power between the researcher and researched is negotiated. Letherby addresses the naming of the research 'subjects': she suggests that 'participant' is used more frequently but argues that this alludes to the interviewees having an equal participation in the research process, and an equal

power relationship between the researcher and the researched, which is obviously not always possible. Letherby chooses 'respondent' over participant for this reason. Samantha Holland chooses 'participant', explaining that 'the term "participants" more adequately demonstrates their interest and personal investment in the subject of the study' (2004:186). I have also used 'participant' throughout the writing of this research, merely through personal preference. I do not feel I am being overly optimistic about the power relations between myself and the interviewees, although I do understand Letherby's apprehension. My personal concern over naming interviewees became apparent when I noticed I had written 'my participants' in a piece of text. I was using 'my' as a way of distinguishing between another piece of research I was discussing, and my own research, but I felt very uncomfortable claiming ownership over the women who had been interviewed.

As well as the participant/respondent decision, another naming issue to consider, is the use of real names vs pseudonyms during the analysis and subsequent publication of the data. Holland discusses her decision to ask her participants to choose their own pseudonyms, and how this allows the women interviewed to *participate* and collaborate in the research decisions. Holland states that this choice, although not giving the participants input into the analysis of the data, does give the women some power in their role in the research (Holland, 2004:187). Holland chose to use pseudonyms because the research was carried out in a relatively small area, involving what can be deemed a 'minority' group, and so lots of the women knew the other participants or other women involved in the alternative scene and culture. Giving the women the choice of name also gave them an opportunity to create their own research persona, and again, contributes to the breaking down of the unequal power relations during the research (Holland, 2004:187). Allowing women to choose pseudonym, or remain anonymous can help reduce the risk of the information offered by them, being used against them in the interpretation and analysis of the data, but does not lessen the power imbalance when it comes to ownership of the data. I offered all the participants the opportunity to choose a name to be known by, or remain anonymous. Only one of the participants asked to remain anonymous, because she was worried about her employer seeing her interview content, and all

the other women wanted me to use their real names. Using real names can be seen as problematic – for instance, there is a risk that the participants change their minds about the use of their real names after the research is published. However, having given the participants the choice, I did not then want to retract this choice and use pseudonyms that either they had not chosen themselves, or to take the choice away and provide anonymous data. The participants actively chose to use their real names, and I wanted to respect this. Most women artists want to be visible, and may have had difficulties with gaining visibility within the industry, and therefore I did not want to contribute to this invisibility by using anything other than the names they had chosen to use. In addition to this, I have only used their first names and so this does reduce the risk of identification if indeed they were to change their minds in the future regarding publication.

With this in mind, it is important to consider power dynamics not only during the research process, but afterwards too. We must acknowledge our potential intellectual privilege (Letherby, 2013:118) – we have more than likely had access to academic knowledge that the respondents have not had, and are using this to inform our interpretations of their narratives. Although Letherby encourages us as researchers to be aware of how this academic knowledge shapes our analysis of the participants' experiences, we must also remember that this is what the research process is, and it is inevitable that our previous knowledge will influence our interpretations of the research data. Letherby also argues that we as researchers turn the narratives into a feminist account of the respondents' experiences, and there is a risk that we turn it into an account unrecognisable by the respondent (Letherby, 2013:119). In effect, we choose the data, edit and deploy it to frame our arguments and therefore, the final product may result in flattening or misinterpretation of the narratives. During the coding of my interview data, I realised that I had worked so tirelessly on coding each narrative that this resulted in a collection of quotes that no longer resembled a narrative, but rather a plethora of themes, with quotes, names and notes attached. What struck me was that I had coded the narratives so intensely, that in doing so I had 'lost' parts of the participants' stories. As a feminist researcher, this sat uncomfortably with me; I had divided each interview into themes and in

doing so, had lost the 'flow' of the narratives. I returned to the interviews after coding, and ensured I looked at them again as whole stories, not only sections of stories isolated for the sake of my research. Letherby also addresses this when talking about her own research, and identifies that by arranging a thesis thematically, you risk further 'fragmenting the narratives of the respondents' (Letherby, 2013:118). Thematic coding and subsequent analysis also risks a misrepresentation of the participant's individual identities during the research process, which can become diluted in translation (Letherby, 2013:78). Providing vignettes about each participant is an attempt to remedy this issue, and I have included them at the end of this chapter. On writing this, I realise that asking the participants to write their own brief description of themselves for use in this chapter would have extended my attempt to represent them as 'whole people' and would also have been another method through which to break down the unequal power balance between participant and me as researcher. Reflection is a powerful tool in research, and very often it is not until you reflect once the research is complete, that you notice the improvements to be made next time.

### **Checking Privileges: Limitations of the Research**

The ability and willingness to be reflexive throughout and about the research process allows for an exploration and acknowledgment of limitations of the fieldwork and analysis. The most significant limitation to this project, and one that without discussion here would considerably compromise the integrity of the research as a feminist project, is my exclusive focus on gender. When conducting the fieldwork and writing up the analysis, my motivations were so focused on gender, that gender became the centred concern of the analysis. This meant that race, sexuality and non-binary and trans identities were de-centred and as a researcher and a feminist, I need to take responsibility for this exclusivity.

As a white, cis woman I am in a privileged position, allowing me the opportunity not to have to focus on my race. This led to me focusing on gender in isolation, rather than engaging comprehensively with the various intersections of

feminism and identity. Although I raised, for example, Clio's brief discussion of racism in the industry, I was unable to fully analyse her thoughts and experiences as my attention was too focused on gender alone. Clio was also the only participant to talk about race and the tattoo industry. The fact that race was not a recurring theme within the data tells us something important about tattoo culture, illustrating the overarching whiteness of the tattoo industry, which is an issue severely under-researched in academia. LeBlanc also addresses the fact that her sample is predominantly white and explains that this is an indication of the 'racial composition' of the punk subculture (LeBlanc, 1999: 26). It also illustrates that as a researcher it is important to note what is not said, as well as what is. Sometimes, non-recurring themes are just as relevant and important as those that are recurring. Clio was surprised when I told her she was the only interviewee to talk about race, which illustrates the need for a more diverse research sample. I was torn between interviewing the women who came to me voluntarily, whoever they might be, or purposefully seeking out possible participants because they were women of colour, or non-binary identifying. I realise now that my somewhat relaxed attitude to allowing women to volunteer, and not being more targeted, means my sample and therefore my research was compromised. Talking to women of colour may have identified further underlying issues within the industry. How do women of colour experience the hegemonic masculinity and inherent whiteness of the industry? This does however, open opportunities for further research, and I feel research on the intersectional inequalities of tattoo culture would be a relevant and important extension of this project. As discussed in Chapter two, there is a lack of research on race and racism in tattoo culture, and there is a significant gap in knowledge which future research should strive to address. As I edited this chapter, an article was published on the feminist website *Wear Your Voice*, focusing on the lack of attention paid to racism with tattoo culture (Koehler, 2017) – it was a timely and enlightening read.

Another significant limitation to the research is the overly binary discussion of gender. All the participants, except for Clio, addressed gender in binary terms, but I must take some responsibility for this, as I 'set up' the research in relatively binary

terms when I asked for 'women tattoo artists'. Because of this, I have potentially missed out on hearing the voices and experiences of gender-queer, or non-binary artists. Since conducting the fieldwork, and whilst I was analysing the data, there were several articles published on-line which show-cased queer and non-binary tattoo artists. There is certainly an increased focus on making queer artists visible, and chapter seven explores how queer artists are attempting to change the industry. I make use of online articles and interviews as secondary data in chapter seven to focus upon gender-queer artists; should I, however, have made efforts in my sampling to specifically seek out gender-queer, non-binary and women of colour participants? The debates in feminism surrounding non-binary identities have evolved since I designed the research in 2013, but this was an oversight on my part, and the research would therefore benefit from a less binary focus on gender. Gender-queer and non-binary artists may experience the hegemonic masculinity of the industry differently to artists who identify as women and by not seeking out participants to share their stories, my research lacks a degree of insight into this. Gaining a more targeted sample would widen the scope of the research, open further debates around gender dynamics in the industry and would possibly provide more of an awareness into how gender-queer artists are changing the industry.

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is important that any piece of sociological research fully considers the ethical implications surrounding the research, implementing stringent ethical procedures, and ensuring the researcher and the research 'do no harm' to the participants, and indeed, the researcher<sup>10</sup>. So that my research was ethically sound, I consulted the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice and ensured I provided participants with as much information as possible about the aims of the research, and my intentions for distribution of the findings. In practical terms, this meant gaining informed consent from the participants, and ensuring they were

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, the institutional ethical review procedure at the university was completed during the upgrade process, and my research was deemed ethically sound by my upgrade examiners.

aware of their right to refuse any questions they did not want to answer and could withdraw from the process at any time. Before the interviews took place, I sent several documents to the women who had agreed to be interviewed: I provided an outline of the research process – explaining that they could withdraw their involvement at any time, what the research was for and how data would be stored.<sup>11</sup> I also provided a short, brief biography of myself.<sup>12</sup> This was important in breaking down some of the obvious power imbalances between the researcher and the participants; I would not expect a participant to share information with me without knowing a little bit about me first. I then also asked the participants to complete an Informed Consent Form.<sup>13</sup> My research methods used predominantly interviews via email and this potentially minimises some of the ethical challenges, as participants can take their time responding, refuse to respond or avoid questions without the pressure of a face-to-face interview.

### **Methods**

To begin creating interest in the project, and gathering names for my research sample, I used my Twitter account, as many researchers do. The ‘tweet’ explained that I was conducting research on women tattoo artists and was looking for participants. When I published my original tweet on 10th October 2013, it was retweeted 200 times. Twitter, therefore, could be considered a digital-snow-balling tool, akin to the more traditional ‘word of mouth’ snowballing method used previously by social researchers. Snow balling can be useful in observing patterns and codes within the subculture being researched (Pitts, 2003:19) and this was apparent from the beginning of my sampling period. I had so many responses it was difficult to manage them, and I found myself having to decide whether to respond to each reply. I was torn between not wanting to appear rude and ungrateful, but not having time to respond to each person. Most responses were from customers giving me the

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix A: ‘Details of the Research Process’

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B: ‘A little bit about me...’

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix C: ‘Informed Consent’

name of their artist. Often these mentions included a comment on the artist's capabilities as tattooists, and sometimes comments on the artist's character or personality (for example, 'she's lovely') which shows the emotional involvement and level of attachment some artists nurture within the client/artist relationship. These responses also illustrate how clients might display their subcultural capital and knowledge of the industry.

Using Twitter as a method of contacting potential participants had an immediacy that email does not. I found that a tweet was a good way of connecting with somebody immediately, something that 'cold emailing' was not so effective at. I found people were more likely to respond to an initial tweet, and would often respond quicker than they did to an email and so it was a good way to gain interest and begin communication. Twitter feels a little less formal, there are fewer boundaries and so I felt I could take on a rather 'chatty' tone, and this was well received and often reciprocated. I favoured therefore an initial tweet, and then a follow-up email with more details about me and the research. Researching as a tattooed woman myself, it was tempting and within the realms of my personal interest to look at the artists' website and portfolio of work before I contacted them. I was, however, aware that this risked influencing decisions about who to contact by judging them on their artistic style and capability, and this was in fact irrelevant and gratuitous. Looking at the artist's website and portfolio, became therefore, a convenient source of procrastination, albeit unnecessary, whilst trying to find their contact details.

With artists who expressed interest in taking part in the research (via Twitter), I asked them for their email address and then sent an initial email<sup>14</sup> outlining the research aims, the initial questions and the ethical practice documents discussed above. There were, of course, artists who expressed an interest via Twitter but did not respond to my more detailed email. I then looked at the names of artists

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix D: 'Initial Emails to Participants' – I have used Becky's as an example

suggested by clients via Twitter. If the artist did not have a Twitter account, I googled their name and studio (where given) to get contact details, and sent them a short email:

Hi there,  
I am a PhD researcher looking at women tattooers and I wondered if you might be interested in taking part in my research? I will send more information if you would like to consider your participation.

Best Wishes,  
Emma

I purposefully kept the email brief to avoid bombarding the artists with information before they had even agreed to take part. However, I later reflected upon this and realised that I should be providing more information on the research focus and aims, and so amended my email to include more detail.<sup>15</sup> From these emails, I did get positive responses from artists who were interested and wanted to take part, and I then emailed them with the 3 initial questions. This resulted in some full interviews, but again, other artists did not respond to receiving the initial interview questions. The participants that did eventually take part were all recruited through either Twitter, or a cold email after googling 'women tattoo artist'. The only exception to this was Sarah, who I know personally and so asked her via a personal message if she would consider taking part.

With hindsight I realise that my sample choice was narrow and unfortunately, lacks women of colour and non-binary tattooists, as I discuss above. This is certainly something to be addressed in, and be aware of, throughout future research. LeBlanc discusses the impossibility of gaining a completely random sample; she used snowballing in her research and often relied on one participant to offer the names of other potential participants. She also relied on her prior knowledge and insider status – frequenting punk gigs, clubs and other venues or events, and approaching potential interviewees (LeBlanc, 1999: 25). This can mean that the sample is generated from a close group of individuals who, perhaps know each other, or frequent the same

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix E: 'Cold Email to Artists'

venues, and therefore, limits the potentially 'random' sample. However, as researchers, we do have to rely on these connections to gain participants.

I had positive responses in all initial contacts with potential interviewees – many expressed an active interest in the research, stating that they would appreciate having their voices heard. I had no negative responses: anybody who did not want to take part merely stated that they did not have the time to spare.

It was impossible, geographically, to even consider interviewing some of the women face-to-face; for example, Toni was travelling in Australia and the USA whilst we were communicating, Kirsty was in Australia, and Clio and Asia were both in the USA. However, I did give most of the participants a choice of interview methods. I conducted two interviews via Skype chat – both non-visual, however, both through choice of the participant. One of these worked well, and the other came into difficulty for reasons not related to the interview method, and I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter. I conducted one face-to-face interview with Sarah. The other women opted for an email interview<sup>16</sup>.

I interviewed Sarah in person whilst she worked, which is something I found quite difficult. I have since reflected upon why this may have been the case. I know Sarah personally, and so interviewing her in a research context was slightly uncomfortable – was I being too formal? Was I not being formal enough? Would she think my questions were ridiculous? We talked about Sarah's negative experiences with mutual associates of ours, which again, was a little uncomfortable perhaps, and a definite disadvantage to interviewing a friend. I also felt a little self-conscious for both Sarah and myself, and slightly voyeuristic: not only was I asking her questions, but I was asking her questions in front of her client – who happened to be a man, and incidentally, was naked from the waist up! Interviewing in the presence of the participant and a semi-naked man is, I would suggest, not the ideal setting for a successful and fruitful interview. I did, however, manage to interview Sarah in

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix F: Example interview schedule

between clients, which was much easier, and this was supplemented by email correspondence as well.

Email interviewing worked well for both me as the researcher, and (I think) the participants. Interviewing via email gives the participants power in choosing when and where to respond:

Hi lovely. I'd be happy to [be interviewed]. Would email be okay? I can sit and do it in my free time then

Becky

Often, participants would email me to acknowledge they had received my email, but were going to wait until they were at home, or had more time, to reply in full, which further illustrates how emailing offers participants control over the process. Writing responses may also give the participant more power and control over what they disclose – having time to process the questions and consider what to share (Letherby, 2013:92). Face-to-face interviewing lends itself to building rapport with interviewees, but it is still possible to build rapport via email interviews. The exchanges seemed relaxed and friendly, and as Letherby says about her own research (2013:92), the interaction became increasingly friendly and familiar with each email:

Sorry, Christmas got in the way of my reply. I decided to do homemade Christmas hampers, with everything homemade inside. It was lovely, just so time consuming!

Amy

Of course, interviewing via email does rely on the participants being both literate and IT savvy. This would exclude some potential participants from taking part in the research, and I would hope that any researcher would offer an alternative method of interviewing to anybody who wanted to take part but could not do so via

email. Another disadvantage to emailing is the difficulty in participating in emotion work in some instances. For example, one participant told me (via email) about a group of men engaging in highly sexualised, harassing behaviour whilst she tattooed one of them. This came as a shock to read and my reaction was that I wanted to support, empathise and talk to the respondent about the experience. I felt that I could not offer immediate empathy and when I wrote back, I referred to the incident, but felt my response lacked the emotion it would have had if we had been face-to-face.

Email does, however, have its advantages. Whilst I was carrying out my fieldwork, I was invited to be interviewed by a friend who was conducting research on riot grrrls for her undergraduate sociology degree. This was a useful exercise for me – not only was I able to reflect upon how interviews have the potential to reproduce identities through constructing a narrative in the interview, I was also able to reflect upon how my participants may have felt during the interview process. My interview was also conducted via email, and I appreciated having the time to consider my answers. I know I would not have given the answers I gave if I had been interviewed face-to-face. This is not to say I embellished or constructed answers that were not true, but having the time and space to think about my experiences and remember details was useful and I think my interview was richer and deeper because of this. Holland describes one of her participants being ‘put off’ by the presence of the tape recorder (2004:190-1), and I can imagine myself feeling the same in an interview situation; for me, an email interview alleviated some of this pressure.

The benefits of an email interview may be enjoyed not only by the interviewee but the interviewer too, and at the time of the research, as a working mum conducting research part-time, interviewing via email worked well for me. I could spend time planning my responses, ensuring I asked the questions I needed to ask and was not put under the pressure of a face-to-face interview. There is also the issue of transcription – with email interviews, the transcription is of course already complete. So, when fellow researchers lamented at how time consuming and laborious transcribing was, or I read researchers accounts of their dislike of the

transcription process (LeBlanc, 1999:29), I felt a little like I had cheated when I sheepishly told them I had conducted email interviews and therefore had avoided the dreaded task. In addition to this, it is important to note that I have not amended the email correspondence and so quotes are shown as they were written by the participants. Any spelling or grammatical mistakes are therefore still present in the text.

### **The Interviews**

My very first email to each interviewee asked the respondents to write to me, very generally, about their experiences of the tattoo industry and subculture. I realised, after receiving a response from Kirsty, how such an open and generalised question could be a difficult place to start:

Hi Emma- my that is a big task!

I think it might help if you directed me a little bit- as I am a writer, I tend to waffle on! And I have been tattooing for years so there are millions of things I could talk about.

I think if you give me some prompts I'll end up just yammering away anyway- what are your key interest areas or things you are hoping to explore?

Kirsty

Some of the interviewees contacted me to say that this was rather a daunting task and they had found it difficult to know where to 'start'. I really appreciated this feedback, and was very happy to amend the original question in line with Kirsty's suggestions. This is an example of how researchers can learn from listening and responding to feedback from participants, and how participants can positively influence the research process for themselves and their fellow participants – if the researcher allows this. I therefore re-emailed all the participants, explained that the first question may have been rather too general, apologised, and followed this up by giving three open-ended questions:

1. How and why did you get into tattooing as a career?
2. What are your experiences of being a woman in the industry and the tattoo subculture?
3. What are your experiences of being a tattooed woman inside the subculture and outside of it, within wider society?

I later condensed question 1 to a simple, “Why tattooing?”. I found my questions became more refined as I went along. Conversations via email often felt informal, as a conversation between friends would be. Some interviewees asked me for my opinion on certain topics, or referred to me being tattooed and therefore presumed I would empathise and understand the point they were making – which was usually the case.

On receiving the responses, I could read them, take time to digest them, and respond with further carefully planned questions, tailored to each participant’s response. This was a huge benefit of using email as a research method – the luxury of having the time to plan my response enabled me to ask everything I wanted to or felt I needed to. One of the disadvantages to consider was the pressure I felt to keep up the momentum with correspondence. It was important for me to reply in a certain time-frame so that the participants felt they were appreciated, and being heard, but also because if I allowed the correspondence to lag, then so would my participants. I did have to ‘chase’ some participants, and it was important not to be afraid of doing this, but knowing when to do so, and when to leave them alone. It became part of my response to try and link the interviewees without breaching confidentiality – and so, for example, I might say, ‘you’re not the only participant to have said this’, as an attempt to reassure each participant and to nurture a sense of collectivity amongst the group, even though each woman was being interviewed separately.

Some interviewees provided more in-depth interviews than others and it became apparent that some people more than others are comfortable and able to write at great length about their personal experiences and thoughts, and some had

begun to analyse their own experiences for their own benefit. Some wrote shorter answers, others shared thoughts, feelings and experiences in more detail. Some interviewees expressed that they had enjoyed the process, and that it had made them think differently about their position in the industry. Other participants appreciated the opportunity to write about their experiences:

Looking forward to it [the interview] - you've engaged my other passion - letter writing, haha, so you can expect some long ones back

Kirsty

Talking about experiences and thoughts did not seem to be difficult for many of the interviewees – I think being a tattooed person and having to think about your body, and answer multiple questions about your body and choices made about your body, means that many of the women had already spent time in their lives contemplating their position within the industry and were aware of their feelings towards their positionality, role and attitudes. DeMello describes tattoo wearing as a 'discursive tradition', meaning we as tattooed people are often asked to discuss our choices, our motives and our bodies (DeMello, 2000:12-13). Women who have experienced sexism in the industry will often have processed this privately (just as any woman experiencing sexism in the workplace or elsewhere), attempting to 'make sense' of it without the prompt of being interviewed about it. I think previous self-reflection probably aided the research process and meant the participants could draw upon these reflections within their responses. Letherby notes that respondents will analyse and theorise their own experiences, and as feminist researchers, we must be mindful not to presume expertise or academic superiority over these analyses (Letherby, 2013:70). It did not seem 'unnatural' for many of the women to be working through and reflecting upon their experiences, many of them not only describing their experiences, but beginning to analyse them also.

I did have, as mentioned earlier, an issue with one of the Skype interviews. Although I do not want to detail the problem in full, because I do not think it

necessary or fair on the participant, I do want to acknowledge it as I think it is relevant to discussions around research methods, and the research topic itself. I had arranged a Skype interview with somebody, conducted the interview and then received a message some time after the interview had concluded, to tell me that although she had talked to me in the capacity of a tattoo artist, she in fact was not an artist and had pretended that she was. This illustrates two points: firstly, you may not *really know* who you are interviewing, and this is exacerbated by internet methods - with no face-to-face contact, it is easier for the interviewee to embellish their responses. Secondly, I do think it reflects the level of capital tattoo artists hold, and the notion that people connected to the culture see being a tattoo artist as a desirable role and identity to take on or to be associated with.

Emails were generally exchanged over a period of around 3-4 months (although some were longer due to a delay in responding) and most interviews consisted of 3-4 email exchanges. To give an idea of the length of interviews in quantifiable terms, the interviews, on average spanned between 4 and 7 pages of A4 paper when printed. The first response was usually the shortest one, giving an overview of how and why the artist had come to tattooing, and the second and third responses were usually the longest and most detailed, answering the more specific questions I had asked, following the first correspondence. Fieldwork was an exciting time in the research. Receiving emails from participants made me feel humble and grateful, and I was always eager to read the responses. I found myself reading through each response at speed, excited to learn more about each respondent. I then took time to read through again, probably two or three times (if not more), to digest the data, begin to analyse, and write my response and further questions.

When the interviews had come to their 'natural' end – for example, topics had been exhausted, or participants had stopped responding - I sent a final email to each participant to thank them for their involvement, and to outline the initial themes that had arisen from the interviews. I gave them the opportunity to either feedback to me about their thoughts on the themes, and invited them to share any further thoughts or feelings around the themes I had identified. Long after the

fieldwork had come to an end, and the writing process was underway, I found myself resisting the urge to re-visit the interviews to ensure I had 'done justice' to the voices of the participants. As I have discussed previously, I know that I cannot expose *the* 'truth' about the industry I am researching, but I still want to represent a 'truth' in a way that respects the experiences of the participants.

I used thematic coding to categorise the recurring themes from the interviews. Due to the small size of my sample, I coded the data manually. This not only suited the amount of data I was working with, but I found manual coding aided my connection with the data, enabling a good working relationship with the narratives of each participant, the themes and any limitations that arose.

### **Introducing the participants**

I spoke to 15 women in total and 8 of these interviews were what I would term 'in-depth'<sup>17</sup>. By this I mean there were several emails sent between myself and the participant, and responses were discursive, rich and comprehensive. In comparison to this, some of the less comprehensive responses were perhaps one or two sentence answers to each question.

When analysing the data, I found myself returning to the same participants' interviews, due to recurring themes within their narratives and also the length and breadth of the information they shared. This means that the quotes used in the analysis chapters are selected from a rather small sample of the participants, because these are the participants who gave the longest interviews and more detailed information. However, it is important to note that all the participants' narratives, experiences and opinions have helped to influence the direction of the analysis in one way or another.

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix G for a table of Participant Information.

### Kirsty

Kirsty is a self-taught tattooist, based in Melbourne (Australia), who contacted me via Twitter and was interviewed by email. Kirsty is not actively involved in the tattoo sub-culture, and identifies as an artist predominantly, using tattooing as another medium for her artwork. She tattoos from home. Kirsty is active in her local art scene, and at the time of interviewing, was involved in various projects.

### Sarah

Sarah was the most experienced of the participants in terms of length of time tattooing and entered the industry through a traditional apprenticeship in the early 1990s. I know Sarah personally: we met when she worked out of the studio I got tattooed in and therefore we have mutual friends in the world of tattooing, and some shared references. Sarah was the only participant to talk about having a child and how the industry is not supportive of mums. Sarah tattoos from a studio in Worcester, UK and I interviewed her via email and face-to-face. I am 'friends' with Sarah on social media and it was interesting to see, during and after the fieldwork period, her sharing her experiences of being a tattoo artist – usually in the form of a Facebook status. One particular example saw Sarah mistaken for the assistant or apprentice in the studio, with somebody asking her who would be tattooing them (presuming it would not be Sarah). It was a well-timed incident, given the themes discussed in our interviews and Sarah even wrote, 'I thought of you, Emma' when sharing this with her social media networks.

### Amy

Amy had wanted to become a tattoo artist from an early age, and was involved in alternative subcultures before getting tattooed and becoming a tattooist. Amy identifies as a 'tomboy' and wanted a career in a male-dominated sphere as she felt this is where she would be most comfortable. Amy learned tattooing through an apprenticeship and now works from a studio in Oxfordshire, UK. I interviewed Amy by email.

Becky

Becky was involved in the alternative music scene before becoming a tattooer and identified both subcultures as male-dominated fields during her interview. Becky started getting tattooed aged 18 and wanted to extend this alternative lifestyle to becoming a tattooist. Becky learned through an apprenticeship and talks fondly about how the industry 'used to be'. Becky identifies as being 'one of the boys' and enjoys taking an active role in tattooing culture. Becky asked to be interviewed by email so that she could respond in her own time.

Toni

Toni was tattooed before she became a tattooer, although she identifies as an artist first and foremost, telling me that she had no prior desire to become a tattooer; Toni considers tattooing to be another medium and vehicle for her artwork. She does not actively involve herself in tattoo culture, and talks openly about wanting to avoid many elements of it. At the time of interviewing, Toni was travelling and we emailed when she was in the USA and Australia, and after some time of corresponding, we discovered that before her travels, she had been tattooing from a studio in the nearest town to my home in the UK!

Asia

Asia identifies a love of art, and a desire to be a sculptor or a painter as the grounding for her career as a tattooist. Although she had not planned on becoming a tattooist, having had a few 'small jobs' after leaving school, she submitted her portfolio of artwork to a studio and was offered an apprenticeship. Asia was not tattooed before she started her apprenticeship, and her first tattoo was one she did on herself. Asia is originally from Canada, but at the time of interviewing, was working in a studio in Indiana, USA and the interview was therefore conducted via email.

Clio

Clio's interest in tattoos and alternative culture stemmed from her upbringing in a 'punk feminist community' in Portland, Oregon. Clio put together a portfolio of her work, and after sending it out to various studios, was offered an apprenticeship with a woman tattooist in San Francisco. At the time of interviewing, Clio was working in an all-women studio and had only worked for women and with women. This was important to her and meant her experiences and insight brought a different dynamic to the research. Clio identifies as Mixed Arab Genderqueer and with her first set of responses, sent me an essay she had written on racism in tattoo culture. She has asked me not to share this essay, as it challenged one specific artist about her conduct and artwork, and Clio had promised the artist that she would not allow the essay to become public. However, the essay was an insight into an issue within tattoo culture that I had not fully considered before reading. Clio's sharing of this essay is a good example of how, as discussed above, the research can be a fluid interaction between researcher and the participants, and how knowledge and information can be shared and indeed, how the participants can certainly educate and inform the researcher.

Kate

Kate was a self-trained portrait artist before becoming a tattooist, and when portraiture was not bringing in enough money, she thought tattooing might be more financially rewarding. Kate was trained by a friend, and at the time of interviewing, was in the process of setting up her own studio in Wales, something quite unusual for someone relatively new to the profession. Kate was not extensively tattooed before becoming a tattooer, but said she took an interest in tattoos and tattoo culture. I interviewed Kate using Skype's instant messaging rather than video, at Kate's request.

Amy B

Amy's response differed from the other participants in two ways. Firstly, she engaged in around three email exchanges and so although not as in-depth as some, her response was certainly more in-depth than others. Secondly, her response

focused specifically on her tattooing project which offers nipple tattooing to breast cancer survivors. I heard about Amy's project via Twitter whilst I was carrying out my fieldwork, and I wanted to talk to her about this specifically, as an insight into how tattooing is being used in different fields and for different purposes. I have therefore used the data from Amy's interview in chapter seven as a more isolated case study, rather than in the first two analysis chapters.

The remaining six interviews were brief compared to the interviews of the participants introduced above. Red, Sharon, Isobel, Karen, Yliana, and 'Anon' all responded to my initial questions with quite brief answers – some more brief than others – and although I asked further questions in a follow-up email (and asked some if they would consider an interview via Skype), they did not respond. However, even the brief responses provided some insight and some similar themes to the more in-depth interviews, specifically how tattooing allowed the women to 'be themselves', and were therefore valuable to the research process.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has not only introduced the research in terms of methodologies and methods, but it has introduced me as a researcher and explored how my background and position as a white, feminist cis woman influences the research. Although it can be difficult to consider the limitations of the research, and one often must resist the urge to 'do the research all over again', reflexivity is paramount to the success of the research, and is in line with feminist research aims.

I have considered the advantages and disadvantages of email interviews, and would in the future strive to extend the scope of my research by using a bigger variety of interview methods. However, email did work for the participants and for myself as researcher in this project, and I am thankful for that.

The next chapter is the first of my analysis chapters, and will use interview data from the participants introduced above, to begin my initial exploration of women's experiences of the tattoo industry as a place of work and employment. Using feminist

methodologies, I explore the intricate dynamics of the industry through a gendered lens.

**Chapter Five****Being A Sub-Cultural Professional**

Beginning an interview is often challenging; beginning an email interview can present even bigger difficulties. It was therefore important that I get the opening questions right. A question too open, the interviewee is left overwhelmed and daunted. Too closed, the interview is at risk of sounding like a survey, devoid of any emotion. *Why Tattooing?* was therefore meant to be my ice-breaker – a prompt to encourage the interviewee to reflect upon their choices and pathway into their sub-cultural career. It was originally meant to simply introduce the interviewee and contextualise the remainder of the interview. However, this question revealed the first significant theme and some of the key conflicts and contradictions within the narratives.

The idea that tattooing allowed the artists to ‘be themselves’ was evidently important to many of the women, and it was clear that this was to form an integral part of their narrative, and their choice of career. Equally important to the research, however, was discovering that this was not the narrative of all the women. This raised the question: *who* feels they can be themselves, who does not and why? The narratives highlighted issues surrounding authenticity and legitimacy, underpinned by the notion of subcultural capital and what it means to be a professional within a sub-cultural field. Who holds capital? What is deemed to be authentic? And how is this capital and authenticity legitimised? This chapter seeks to explore how women have navigated a transition from subcultural consumer to sub-cultural producer and subsequently, how they have negotiated their post-transition space within the tattoo industry. By exploring the nuanced experiences of the artists and the conflicts that arose within and across their narratives, I will then examine how the imagined experiences of subcultural employment compare to the lived reality of working in a male-dominated sub-cultural field.

**From Consumer to Producer: Tattooe to Tattooer**

For many of the women I interviewed, their connection with alternative lifestyles and subcultures was an important part of both their identity, and of their pathway into tattooing as a career. Through exploring and understanding this commitment and devotion to their alternative identities, I hoped to understand how a career that allowed these identities to be experienced in a professional setting was so important to them.

I knew younger than 14 that I would be an artist, as drawing and painting were my all-time favourite things to do. I was fascinated by tattoos, I was also really into music, and the punk movement (OK, I may have been a few years too late, but I loved it all the same ...). It all fit so well....

Amy

I never fit in at school... So as I got older, I dyed my hair crazy colours, I played guitar, and got piercings. I wore expressive makeup and alternative clothes. When I was old enough I got tattoos. I didn't want to fit in anymore, and having my body art said to the world, 'I'm not average'....

After 5 years of getting tattooed and harassing every tattooist I came into contact with, I managed to get a traditional apprenticeship at 'Tattooz' in Birmingham. This is Micky Sharpz' old shop, so has a great history.

Becky

I was always interested in doing tattoos. I would draw in sharpie on my best friends, I grew up in a punk feminist community in Portland, Oregon, and all the dykes I loved had tattoos. I was especially fond of tattoos that prevented someone from working a normal job, tattoos that crept up the neck or down the hands.

Clio

Amy, Becky and Clio all express an interest in, and connection with, non-mainstream, non-conforming cultures. Punk subculture, body piercings, dyed hair and tattoos are all used as symbolic indicators of living a lifestyle that does not necessarily conform to what we might term 'the mainstream' and is what Pitts (2003) terms 'symbolic rebellion' – creating a subcultural style through using already stigmatised symbols such as tattoos (2003:5). Becky made the decision to purposefully engage in body projects and practices that would visibly separate her from the mainstream, something she terms as being 'average'. Clio also alludes to this with her fondness for tattoos that in her words prevent people from working in 'normal' jobs. This reflects previous discussions within the literature review about young people's use of body projects and the desire to attract the gaze of others (Ferreira, 2011). Becky specifically tells us she did not want to 'fit in' anymore, suggesting a conscious decision to ensure she stood out as 'different' from her peers. Becky purposefully engaged in body projects to increase her visibility as a young person and although this may seem to be rather typical teenage rebellion to some, in the context of this project and in light of the careers the women have pursued, the impact of this 'rebellion' has far greater consequence and it becomes crucial to their career paths.

As we have seen, youth cultures and subcultures have been researched extensively and many of the findings resonate with what Becky, Amy and Clio have expressed in their interviews. However, what much of the research on 'youth' cultures fail to acknowledge is that many of the young people who are engaging with these subcultures continue to engage in some kind of alternative lifestyle as adults. For the women involved in my research, this was indeed a significant factor in the motives behind their career choices. The connection with alternative lifestyles was not only an important part of their youth, but formative in the identities they embody today. The 'symbolic rebellion' (Pitts, 2003) of tattooing, which was once a practice of personal self-identity and leisure, has become the vehicle allowing the women to be independent adults with careers. These women have not 'grown out' of their alternative lifestyle – they have grown with it, and allowed 'it' to grow with them and mark their transition into paid professional work, a symbol of adulthood. During the

interviews, many of the artists were eager to express the benefits and opportunities tattooing as a career had afforded them. Pitts, as discussed in chapter two, suggests that there are limits to the subversion of ideals one can engage in within mainstream society, due to the day-to-day constraints put upon individuals to conform. Therefore, if a career can be carved within the subcultures through which this subversion is nurtured, it extends the opportunities to disrupt societal norms.

The ability to 'be myself' was central to many of the interview narratives and included discussions about freedom, power and control. For women like Becky, Amy and Clio, who already embodied an alternative lifestyle and aesthetic, tattooing as a career was said to offer feelings of choice, subjectivity and independence; this appeared throughout the narratives to be an influential element in the desire to become a tattooer.

I LOVE my job. I do have the freedom to be exactly who I want to be all day long, and I don't feel many can say that

Asia

The career path of a tattooist to the 14-year-old me meant I got to be myself: I could wear what I wanted, draw all day, and meet some wicked people along the way! I guess you could say tattooing seemed like a way to express myself and be free [...] I've always been happy to stand out from the crowd, or at least content not blending in. In so many careers I feel you have to conform, or at least put on a 'poker face' for work, you cannot be 100% yourself. But being an artist, I'm almost expected to be a little bit strange!

Amy

I have always been into tattooing because of the sovereignty it affords me. I do very poorly with authority and bosses, and tattooing allows me to run my own business and work for myself.

Clio

Clio's dislike for authority is, I would argue, a familiar narrative within alternative subcultures and is an important part of Clio's sub-cultural identity. Clio felt that tattooing as a form of employment provided a solution to having to negotiate authority figures on a daily basis within a professional employment context. A career that might enable, encourage and nurture an alternative, subjective identity is likely to be seen as a positive and empowering opportunity for women who are engaging with non-mainstream cultures. Asia and Amy mirror Clio's narrative in defining tattooing as a career which allows them to be 'free'. It is important to note here that both Asia and Amy comment on 'other' forms of employment not offering the same opportunities as tattooing in terms of enabling an expression of a true identity and self. Although there were no specific examples of 'other' jobs offered, there was a distinct narrative that alluded to tattooing as being unique in its rewards for the tattoo artist and the maintaining of the self. This suggested that being a tattoo artist does not rely on the need for separate work identities to be constructed in order to succeed and that being able to 'be yourself' allowed a degree of embodiment of both private and public identities for the artist. 'Other' careers were seen as more restrictive and as requiring a degree of conformity to become successful in the workplace. The discussion around other forms of employment mirrors findings from research carried out by both Samantha Holland (2004) and Linda McDowell (1997). Holland's research on aging and alternative subcultures shows her participants as being aware of the need to compromise personal identities to some extent in the workplace. Holland states that several participants expressed how their appearance reflected their real selves and that they regularly felt they had to negotiate this, threatening their sense of 'true' self (Holland, 2004:88). Holland explored participants' efforts to separate their work wardrobe from their leisure wear, in the attempt to fully detach their work selves from their 'true' selves (2004:90). As Holland suggests, finding employment opportunities in which the workers did not have to modify their appearance allowed the women to dress as they chose, without the feeling of compromise (2004:91-92). Similarly, McDowell's research on gender and employment found that the women participants identified their workplace persona as different to their personal persona, having to adopt a 'different sense of myself' and 'not using my real

personality' (McDowell 1997:201); this suggests that compromise is not only felt in an aesthetic sense but also in relation to an emotional identity. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

Clio talks positively about the opportunity for self-employment, introducing the idea that tattooing as a career is not only about identity, creativity and the freedom it enables, but it is also a matter of business, industry and production. McRobbie argues that subcultures provide members with a way of achieving social subjectivity and identity through the subcultural experience (McRobbie, 1993:412); however, in her research on Rave subcultures, McRobbie also discovers that girls remain as invisible or semi-visible consumers rather than active, visible producers of the subculture (1994:168). In contrast to this, Helen Reddington (2004) also examines levels of cultural production in her discussion of girls in punk bands, but notes that what differentiates the punk scene from other subcultures is the opportunities for women to become subcultural producers rather than remaining as consumers (2004). There are important links to be made here with the field of tattooing. By becoming tattooists themselves, women who are active members of alternative subcultures - such as the tattoo community - are extending their participation to become active subcultural producers rather than just passive consumers. It is important therefore to unpack the issues surrounding this shift and to ask just how easy is it for women to become the authors of the subcultures they have invested so much time and emotion in.

The experiences noted above were not the experiences of every interviewee. If we are to suggest that working within an alternative sub-cultural field such as the tattoo industry gives women the opportunity to avoid and resist mainstream norms and ideals, we must also explore the problems and constraints women may face. Does sub-cultural employment really escape the constraints and restrictions of more mainstream employment? Is the tattoo industry really as welcoming and 'free' as these narratives suggest? What are the constraints and how do women negotiate them? It may not be as easy for all women in the field to succeed, and it is important that we ask why, through an exploration of the nuanced experiences voiced

throughout my interviews. The women I interviewed expressed how difficult it was to get an apprenticeship and some had not been successful at all.

Initially, I was doing a lot of portraiture for extra cash and absolutely love that, but sadly there's not a lot of demand for that with the economy the way it is. I've always been interested in tattooing and am fascinated by the culture of it all, along with piercing and the fashion aspect too [...] I found it a daunting prospect as the industry can be quite elitist and snobby [...] It was a kind of 'you have to have been born into it to do it' kind of attitude...[The tattoo industry is] elitist in the sense that when I had approached tattooists (when getting some [tattoos]) about training/apprenticeships/information they were very secretive and not at all forthcoming

Kate

It is evident that Kate's narrative surrounding her route into tattooing differs greatly from that of Becky, Clio and Amy. Kate was not an active member of the tattoo community before she started tattooing despite having had some small tattoos herself; she was making money through art, but came to tattooing as a way of making money and developing her artwork through alternative mediums. Kate wanted to find a space within the field, but found it difficult to 'break' in to the industry. It became apparent throughout the interviews that the route into tattooing, and the background – or habitus – from which the tattooer had 'transitioned' from (i.e. an alternative subculture or fine art) had a significant effect upon how she viewed the industry, how the industry viewed her and how space was negotiated within the field. Kate had not accumulated subcultural capital in the way that Clio, Becky and Amy had, and this seems to have had a significant effect upon her opportunity for making the transition from consumer to producer. Even *with* a connection to the tattoo community, as in the case of Becky or Clio, the narratives throughout the interviews illustrate that it is not easy to get an apprenticeship – words like 'convinced', 'harassed' and 'eventually' were regularly used throughout the interviews, suggesting that there is a lot of work that goes into being 'allowed' to even begin the shift from client to tattooer and therefore it is easy to understand the

difficulties Kate faced. An apprenticeship is the traditional and most common way of learning to tattoo and if, as I am arguing, the industry has been dominated by men since its formation, most of the tattooers offering apprenticeships have been men. This in turn, positions experienced male tattooers as the gatekeepers of the sub-cultural field. Without these male tattooers offering and agreeing to take on apprentices, there is little opportunity for women (or anybody) to gain the knowledge and expertise to become, or be 'allowed' to become, a tattooer. Knowledge is authorised and legitimised via the apprenticeship and could be argued to be a 'malestream' method of learning the trade. Anyone who does not learn through an apprenticeship is disregarded, and labelled unskilled and not legitimate. As discussed in chapter two, research by Wicks and Grandy (2007) showed their participants constructing self-taught artists as 'less professional and less committed' than apprenticed artists, thus placing themselves in a position of authority over 'other', less authentic artists (2007:354). Until women become the experienced artists in a position of power through which to offer apprenticeships of their own, it was and is men who have ultimate control over who occupies space within the industry. An example of this indirect but effective gatekeeping is seen throughout my interviews, expressed through discussions of tattooing being a 'secret industry'. Kate's previous quote refers to the industry as secretive and expressing her negative experiences of the field, Becky also talked about the secret nature of the industry, yet from a completely different perspective.

I guess until quite recently, everything about the tattoo industry was secret. The tattooist was someone who could execute tattoos and no one else knew how to, or could even buy any equipment. Before eBay, and cheap Chinese tattoo kits (which the inks in are actually very dangerous) you couldn't get into tattooing without getting into a tattoo shop [...] You didn't know anything about the tattoo industry unless you were getting tattooed

Becky

Becky looks back with fondness on a subculture in which she has grown up in; to her, the secrecy of the industry was alluring and an influencing factor in her desire

to be part of the field. Becky, who was affiliated with alternative subcultures before she began tattooing as a career, talks about the industry throughout her interviews using what I would describe as romanticised language, or a nostalgic tone. She talks a lot about how the industry 'used to be', or certainly, how she viewed the industry as a consumer within the community prior to her career as a tattooist. Becky developed her interest in tattoos and tattooing during the 1990s, when tattooing was undergoing a shift from its association with sailors and criminals, and becoming more popular with alternative subcultures. Becky witnessed the rise in popularity of tattooing, and with this the status and prestige that came with being a tattooer in a growing community. Becky enjoys being part of an alternative culture: it is important to her and she invests a lot of time and emotion in it. This emotional investment has 'paid' off in that she was offered an apprenticeship at a well-respected studio under a well-respected stalwart of the industry. Becky already held some degree of capital within the community, accumulated via her affiliation with alternative subcultural aesthetics, and could utilise this capital to secure a space in the industry as a prospective professional.

Kate, in contrast to Becky's experiences, was not an active member of the community and therefore had no capital to use in the negotiation of an apprenticeship; ultimately, this had a detrimental effect upon her ability to gain space within the industry. As Dupont (2014) suggested in their study on skateboarding, socialisation is key to maintaining the dominant social structure of the subculture, and (re) affirming the hierarchy and power relations at play (2014:577). Without some level of previously acquired subcultural capital, it seems that breaking through into the field of tattooing is almost impossible.

### **Subcultural Capital and Industry Hierarchies**

It is clear from examining the narratives that holding subcultural capital within the tattoo community plays an important role in women's transition from tattoo consumer to tattoo producer. Capital is a complicated, nuanced issue within both the tattoo community and the industry. Discussions around unequal power

relations were dominant in many of the narratives and it seems that capital and its distribution underpin the negotiation of status, power and hierarchies in the sub-cultural field. Subcultural capital has been explored by numerous subcultural researchers (see Brill, 2007 and Thornton, 1995), and is a useful theoretical tool in understanding hierarchies and power relations.

The term 'subcultural capital' was introduced by Sarah Thornton in her research on 'Club Cultures' (1995). In practice, subcultural capital is a way of distributing and negotiating power and is a currency which legitimises the unequal distribution of status within subcultures (Brill, 2007:112). By exploring the nuances of these power relations within individual subcultures we can conceptualise the divisions and hierarchies amongst the subcultural members (Brill, 2007:112).

Status was something frequently acknowledged throughout the interviews and it became apparent that being a tattooer means holding some level of status both inside and outside of the tattooed community. Although this was considered positive by some, and as more negative by others, there was certainly a consensus that this status and prestige existed and was part of everyday life as a tattooer.

Having been an active member of the tattoo community since the late 1990s, I am myself aware of the existence of subcultural capital amongst community members and artists, and have often reflected upon how this capital is awarded and distributed. Capital is nuanced and complex, and it is important to consider who holds capital, who awards capital and whose capital is deemed authentic. The experiences below illustrate how capital works for artists when they engage with those who are outsiders to the industry.

Some people seriously react almost as if they are meeting a celebrity- it's so absurd- I really do think this is where tattooists can get that ego from, because people really can seem to treat you as though you are special or something. It's good to remember it's just a job like any other!... Most of the time I don't tell people [that I am a tattoo artist] because then I end up having to have

incredibly long tedious conversations about it which bore me to tears- countless parties I have been cornered and told about 'this one tatt I have been thinking of for years but I'm not sure if I should get it what do you think...' Ahhh - I find it so frustrating!!

Kirsty

The capital described here is granted by the consumers or potential consumers of tattoos and places the tattooer in a position of status and power. The narratives suggest that capital granted by consumers in this way may be of less significance to artists than sub-cultural capital awarded within the sub-culture itself. Magazine articles, social media representation and endorsement from fellow artists are all good examples of how this sub-capital might manifest. Kirsty explains that she often does not tell people she is a tattoo artist, to avoid long conversations about ideas that may never turn into actual tattoos – Kirsty is managing the disclosure of her identity as a tattooer to avoid the unwanted attention that subcultural capital can bring. Outside the sub-culture, there is a difference, however, between the conversations with people who will never be tattoo customers, and those who are potential customers. It has been argued by academics that some types of capital are only valuable if they can be successfully converted into other types of capital (Jensen, 2006: 268) - for example (sub)cultural into economic. The capital described by Kirsty above, and Asia below, is not guaranteed to develop or be converted into anything more than consumer-led sub-cultural capital and therefore may not be deemed 'useful' capital.

Whenever I go out people want to talk to me about tattoos. When I try to get help buying running shoes from a sales rep they just want to talk tattoos and not fit or help me. My close friends get frustrated because if we go to a party it ends up with them standing around while I get hounded by people for information about tattoos, and half the time those people never actually come get them.

Asia

Thornton notes that the conversion of subcultural capital to economic capital does not occur as easily as it may do between *cultural* capital and economic (Thornton, 1995:12). However, I would argue that subcultural capital within the tattoo community is more complex than Thornton's comparison suggests. Kirsty's and Asia's narratives illustrate the notable difference between the capital held by the profession as a whole – which can be held both inside and outside of the community - and the capital of the individual artists – usually granted by the 'insiders' of the community. It is the capital held by individual artists that ultimately leads to the production of economic capital. Tattoo artists gain economic capital by becoming well-known, respected artists in the community and this capital is legitimised by influential individuals within the community such as bloggers, magazine editors and fellow artists who already hold status and power. Artists with less sub-cultural capital may continue to earn a living from tattooing, but this financial reward generally only increases if their sub-cultural capital also increases. More sub-cultural capital leads to a higher status in the community and likely more financial success. Artists who are influential in popularising new styles or techniques of tattooing become the sub-cultural authors of the community and gain respect for their role in defining and creating the industry as well as holding capital for their role as a tattooer (Thornton, 1995:12).

This, however, is not the case for Kat Von D, whose reputation amongst the insiders and outsiders of the sub-culture has led to ambivalence towards her work and influence on tattoo culture, and this was something addressed throughout the participant interviews.

Kat von D (KVD) first appeared on screen in the TLC television series, *Miami Ink*. She then acquired her own series, *LA Ink*, in 2007. This followed KVD and her colleagues working in the LA studio High Voltage Tattoo; it was not a surprise, therefore, when she came up in conversation during the interviews:

She's empowered women artists in the industry, I think. It's far more accessible to women now, and I can only assume that's partly down to her

raising the profile of TALENTED women in the industry. Granted it's a slow process, but I do think attitudes are changing. The public's perception of women tattooists is rapidly gaining momentum, sadly I think the industry itself has some catching up to do

Kate

Often the public's opinion and the industry opinion of her [KVD] differs: the public love her, the tradesmen not so much. I do think she has done good for the tattoo society in the public's eyes in the way that a beautiful, popular woman can not only be covered in tattoos, but be one of the top artists within her field. I think it has given some female artists the opportunity to show they can do it too, or be brave enough to go into a studio and ask for that apprenticeship they've been dreaming of. On the other hand, whereas she was first known for her work, now she is known for being 'Kat von D'; herself. As it happens to many celebrities, she has been turned into a product, rather than producing herself.

Amy

Here we can see the somewhat mixed opinions towards KVD and what she has or has not done for women in the industry. Amy reflects discussions familiar to me both during the research process and outside of the research – often, public opinion of KVD differs greatly to the opinion of people inside of the industry. To outsiders, she is a familiar face, a successful artist who brought tattooing to the mainstream public; for the same reasons, she is somewhat disliked or not respected by artists inside of the industry. Interestingly Kate, who we know to have come to tattooing from outside of the subculture, feels that KVD has been a positive influence for women artists. Kate's opinion is perhaps informed by her initial status as an 'outsider' and therefore her standpoint differs from that of Becky or Sarah, for example. Amy does acknowledge that KVD may have had a positive influence for some women in the industry; however, like Sarah she also criticizes KVD for the marketing of herself as a product or a brand. This of course relates to the notion that

tattooing is a business, and as such there is some marketing of the self required to become successful, as I will expand upon in the next chapter.

KVD's example shows that there is, it seems, a clash of capital amongst the tattooed community. Being well-known on the *inside* of the community is positive for artists. However, being well-known by people outside of the community is not so positive and alludes to the existence of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' consumers. Insiders are regarded as authentic, whereas outsiders might be inauthentic and therefore the capital they award artists is not legitimate or warranted. To have value inside the community, as an artist, you must have the 'right' consumers. This clash of capital has been largely accelerated by the increased television of tattooing, which has been a significant and influential factor in the mainstreaming of tattooing, having a substantial effect upon the capital held by tattooers outside of the sub-culture. It has aided the dissemination of knowledge about the industry and tattooing as an artistic process, becoming the vehicle through which tattooing reaches a wider audience, leaving the industry open and visible to people outside of the tattooed community and reducing the 'secrecy' of the industry discussed previously, and favoured by Becky. This further complicates the nuances surrounding the subcultural capital held inside and outside of the community, and the artists were keen to express their concerns surrounding the effect tattoo shows were having on the image of the industry.

Nowadays it's 'cool' because it's on TV. People getting hands and necks tattooed before they have sleeves, with no regards to future careers. It's cool because you can get mega rich and famous. All your friends think you're amazing. It's easy money. I WISH!!! ... Don't get me wrong, they have done the tattoo industry a world of favours. For the first time, people see how good tattoos can be. Hannah Aitchinson on LA ink blew my mind. Her use of colour blending and her ability to draw the human form is just pure skill. People have started to want bigger pieces, and want something custom. It has encouraged people to look at tattooists work and realise the possibilities are endless. Also that different people specialise in different areas. It has

made tattooing a very rich industry for certain people, and this is a good thing. Conventions have sprung up all over the place, people are generally much more interested in tattoo art.

The downside... Everyone is a tattooist. It's received a 'cool' status and everyone wants to be Kat von D or Ami James. I guess I may be contradicting my last question answer, because that's what drew me in 10 years ago.

Becky

Becky, having previously said that she liked the status and the 'celebrity' attention that being a tattooer might bring, here expresses her disappointment that tattooing is now considered 'cool' due to the wider television coverage it attracts. Although, as I have previously discussed, this suggests that capital earned from being on TV (and in turn the mainstreaming of tattooing) is, in the eyes of some artists, the 'wrong' kind of capital and possibly therefore not 'legitimate' or meaningful, it also illustrates the ambivalence felt towards the mainstream attention given to tattooing. This reflects what Breeze (2015) discusses in relation to roller derby and the mainstream, in that to be taken seriously when engaging in alternative or resistant practices, one may have to conform to hegemonic and dominant ideologies (2015: 27). In the case of tattooing, these dominant ideologies might manifest as mainstream media representations of tattooing, for example. Conforming to mainstream media leads to complexities: although the media publicises tattooing, and therefore may increase the chances of the mainstream taking tattooing seriously as a profession, some media portrayals are far from positive, and therefore, do not promote seriousness at all. On the one hand, television appears to have increased the amount of capital afforded to tattoo artists, but on the other hand, diluted this capital in many ways.

A client's expectation now is probably informed by shows like Miami Ink etc. The amount of times I have been asked if I watch these shows is...almost every client.

I have seen perhaps half an episode.

Tattooing is a slog of a job

Toni

You have the disadvantage that everybody thinks they know all about it, but you also have the advantage that people have opened their minds to tattooing. But, it is a very double-edged sword. It has unfortunately bought a lot of “entitlement syndrome” in to it. Because they see it and think that’s cool, with some people, that’s the only thing they know about tattoo.. it got to a point where a lot of other artists wanted to get t-shirts printed saying, “yes I’ve f\*cking seen LA Ink...

Sarah

Here Sarah illustrates the clash of capital. Increased coverage of tattoo in the mainstream means that the non-tattooed public ‘think they know all about it’, but at the same time, Sarah talks positively of people having their minds opened to tattooing as an artistic practice. Knowledge gained via the television shows is often used as capital currency within the community; both Sarah and Toni, as illustrated above, have experienced ‘outsiders’ to the tattoo community using the shows to gain capital, attempting to use the shows as a familiar cultural reference or perhaps using culturally-specific language to display knowledge of the sub-culture. This can be related to an ‘authentic’ performance of identity, discussed by Dupont in their study of skateboarding (2014:571). Dupont found that some skating performances were deemed illegitimate by subcultural insiders because the initial introduction and socialisation into the culture was through media representation of the culture’s ideologies and not direct socialisation from members of the subculture (2014:571). If the media are presenting both ‘inauthentic’ and ‘authentic’ information about the subculture, the outsider does not have the ability or knowledge to decipher what is and what is not legitimate information and this is ultimately what ‘gives them away’ as outsiders (2014:571).

Television was also criticised for the unrealistic image it portrayed of the industry and of tattooing as a practice.

TV makes it look so damn easy. Back pieces tattooed in 15 minutes. Sleeves drawn up in seconds. Every tattooist being utterly loaded with cash. Getting drunk all night and tattooing all day. Why wouldn't you want to be a tattoo artist?? I feel that this had bred a society of really bad tattooers, and really greedy business men. I know of people who run tattoo shops, that have no interest in tattoos. They get any old bedroom tattooist in and take half their money. That's fine I guess. It's just heart breaking when you know there are amazing artists short of work, and these awful tattooers are booked up

Becky

...her [Kat Von D] show presents tattooing in such an unrealistic light. Because of that show people think they can come in at 11:00pm and get a full sleeve done. It's crazy! It happens all the time. I'll try to explain to someone that it takes ten hours sometimes just to DRAW a sleeve, let alone another twenty plus to tattoo it, and they just can't believe it... All these tattoo shows that are popping up are ridiculous. I don't follow them religiously, but I've scoped them out for obvious reasons.

Asia

Both Becky and Asia refer to the unrealistic expectations that television shows perpetuate, suggesting perhaps the shows demeaned the skill involved in tattooing, which in turn diminished the hard work that goes into developing a career in the field. This has a detrimental effect on the respect held for artists outside of the industry, leading to a decrease in legitimacy. Artists want to be considered as hard-working professionals outside of the sub-culture, in the hope that this reduces the stigma attached to the industry, but many artists feel that television reality shows are presenting tattooing as a glamorous and 'easy' career. Because of this, there was ambivalence towards the effect television has upon the industry.

Of course, conflict also arises between the effect of television on the mainstreaming of the sub-culture, and the effect of television on the opportunity for financial gain and economic capital, as illustrated here by Clio:

I feel totally disoriented about the way that subcultures in general are going. It seems like marketing and internet proliferation of images has really recontextualized every symbol or sign of subcultural membership. I like some elements of pop culture, and I benefit from tattooing being popular, but there is part of me that is forlorn to see subversive symbolism turn normal. I do love tattoos though, I think that tattoos really add character and beauty so I'm excited to see more and more people getting tattoos you can see. Conflicted I guess?

Clio

As Clio identifies, there is a conflict here, and an ambivalence towards the effects of mainstreaming on what was a sub-cultural activity. Although tattoo artists may criticise the mainstreaming of their sub-cultural practices, they are also benefiting from this popularisation: through being taken more seriously as a profession, and financially. This is an issue any subculture would face upon its aesthetics, signs and symbols being more widely accepted in the mainstream and it is something that the artists in the tattooing industry must negotiate. This is demonstrated through an ambivalence towards the mainstreaming of tattoo culture, and continuous conflicts and contradictions are seen throughout many of the interviews.

### **The 'Other' Artist**

Some of the participants described being 'othered' by their fellow artists, which illustrates points discussed above regarding hierarchy, status and capital.

I can feel very judged by other tattooed people- just like in any subculture, some of them are snobbish about it or take it to the extreme - if you don't

have what's 'cool' right now, then they will look down on you. This is definitely noticeable when tattooists meet 'scratchers' (the derogatory term tattooists have for artists like me who taught themselves). Though not always - again, it just comes down to if the person is respectful and comfortable with themselves

Kirsty

From experience, the customers don't care [that I am a woman] once they've seen what I can do... It's most certainly other artists that create the feeling of being ostracized

Kate

Both Kirsty and Kate suggest that it is fellow artists who impose and reinforce the hierarchy or at least the feeling of a hierarchical structure. The hierarchy is imposed by and amongst the artists themselves. Kirsty echoes what Kate has experienced and identifies the subcultural-specific term 'scratcher'. This is a common term within tattooing circles, and is used to describe any artist who is either self-taught (as opposed to learning through an apprenticeship) or who does not fulfil the artistic skills and expectations of whomever is doing the describing. In her research, DeMello identifies 'scratcher' as a term used to differentiate between classes of tattooists, and relates it to distancing the self from others (DeMello, 2000: 6). It is usually used by tattoo artists or by established, long-term members of the tattoo community with derogatory intent. It is an example of what Thornton has termed 'embodied subcultural capital' - being 'in the know' - and might be displayed through using language specific to the subculture or community, for example (Thornton, 1995:11). Embodied subcultural capital could also be displayed by using other language specific to the subculture, and would only be accessible and intelligible to people who had some involvement with the community – for instance, Becky, who affiliated with the community for a long time before she began tattooing, would have the ability to 'talk the talk' and therefore openly display her embodied subcultural capital. This again, can be used to distinguish the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders' of the

community; mirroring the inauthentic consumers, scratchers are considered inauthentic producers, and this reproduces hierarchies amongst artists.

At the same time as describing negative experiences of being judged and excluded, I noticed the interviewees themselves 'othering' fellow artists throughout their narratives. This served, as DeMello had argued in her own research (2000:6) to discursively position themselves within the industry hierarchy and legitimise their own space within the field. Many of the participants criticise artists for their lack of skill, lack of authenticity or illegitimacy.

I think being a tattooist is so 'cool' at the minute, and there are so many awful tattooers in the UK at the minute

Becky

I feel that if tattooing wasn't such an accessible, cool thing, the weak would be weeded out and we would be left with a client base of serious tattoo collectors, and quality work across the board

Becky

There are 2 studios in our town, one is \*ahem\* questionable, and the other has been established for 3 years, but I've done a lot of cover up of his work

Kate

A friend of mine in her 50's who tattoos, said she was working a convention a while ago and being spoken to like an idiot by some 20-year-old hipster kid, he's only been tattooing 5 minutes, did one style of tattoo and yet called himself an old-school tattooist. We said, no, an old-school tattooist did whatever came in the door, you'd be there from 10am to 8pm at night, doing every style that was thrown at you, you had to up for every style, not this neo-traditional thing.

Sarah

In discussing 'other' artists, the women created dichotomies to produce and display their own 'authentic' subcultural identities (Becker, 1966, cited in Dupont, 2014). They placed themselves in comparison to, and distanced themselves from 'bad' artists as opposed to good:

There are 2 studios in our town, one is \*ahem\* questionable, and the other has been established for 3 years, but I've done a lot of cover up of his work.

Kate

Sarah, who had been tattooing for the longest out of all of my interviewees, criticised the younger generation of tattoo artists and used her age and years of tattooing experience as proof of authenticity and capital to place herself above 'them' within the hierarchy, even though she herself had experienced discrimination as a younger tattoo artist:

My age (I was 21) often worked more against me [than gender], which of course I understand completely now!!

Sarah

Voicing their commitment to the industry was another way in which artists placed themselves on the cultural hierarchy. This was discussed in chapter three in relation to Dupont's work on skateboarding – status and authenticity is claimed by displaying very high levels of commitment to the subculture, in comparison to other 'less committed' members of the subculture (Dupont, 2014:561). Placing themselves in comparison to other artists seemed important to the women and this was key to the narratives; it was very much part of the interviewees' identity work and performances of the self which in turn created a platform for them to reinforce their professional standing (Gimlin, 2010:74).

There was always an 'other' to resist against, somebody 'not' to be. Distancing the self from 'bad' artists not only indicates a devotion and a passion for

'good' tattoos, but it also serves as a tool for constructing the self as a 'good' artist. 'Bad' artists are not named specifically, but similarly to the women discussing 'other' careers at the beginning of this chapter, they are used as symbolic others by which the interviewees can then construct their own identity around, or in direct comparison to. Re-telling experiences, and sometimes in the case of my interviews, using other people's experiences rather than their own as examples, the interviewees are reasserting the discourses and narratives that they want to be heard (Gimlin, 2010:60-1). This is especially evident when some of the women talk about male artists and the masculinities evident in the industry – not all of the women have personal experience of dominant masculinities, but most offer examples, either of their own experiences or of others'. Men artists were certainly, for some women, seen as somebody to compare themselves to, with some of the participants creating a gendered 'other'. This serves to emphasise the existence of a sub-cultural dominant masculinity– whether experienced personally or not. Thornton describes this as the 'imagined other' in her own research. She argues that this is not necessarily how the subculture is organised but is more to do with how members of the community imagine or see their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital in comparison to fellow members of the group (Thornton, 1995:96).

### **Gendered Authenticity**

Throughout the interviews the women described what appeared to be a masculinised culture within the industry. The narratives show recurring themes surrounding the dominance of masculinity within the field of tattooing and what I would identify as gendered norms and understanding of authenticity of knowledge and status. Subcultural capital is often biased towards masculinity, which can, in some circumstances, leave femininity holding a marginal status, mirroring that of wider cultural situations (Brill, 2007:112). Issues of legitimisation and authenticity are key in the accumulation and the displaying of subcultural capital, and in the case of my research it appeared that authenticity in the field of tattooing was heavily gendered.

In my experience, the public are FAR more open to women tattooists and are almost excited by the prospect of seeing what women can do in a predominantly male industry. Other artists though are a whole other ball game. It's a period of proving oneself before you're accepted as capable as a man.

Kate

Women in this industry constantly have to fight for the respect that is thrown, all too often undeservedly, at men... I actually can't recall an instance where a client made a remark about the sex of the men I work with and its effect on their tattooing.

Asia

Although Kate's and Asia's quotes are slightly contradictory in that Asia has experienced client (as well as men artists) discrimination against women artists, both narratives suggest that the masculine culture of the industry legitimises men's knowledge over women's and places men as the legitimate, authorised holders of knowledge and power. It also has a significant effect upon how women artists negotiate their femininity, and this was an important theme to come out of my interview data. The women spoke about having to 'prove themselves' as capable tattooers and how at times, they struggled to be 'taken seriously'. I would argue that this is a direct result of a hegemonic masculinity in the industry, and it is a significant part of being a woman artist in a male-dominated and masculinised field. When they described men artists, the women I interviewed made frequent use of the term 'rock star'.

I have come across some men who think they're something akin to young rock gods.

There's a lot of hero worship that goes on.

Toni

I have worked along one or two 'Rock Star' tattooists, but that doesn't really bother me as an artist.

Amy

It was a bit of a rock star job. I've heard so many stories about Micky Sharpz (I mentioned I apprenticed in his old shop) having a studio full of walk in customers and turning them all away because he wanted to play his guitar all day. People still came back.

Becky

In these quotes, women describe a form of masculinity which they perceive to be dominant in the tattoo sub-culture. This 'rock star' masculinity seems to draw on the stereotype of a creative or artistic man with an inflated ego, demanding and receiving attention and adulation. Tattoo studios generally play music whilst the artists are working, and this music is often rock music, and thus there is a significant link between rock music and tattoos. This might explain the literal association of men artists with the term 'rock god'. However, I would argue that the association goes further than that. It also alludes to a rock star 'attitude', perhaps being edgy, dangerous and assertive whilst demanding sexualised attention from customers/fans, with their sub-cultural capital enabling a sense of entitlement to this attention. This is a good example of how the dominant sub-cultural norms of masculinity are reproduced within the sub-culture and are specific to the sub-culture itself. The women were also perhaps using the term 'rock star' to devalue the capital afforded to men artists, in an attempt to mock this hegemonic form of masculinity and gain distinction themselves (Vroomen, 2002:126); this was evident as another form of negotiating the gendered power imbalances.

The normative role of this 'rock star' masculinity leads me to call it a hegemonic masculinity, one which is specific to tattoo culture. I understand however, that although tattoo culture is highly masculinised, the hegemonic masculinity experienced within the culture will differ from wider societal hegemonic masculinities in many ways. Hegemonies are complex, multiple and sometimes

conflicting. They are created and enforced through the production and reproduction of norms – whether these norms are sub-cultural or societal. Masculinity is a set of practices accomplished in and throughout social actions and interactions (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:836). Hegemonic masculinities can therefore be constructions that do not necessarily correspond to the lives of any actual men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:838). Hegemonic masculinity does not represent a certain type of man, but a way in which men position themselves through discursive practices – men can adopt the symbolic indicators of the hegemonic masculinity if needed or wanted but at the same time, can distance themselves from it also (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:842). Many of the men who enact the hegemonic masculinity of the tattoo sub-culture will not fit with the norms of masculinity outside of the sub-culture. And so, when I discuss a hegemonic masculinity, I mean a sub-culturally specific hegemony, and the dominant norms of masculinity that the sub-culture reproduces.

In comparison to the assumed 'rock star' status of the men artists, women artists are often placed in a position of 'props' and assistants to the men in the studios.

You get the odd, older gentleman client, that still thinks women don't belong in a tattoo shop and automatically assumes you are the receptionist.

Becky

It is frustrating when people assume I am the assistant, but their ignorance is nothing to me, it just pushes me to prove myself more. I know I am capable, let me show it!

Amy

Ignored, miscategorised or disrespected, the women artists are left having to prove themselves as legitimate producers of their own standing, further

demonstrating the masculine culture of the industry. Although Amy describes this as frustrating, she also argues that the presumption that she is an assistant pushes her to prove herself. Amy expresses this as something positive, but it also illustrates the weight of the continuous negotiation and labour that many women artists have to deploy in order to be taken seriously as artists in the sub-culture. Maleness carries a presumed position of power and knowledge; femaleness, on the other hand, does not. Thornton argues that authentic culture is depicted in gender-free or masculine terms, and remains the prerogative of boys (Thornton, 1995:105). She states that disparaged 'other' cultures are characterised as feminine and 'girl's cultures' are devalued (Thornton, 1995:105); this reflects Amy's quote below. As argued by Breeze (2015) and LeBlanc (1999), to be taken seriously in a male-dominated and masculine culture, there is a certain degree of conforming to the masculine ideal required to succeed.

I have worked alongside an amazing female tattoo artist, she advised me on how to hold myself in front of male artists. For instance, not having all of my equipment pink, might allow me to be taken more seriously...celebrating being a 'girlie' girl with pink tattoo machines and pigtails, might lead to some of the more 'old school' artists not taking that woman seriously as an artist. I would say that definitely some people see pink equipment as too feminine. First impressions count, not even tattooing escapes this. I think women no matter what profession, are under scrutiny a little more than our male counterparts, so we may just have to work a little harder to prove our worth. We have a certain image to hold, in every walk of life. I guess it is about 'fitting in with the boys', or perhaps just toning down on our femininity. Be recognised as an artist before being noticed for being a woman, and that may just get us the respect we deserve. This industry has been predominantly male for years, female artists just need to prove that they have every right to be there too.

Amy

Femininity, or exaggerated and overt femininity - what Amy describes here as using pink equipment or being a 'girlie girl' (something I take to mean adhering in an explicit and even exaggerated way to dominant norms of what it means to be feminine) - seems to imply a 'lack' in the field: lack of skills and knowledge, and a lack of worth and seriousness. Amy was 'taught' how to manage herself in front of men artists; this suggests that women are not taken seriously and have to actively, consciously and strategically manage their femininity in order to gain respect, and that this is a common experience within the industry. Women are having to work together, to manage and negotiate their identities as artists in order to be taken seriously in the industry. Femininity, or at least 'too much femininity' is seen as something to be toned down, to be able to 'fit in with the boys' and succeed. Amy even says that women need to be seen as artists first, women second, in order to be taken seriously; this highlights the problematic relationship the masculine industry has with women trying to succeed, suggesting a degree of invisibility is required until the women have proved that they are worthy of the respect afforded to men artists.

I discussed above how the industry has had, to some degree, to conform to mainstream norms and ideologies in order to be taken seriously as a profession and an industry (Breeze, 2015: 95). Here we see that women, in order to be taken seriously as capable tattoo artists, not only have to conform to *mainstream* norms, but also to internal industry and sub-cultural norms and ideologies. In chapter three I discussed Breeze's use of the 'apologetic feminine' and the feminisation of 'masculine' activities. Here we see that the feminisation of tattoo equipment is seen, by women, as something to avoid and so rather than over-playing feminine aesthetics in order to apologise for being a woman in a supposedly man's role, women tattoo artists are downplaying feminine aesthetics in order to be taken seriously. This, it seems, is a different type of apologetic feminine – rather than over-playing femininity as a way of reassuring women are no threat to the masculine order, women tattooists downplay their femininity in an attempt to fit in with the men. Although not all the women had personal experience of this dominant masculinity, most had anecdotal narratives shared by clients, which suggests the

hegemonic gender order is not reserved for the industry but is present throughout the sub-culture.

It is important to note at this point however, that just as hegemonic masculinities between different cultures (such as the tattoo sub-culture and the mainstream, for example) are multiple and complex, hegemonic masculinities *within* cultures are also complex. Arguing for the existence of a hegemonic masculinity does not mean arguing that 'masculinity' is a fixed entity or indeed that the dominant masculinities are the embodied reality of all men and the male artists in the industry. Suggesting that there is a hegemonic masculinity evident within the tattoo industry does not mean to say that all male artists are complicit in this. The hegemonic masculinity of the industry does not only affect women – studios are often very masculine spaces, whether they intend to be or not. Just as men who conform to the sub-cultural norms of masculinity might not fit with wider societal ideals of masculinity, not all men within the sub-culture adhere to the dominant sub-cultural norms of masculinity. This can be intimidating for anybody who does not 'fit' into this category of masculinity and can often leave some men feeling like they are expected to conform to a narrow set of masculine ideals. This was identified by some of the women I interviewed, who could see that some men clients too are affected by the hegemonic masculinity and found women artists easier to work with.

A friendly face is often welcomed. I have been told in the past by men that they felt uncomfortable walking into male ran studios, whereas with me they feel at ease

Amy

I do believe the accessibility of female tattooists now has led to the more nervous of society to be able to get tattooed

Amy

What these quotes do not acknowledge is that it is not only men clients who might experience the effects of a hegemonic masculinity, but men artists also, who may feel a pressure to conform to the culture's dominant norms of masculinity. When getting tattooed, clients are often apprehensive for various reasons: worried about the level of physical pain, how the body will respond to the pain, or the awkwardness of being in intimate proximity with a stranger, for example. Here Amy talks about a 'friendly face' and how female tattooists may help the more nervous of clients to get tattooed. By adopting traditionally male roles, women are changing the industry and in turn, the sub-culture – if what Amy suggests here is true, more people who do not fit the mould of the hegemonic masculinity of the community are now able to get tattooed, this masculinity could in time become diluted and the community and industry might feel less of a male dominated space; this is something I explore in more depth in the next chapter. Additional to this, I must note that although the participants spoke about the masculine nature of the industry, some of the women also wanted to express their positive experiences of working with men artists. Both Toni and Sarah discussed men artists in a positive light, suggesting that women who might have had experiences of the masculine culture as a whole were keen to express more positive experiences they had had with individual men artists.

Some of my biggest mentors have been male. I wouldn't want to take away from their input. I have worked with a lot of male artists who not at any stage have treated me any less because I am a woman. The guys you think are more old fashioned, would never talk down to me because I was a woman

Sarah

And from my experience when women artists are talked about by male artists it is with total equality based on their skill

Toni

Both Sarah and Toni's personal experiences illustrate that, as I have discussed above, suggesting that the tattoo sub-culture is a masculinised space, which constructs norms of a hegemonic masculinity, does not mean that *all* men artists conform to this set of norms. However, Sarah, who here wanted to express her positive experiences with most of the male artists she has worked with, also told me about the difficulties she experienced when she had her daughter.

Sadly in this industry (even though you would hope it would be better being an 'alternative' type of industry) male run studios are not always understanding of child care issues for women. This is something that I find is generally not a problem for men! I have been very disappointed by my experiences in this field. Thankfully where I work now has been much better about it and more understanding but my eyes have been fully opened by my experiences since having a child.

Maybe if one day, I do have my own place it will all be run around childcare hours for female artists!

Sarah

We should not presume, therefore, that subcultures do not come with the same issues as the mainstream. Sarah describes an expectation that because she is working in an alternative industry, it would be different from mainstream employment and yet, she was disappointed to find in many ways, it was the same. Working in an alternative career still means having to perform this career within the constraints of more mainstream norms and values, it does not avoid them completely. What Sarah offers here is evidence that the tattoo industry is, in part, no different from any other mainstream employment in that it, along with many other industries, has an issue in dealing with the practicalities of working parents – something that Sarah identifies as being predominantly an issue for women workers rather than their men colleagues.

In addition to this however, I would argue that it is not only men who can adopt the hegemonic masculinity, and my interviews show this. We cannot argue

that hegemonic masculinity is adopted through discursive practices and is not inherent in all men, without acknowledging that women can therefore adopt these discursive practices too. In contrast to the women who criticised the masculinity within the industry, there were artists who embraced this specific norm of masculinity, and worked with it rather than actively resisted it. The way in which the women had come to negotiate the masculinities differed and depended upon their subcultural habitus, socialisation and route into tattooing. Whatever their methods of negotiation, the women were all very aware that this negotiation was taking place and voiced this through their narratives.

I've always been a bit of a tomboy so I knew that I had to pick a job in an atmosphere I would be comfortable in, i.e. a male dominated one [...] I have no problem working alongside men. I usually find their behaviour amusing! But as I have mentioned earlier, I've always been a bit of a tomboy, so I am used to being around men. A lot of women aren't like this.

Amy

I have been one of the boys since my teens [...] In a tattoo shop (as well as a band) when you are the only female, you are subjected to a lot of 'man banter'. I always join in.

Becky

Both Becky and Amy recognise the dominant masculinity in the industry and make reference to their previous experience of male-dominated subcultures. Becky and Amy both have access to, and the ability to appropriate typical masculine traits, which they express here as being an important part of their identity. Research on gender and gender negotiation in subcultures has explored the notion of the 'tomboy' and has argued that rather than disrupt the gender order of any male-dominated field, it serves to reinforce and reproduce the male vs female power relations (Scruton et al, 1999:105). Backstrom, in their research on gender and skateboarding, notes that in the skateboarding subculture, displaying tomboy femininities is met with an accepted presence within the hegemonic gender order

(Backstrom, 40:2013). This suggests that identifying as a tomboy or 'one of the boys', rather than offering any kind of alternative femininity is, in fact, colluding with the male dominance and therefore perpetuating the gendered hegemony within the field. On my first analysis of the data I considered this argument. However, to claim that Becky and Amy are 'colluding' with male dominance is, I think, somewhat disparaging and over simplistic. Their relationship with and negotiation of the masculinities and femininities of the field are far more nuanced than this argument would recognise. In her research on gender and rock music, as discussed in chapter three, Schippers (2002) introduces the concept of gender manoeuvring. She explores strategies employed to transform sexist cultures into non-sexist ones and explains gender manoeuvring as being *cultural* and *interactive*. *Cultural* refers to the manipulation of relationships between masculinity and femininity as culturally-embedded beliefs, and *interactive* refers to the manipulation of these relationships in moments of interaction (Schippers, 2002). The concept of gender manoeuvring allows us to explore the relationships between genders as actively negotiated within face-to-face interactions (Schippers, 2002). Schippers argues that the intention of gender manoeuvring is to transform the gender relations and organisations of everyday life with 'our bodies, our activities, our interactions, and in the broader distribution of resources and power' (Schippers, 2002:189). It is not simply a case of Becky and Amy colluding and therefore reinforcing the gender order; I do believe that their access to masculine habitus was influential in their ability to gain space within the field (which I will expand upon below). However, later in their interviews, both women spoke about knowingly using their femininity for the benefit of not only themselves, but also other women in the tattoo community. Therefore, this active negotiation between 'fitting in' with the male culture of the field but yet positively utilising their femininity within this male space, could be seen as gender manoeuvring.

Previously I have argued that Becky's subcultural capital was an influential factor in her gaining space within the field of tattooing. We also need to consider Becky's access to a masculine habitus and how this may have influenced her entry into the industry. Becky did possess capital from her affiliation with the tattoo

community before her career as a tattooist. However, Becky (and Amy) come from a background of male-dominated subcultures and therefore possess embodied masculine capital; they know how to present themselves in a male-dominated environment. Neither Becky nor Amy criticise the masculine culture of the industry, and we could argue that this is because they have been socialised into it. We could therefore also argue that Becky and Amy have both been welcomed into the industry so readily because of their willingness to accept the hegemonic masculinity. Anyone trained through an apprenticeship is nurtured and socialised in what is predominantly a masculine space. The hegemonic masculinity is 'the norm' and becomes embodied. Those artists who have affiliated with the community before becoming a tattooer, have spent even longer being socialised into the dominant masculine culture. The women who can recognise this male dominance, but rather than resist it, work with it, are perhaps more likely to be 'accepted' into it. Finley, in her research on women's roller derby recognises that in subcultures, women, as with any subordinate group, are sometimes driven to using the resources available to them to 'survive' and therefore, Finley suggests it is likely that women negotiate between multiple femininities in differing contexts (2010:362-3). Finley also notes that some of the multiple femininities performed, may be of benefit to other women within the patriarchal system, and some may not (Finley, 2010:362-3). This then may lead to some women being seen as conforming to dominant norms of femininity in order to succeed – as Reddington (2004) notes in her work on punk subculture, that in order to be successful in a male-dominated sphere, women must package themselves as objects 'amenable to men' (2004:249).

Connell suggests that women can appropriate aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:847) and this may be an accurate theorisation of the way in which Amy and Becky utilise their masculine capital. We could also consider Tseelon's work on masquerade in *The Masque of Femininity* (1995) and argue that an appropriation of masculine capital could also be a *masculine masquerade* – women embodying and performing aspects of hegemonic masculinity in an attempt to forge relationships in certain situational contexts. Women can adopt the traits of hegemonic masculinity in order to access masculine cultural capital.

Once they have gained a space in the industry by appropriating masculinised traits or at least 'fitting in' with the culture in which these traits are performed, they are able to engage in behaviours associated more with dominant versions of femininity, to benefit themselves and their clients, I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

### **Conclusion**

By examining the artists' route from consumer to producer, this chapter introduces and highlights some of the key themes to have emerged from the interview data. Many of the women chose to pursue a career in tattooing as an alternative to mainstream employment. After already engaging with alternative subcultures, life as a tattoo artist offered potential for them to 'be themselves' in the workplace, extending their alternative lifestyle from one associated with youth culture, to one of work and adulthood. Some of the participants discussed 'other' forms of employment, and described how mainstream employment was restrictive and relied on the compromising of the self and identities. The field is perceived, and in some cases, voiced and presented as a space of freedom. However, as discussions progressed, contradictions emerged. What this chapter identifies is that this space of freedom comes with many restrictions and boundaries. Not all the artists had found it easy to break into the industry, and what emerged was a prominent hegemonic masculine culture, perpetuated by male gatekeepers, creating barriers for women striving to make the transition from tattoo client or enthusiast to tattoo artist. The chapter not only illustrates the capital afforded to male artists, and what constitutes authorised and legitimised knowledge, but it also highlights the masculinities at play within the field.

The hegemonic masculinity of the culture also led to a gendered authenticity, whereby men's knowledge was considered more authentic and legitimate than women's. This left many of the women feeling as though they had to work harder to be taken seriously in the field – by both fellow artists and consumers. The industry, it appeared, is built upon hierarchies – both gendered and sub-cultural, and revolves

around fluid and unstable power imbalances that require careful and complex reflexivity and manoeuvring.

Capital was a central theme to emerge from the analysis in this chapter, with complex and nuanced discussions illustrating the paradoxes and ambivalence attached to capital within tattoo culture. Sub-cultural capital had facilitated some of the women's transition from consumer to producer, although the same women still described difficulties in gaining space in the field. This sub-cultural capital was coupled with socialisation into tattoo culture, which implied that some women could access, utilise and appropriate a masculine habitus to 'fit in' to the hegemonic masculine norms of the field and therefore, were sometimes more likely to be accepted by their men colleagues. Although this might, by some, be considered as colluding with the masculine hegemony, it also illustrates the fluidity and plurality of the masculinities and femininities, and highlights the ability to utilise, appropriate and combine different gendered behaviours, which is something I explore further in subsequent chapters.

This chapter also identified contradictions and ambivalence in discussions around sub-cultural capital. Participants spoke about the popularisation of tattooing in the mainstream, and how their capital and status as artists, although being vital to success and therefore welcomed within the industry, capital held outside of the sub-culture, led to feelings of ambivalence. Tattooists benefit financially from the increase in interest in tattooing, but felt ambivalence towards tattooing becoming more popular in the mainstream. Television was seen to be a key influence in the mainstreaming of the tattoo, but artists who had appeared on TV or had been involved in TV shows were seen as having 'sold out'. There was discussion around consumers and the capital they grant artists. Authentic consumers, who were seen as committed to the subculture, were respected and appreciated. Inauthentic consumers, however, (for example, individuals who had gained their tattoo knowledge through TV and mainstream media), were less respected and their opinions not valued.

This chapter identifies the clashes of capital within the subculture and the industry, the conflict between insiders and outsiders, and the demonstration of authentic and non-authentic consumers. It also reveals a significant hegemonic masculinity dominating the culture, and because of this, subcultural authenticity is invisibly gendered. Women as both tattooed people and tattoo artists strive to distance themselves from both mainstream ideals of femininity, and the 'other' artists (what they deem 'bad' artists, for example). However, women artists are at the same time in a position of being the other, with regards to being a woman in the industry. How then, does this affect the ways in which women negotiate their femininity within the field? And in what ways do women artists make femininity work for them?

**Chapter Six****Making 'Woman' Work**

Thus far, I have discussed femininity as something to be downplayed or managed; this chapter will complicate the analysis of negotiations of femininity, by introducing to the discussion the idea that femininity is also something to be positively utilised by tattoo artists. It was clear from the interviews that this was important to the women and a prominent part of their lives as tattooers. This chapter, therefore, will seek to explore how femininity and femaleness are actively employed and navigated within the field, and to ask what effect this might have upon the industry. The chapter will use the work of feminist scholars such as Skeggs and Huppertz who have developed Bourdieu's work on capital to include gendered capital and it will focus upon women's experiences in the tattooing workplace and the relationship between the artist and the client. This is a complex relationship and in continuing the exploration of this, the chapter will consider tattooing as body work and the emotional and aesthetic labour involved in the practice of tattooing. In the exploration of body work, I will utilize the work of Carol Wolkowitz who has previously argued that research on emotional labour has neglected the specific issue of workers' interactions with the bodies of clients, patients and customers where the work involves intimate bodily contact (Wolkowitz, 2006:146). Inspired by Wolkowitz, I argue that we must acknowledge the link between body work and emotional labour in tattooing. Discussions surrounding aesthetic labour will offer insights into how women artists manage the image of the profession outside of the tattooing community, and the labour employed to manage and negotiate these societal perceptions.

**Capitalising the Female**

The notion of gendered capital was born from feminist theorists who extend Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (see McCall, 1992, Skeggs, 1997, Lovell 2000). These theorists suggest that women can use gender as a form of capital or resource, developing femaleness and femininity as forms of embodied cultural capital which

place the subject in a more active, powerful role in the construction of identity and agency (Ross-Smith, Huppatz, 2010:549). Research has been carried out on various industries to explore the uses of gendered capital in the workplace, including the caring profession (Huppatz, 2009) and management (Ross-Smith and Huppatz, 2010). Both of these fields hold similarities to the field of tattooing in relation to how gendered capital is utilised and valued.

Huppatz' (2009) research on women in the caring industry introduces the notion of both feminine and female capital, and it is this that is so significant to my own work. It is important to note that the concepts of femininity and feminine capital are not seen as attributes reserved for women only, much like the discussion in the previous chapter surrounding masculinity not being the reserve of men or men artists. One must not fall into the essentialist trap of associating typically feminine traits with that of being a woman. Female capital is the gender advantage that is derived from being perceived as *female*, but not necessarily *feminine*. Feminine capital is the gender advantage that is derived from displaying traits associated with femininity (Huppatz, 2009:50) which, of course are not exclusive to women. So how is this capital played out within the field of tattooing?

The existence of gender capital was broadly expressed throughout the narratives in two ways. Firstly, many of the participants were eager for me to know that women clients often favoured women tattoo artists and sought them specifically because of their gender, thus indicating the existence of a form of female capital. Secondly, the artists were equally as keen to tell me about how they utilised their femininity to benefit their clients, which in turn increases their ability to gain economic capital. Female and feminine capital, although not named as such in the interviews, are a significant part of the women's narratives, shaping how they viewed themselves within the community and further constructed their role within the field. It was apparent that this was important to many of the women I interviewed and something which they took very seriously in their role as tattooer.

[...] most of my customers are female, and so it [being a woman] attracts them as a customer base

Becky

I know a lot of women seek me out specifically for tattoos as they find it difficult to find a tattooist they trust. Many, many clients are referred to me after they have had bad experiences at professional parlours - most women tell stories of being bullied, scoffed at or just simply ignored. I hear these tales over and over, and certainly, when I got the one studio tatt that I have, from a man, that is how I was treated as well. I certainly don't treat my clients this way- but then again, I don't treat anyone that way.

Kirsty

A high proportion of my customers are female, and I know a lot of them feel more comfortable with me, as a woman, than if they were to hire a male artist. Walking into a tattoo studio, and putting yourself under the needle can be quite a daunting experience, so if I can help ease this uncomfort [sic], simply by being female and friendly then all the better.

Amy

We can see here that female capital in the field of tattooing is a valuable resource and the narratives suggest that the women are aware of this. In the previous chapter I argued that the women's sub-cultural habitus influenced how they dealt with, or viewed the masculinity of the industry; here we see that the sub-cultural background of the artist has little or no effect upon their engagement with feminine and female capital – the women accumulate and utilise gendered capital regardless of their background or access to sub-cultural capital. Kirsty, for example, talked extensively throughout her interview about her gendered capital (although she did

not use this specific term) and yet she also expresses her dislike of the masculine nature of the industry, and lacks the sub-cultural capital that perhaps Becky or Amy both hold. The women talk about their female capital as something unique to them as women artists, offering something that men cannot – alluding to a sense of pride throughout the narratives. Although being a woman, for some, hinders opportunity and the ability to transition from consumer to producer within the industry, the narratives in my research show that once a woman artist has gained a space in the field, being a woman holds capital which has the potential to be converted into economic capital. There is an interesting paradox between the women being aware that their gender affected their entry into the industry, and them being aware that their gender can be used in a positive way to affect their position and income once in the field. The very reason women find it so difficult to break into the industry has the potential to become the reason they succeed. Once women have overcome the industry gatekeepers and secured space in the field, artists are able to develop their skills and role within the industry and what once counted against them can become their distinctive 'selling point'.

Tattooing has not been a typically feminised occupation and has been seen traditionally as a working-class, masculine trade and so the negotiation of feminine and female capital differs to that of, for example, the caring profession. Ross-Smith and Huppertz' (2010) research on women in management explores the experiences of women who have gained positions in an inherently masculine field and subsequently use their gendered capital to further establish their place in the field; their research shows similarities to my own work.

The women who took part in our study have successfully entered this field and this research therefore provides the opportunity to examine whether female and feminine dispositions may operate as capital in a field that has generally privileged masculine embodiment (Ross-Smith and Huppertz. 2010:548).

The tattoo industry as a field is predominantly masculine, with men artists taking a position of dominance and power, which gives them the ability to 'shape the field of play' (Ross-Smith, Huppatz, 2010:548). Clients, as suggested by Kirsty's quote above, may align feminine qualities such as caring and listening with being female, and presume that a woman artist therefore will not display the stereotypically-masculinised traits Kirsty speaks of.

Clients choosing women artists has the potential to complicate and disrupt the hegemonic gender order. It was evident from the narratives that many women clients seek women artists in order to avoid the overly and narrowly masculine norms of the industry. Amy too identifies that simply by being female, she may be able to alleviate some of the discomfort felt by women clients. Many of the women I interviewed realised the potential for gendered capital to disrupt the dynamics of the overly masculine, male-dominated industry.

I think the macho tattoo culture will shift – so many women are getting in to tattooing, and a lot of shops are opening that are all women, or directly aimed at women. I think it's a great thing. Anything that allows women to feel safer, supported and appreciated is fully endorsed by me.

Kirsty

Here Kirsty makes a direct link between the rise of women getting tattooed and the shift in the masculine culture of the community. She does not specifically link women seeking women artists; however, she does identify that studios are becoming more women-friendly. Although it has been argued by some scholars (Skeggs, 1997) that using feminine capital will not overturn power relations completely, perhaps in the context of the tattoo industry women do increase the potential to overturn the power imbalances of the field using both female and feminine gendered capital.

### Capitalising the Feminine

Feminine capital differs from female capital in that it relies on the traits associated with 'being feminine' and therefore is not reserved for women, but can be utilised by anyone willing and able to perform femininity. The women interviewed expressed their feminine capital through narratives of typically caring behaviour. Like their female capital, it was something important to their identities as tattooers and they seemed to take pride in caring for and providing a positive experience for their clients. Skeggs (1997) argues that a feminine habitus is something performed, something that women 'do' rather than what they are. This is particularly relevant to those artists who describe using their femininity to make clients feel comfortable and cared for, but yet do not identify as 'feminine' in their everyday identities, such as in the case of Becky and Amy, who identify as 'one of the boys'. Amy specifically describes performing this femininity for the benefit of her clients, and ultimately, the benefit of her reputation as an artist. Skeggs has also suggested that women do not get the praise that men might get for displaying femininity because it is presumed to be a natural disposition for women to display. But is this different for tattooed women?

[...] because it is such a male dominated industry, it is presumed you must be 'tough' or 'hard' to exist within it.

Kirsty

Here Kirsty suggests that there are assumptions made around women's identities and personalities due to the nature of the field – tattooed women are not only subverting society's ideals of what it is to *look* feminine, but if women are actively engaging in the tattooing industry, they are presumed to be lacking in typically 'feminine' traits such as caring or listening and therefore what it is to *be* feminine. Perhaps therefore, performing femininity *does* get rewarded because these are traits not expected of women who defy mainstream norms of femininity. Research by Vail (1999) on tattoo collectors reveals the importance clients put upon the experience of becoming tattooed. The interviews showed participants valued the

quality of the tattooing experience, and saw it as holding more meaning, than the technical qualities of the tattoo itself (Vail, 1999:266) – illustrating that clients do benefit from, and appreciate, the emotional labour employed by the participants in my own research.

Although *female* capital is inaccessible to men artists, men artists do have the opportunity to appropriate aspects of *feminine* capital and this, in turn, has the potential to disrupt and subvert the culture of unequal gendered power relations so prevalent within the industry. Some of the participants did begin to discuss their thoughts on men's utilisation of these qualities in the interviews, although their views differed and sometimes contradicted themselves.

I do believe female tattooists can be more approachable, and offer a more comfortable service [...] Also, during the tattoo, I know that I am a lot more gentle than some other (particularly male) artists. I don't like to put my client through any more pain than is necessary. Now, I don't know for certain if it's because I am a girl that makes me like this as an artist, I would guess it may have something to do with the mothering instinct!

Amy

It should be the quality of work that makes someone popular, that and the experience you as an artist give your client. This can be done by either gender of tattooer.

Amy

In the actual [tattooing] interaction, there is so much care and attending to your client's comfort and body. I don't know if male socialized tattooers feel the same way, but I imagine they might.

Clio

I think a lot of clients seeking out women tattoo artists have had negative experiences not being listened to, and can count on women tattoo artists to be more likely to listen and attend to their needs just due to the shape of female socialization

Clio

Both Amy and Clio recognise that women clients may seek out women artists due to presumptions around typically feminine traits, and both question male artists' abilities to utilise these same traits. It is interesting that both Amy and Clio contradict themselves at different points in the interviews, but, like Holland and Harpin (2015), I do not see this as a problem or invalid data; instead, it shows how complex and contradictory the negotiation of gender in tattooing is (2015:296). Putting gendered traits into practice and performing gendered norms is seemingly so complex, and Amy and Clio's contradictions further prove this. Amy, although having previously identified as 'one of the boys', offers the 'mothering instinct' as an explanation for her caring and gentle nature when tattooing, suggesting she puts this down to an innate 'feminine' quality in women. Although identifying with more masculine identities, overall, Amy intimated that women artists can provide a different service to male artists, and that this is due to gendered behaviour and the capital gained from this.

I know that I am capable just as any man is, and that my gender does not affect my ability to produce good work. But on the other hand, I will use my femininity to help me with my customer rapport

Amy

Here Amy describes actively using her femininity during the tattooing transaction, and yet it was Amy who we saw in the previous chapter describing being advised to 'hold herself' correctly in front of male peers, tone down her femininity and avoid using overly-feminised equipment such as pink machines. Although the overtly 'feminine' symbolic indicators such as pink machines were seen in the last chapter as something to be managed and controlled. Emotions - and typically

feminine traits – in comparison to pink equipment, for example, are considered valuable and something worth utilising. There is somewhat of a conflict between this displaying of feminised artefacts, described by Amy in the previous chapter, and the displaying of feminine qualities to ensure the comfort of the client, described by Amy above. This is an interesting conflict: why are women expected to down play their femininity in some respects, but not in others? Why are some aspects of femininity legitimised and others not? Is there perhaps a difference between 'acting' feminine and 'looking' feminine? And the ways in which this is legitimised?

Overtly feminised equipment is visible, 'out there' and adheres to the notion of a dominant femininity and perhaps this is a difficult concept for the industry, with its dominant norms of masculinity, to accept. Caring, listening and other typically 'feminine' traits however are not visible, and can be appropriated and utilised by male artists as well as benefiting the client, and in turn the industry – they are therefore often legitimised because this is *useful* appropriation. 'Looking' feminine, however, and buying into overtly feminine-looking equipment for example, is perhaps *too* visibly feminine, and therefore not *useful* and in turn, not legitimised. This is not to say however, that feminine traits, specifically caring and being attentive are always appropriated and welcomed by the industry, and we can certainly see in the experiences of Kirsty or Toni, for example, that they have both had interactions with men tattoo artists who do not utilise these typically feminine qualities. In fact, they may even argue that some men artists purposefully reject these qualities *because* of their association with the feminine.

In addition to the discussion around useful, authentic capital, the narratives showed that as well as the women describing having to negotiate their own femininities, they actively engaged throughout the interviews in constructing what I saw to be 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' femininities displayed by fellow women artists. We can link this back to the previous chapter and the discussion around 'othering' artists, but more importantly, it needs to be considered here in the context of the intersections of gender with capital, legitimisation and authenticity.

Female tattooers use 'selfies' and underwear shots to get as many followers on the internet as possible. I personally would rather people just like my work, however like I say, I'm one of the lads [...]. I follow a lot of female tattooers on Instagram. One in particular, annoyed that many people with her selfies, it caused another female tattooist to comment 'how about you spend your time concentrating on your work...' or something like that. This selfie obsessed tattooist got hundreds of followers every time she put up a flattering picture. Great way to network, but not what I would do. I want to be recognised for my work and music, not my face [...] But then a few well known female tattooists are also models and suicide girls<sup>18</sup>. It does make you wonder if they'd be as well known if they kept their clothes on? I suppose women are empowered by sex, and men love looking at women, and so it's a great way to promote your work. I just wouldn't feel comfortable, and like I say, I want my work to speak for itself

Becky

Some female artists use their sexuality to promote themselves and their work, rightly or wrongly. They may tattoo in bikinis at conventions, or pose scantily clad for magazines. This gets judged, as it could be seen as selling herself not her art. However, the beautiful female figure is something that the men do not have, why not use it to its full advantage! [...] I think it is very important that a woman is proud to be a female tattoo artist, no matter if they are a tomboy or a girlie girl...However, whilst I do not believe we should not hide from being female, it shouldn't be because we have women's bodies that we stand tall. I do think that women can offer a more approachable

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<sup>18</sup> *Suicide Girls* is an 'alt porn' website, offering an alternative to mainstream online pornography, featuring women who supposedly do not conform to mainstream ideals of femininity or sexual attractiveness (i.e., they might have unnatural hair colours, tattoos, piercings). Not only does it offer an alternative to the aesthetics of mainstream pornography, but the website markets itself on its empowering ethos, maintaining the women featured remain in control of their images and the acts they perform.

service, even perhaps a more delicate, feminine design so it is for these differences we should be honoured in setting our own pathway.

Amy

Here we see 'other' women artists being criticised for using their sexuality to promote their work and themselves. Both Amy and Becky had mentioned in their interviews that the industry is crowded and therefore it was important to stand out and be noticed, and that being a woman sometimes helped this. And yet here we see Amy and Becky openly criticising their fellow artists for attempting to stand out – even identifying that it's a 'great way to network' and 'promote your work', but still condemning the method. I would argue that this constructs parameters in relation to what Amy and Becky consider to be an acceptable use of femininity and what is unacceptable, or how to *do femininity properly*. Amy especially has openly discussed using her femininity to positively influence the rapport between herself and her clients, and to ensure her clients have an enjoyable tattooing experience. However, it seems that using one's femininity (and sexuality) to promote your work is 'unacceptable' and inauthentic. Amy states that she does not think a woman should stand out *just* for being a woman. Very much like the use of pink equipment, this *visible* utilisation of femininity is not a legitimate use of femininity; only this time, it is the women who determine this. This creates and reproduces boundaries for the artists to use in distancing themselves from the 'other' artists, as discussed in the previous chapter. By voicing their disapproval of this use of femininity, they are both affirming femininity and distancing themselves from it at the same time; constructing a boundary to establish who is doing femininity properly and who is not. This can also be compared to discussions around Kat Von D in the previous chapter and the ambivalence felt towards the influence she has had upon the status of women in the industry. Both Becky and Amy have identified as 'one of the boys' previously and so perhaps are comparing these versions of hyper-femininity to the more masculinised identities they relate to (Renold, 2005), constructing their own ideals of what it is to be not only a woman, but more importantly perhaps, a woman tattoo artist. Amy discursively constructs the tomboy/girly-girl binary, after previously self-identifying as a tomboy and states that she would rather her work speak for itself. Becky

questions the artist's professionalism and authenticity, and is somewhat disparaging of these 'other' women's work. Amy's description of the women who tattoo in bikinis at conventions seems a somewhat exaggerated version of the hyper-feminine woman, and is perhaps part of a narrative in which the 'girly-girl' who engages in this version of femininity is contrived as a symbolic marker of the excesses of 'hegemonic femininity' (Holland and Harpin, 2015:307) and is something for Amy to place herself in opposition to.

Dominant norms of femininity and hegemonic gender orders are more likely to shift when women are not isolated in their challenges; if women are able to create spaces independent of masculine-controlled institutions, gendered norms could be deconstructed and reorganised (Finley, 2010; Garrison, 2000; Moore, 2007; Klein, 1997). Just as in the history of feminism, from consciousness-raising groups to the riot grrrl movement, networks for the unity of women are critical (Moore, 2007). Women in subcultures and the mainstream, however, often "distance themselves from what might possibly be their best source of support: other girls" (LeBlanc, 1999:220), especially if they have been isolated from other women because of competition nurtured and encouraged by patriarchy. Negotiations of alternative femininities frequently occur in settings where the overall power of the masculine to define the negotiation overwhelms dynamics between femininities (Finley, 2010:366). As discussed previously, boundaries are created and maintained by and amongst women, which often leads to women policing others' femininities.

### **The Body Worker and the Body Worked**

The engagement and embodiment of emotional labour, seen above in the women's description of the care and attention to their clients' needs, was another way in which the women utilised their feminine capital. It is important now to explore how gendered capital relates to the labour processes involved in both the practice of tattooing and the practice of being the tattooer, and to unpack the complex and interrelated aspects of tattooing as body work and the bodies that carry out this work.

Wolkowitz (2006) explains 'body work' to mean 'employment that takes the body as its immediate site of labour, involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body, its orifices or products through touch or close proximity' (Wolkowitz, 2006:147). Wolkowitz explains that the term body work has previously been used to describe the work people do on their own bodies, and she argues for the widening of this description to include the experiences of paid workers whose work involves 'the care, pleasure, adornment, discipline and cure of others' bodies' (Wolkowitz, 2006:147).

Research identified by Wolkowitz (Glassner, 1995, Munro, 1999) has found that body workers are often drawn to their occupations via their experiences as consumers in the field, and therefore their focus is often on the experience of the consumer rather than them as paid workers (Wolkowitz, 2006:148). This is certainly an aspect within my research, whereby the women focus largely on the experience they can offer the client rather than their own experiences – it is therefore important that research projects such as this allow opportunity for the voices of body workers to be heard and explored. We can also see, in the narrative of Kirsty especially, that some of the women were influenced by their own experiences as consumers.

Many, many clients are referred to me after they have had bad experiences at professional parlours - most women tell stories of being bullied, scoffed at or just simply ignored. I hear these tales over and over, and certainly, when I got the one studio tatt that I have, from a man, that is how I was treated as well.

Kirsty

Kirsty voices the negative experiences she has had with male artists as a consumer and frames this as something that drove her to want to offer a different service to her clients, as Wolkowitz identified in her research on body workers. Wolkowitz criticises previous research on body work or work on the body and states it has focused primarily on emotional labour, thus separating mind and body to the detriment of a full understanding of the situation – by separating emotional work

and body work, the understanding of physical care of the body is narrowed (Wolkowitz, 2006:149). Emotional labour should not be equated solely with the mind, but as a practice of the body also. As I progressed through my research, it became increasingly apparent that emotional work could not and should not be considered as separate from body work, and I soon discovered that the exploration of tattooing in this context offers an even more complex set of issues than I had originally anticipated. What makes the discussion difficult is the notion that tattooing is a practice reliant upon the interlocking of not only body work and emotional work, but aesthetics too. And so although Wolkowitz argues for body work and emotional labour to remain interconnected, I am suggesting that we further complexify this by arguing that emotional labour cannot or should not be considered separately from aesthetic labour in the context of creative body work. I specify creative body work as I am not arguing that *all* body work involves the same level of aesthetic commitment that is seen in tattooing. Caring or nursing, for example, would involve different levels of aesthetic labour than creative body work such as tattooing or hairdressing, and there is, I would argue, less of an emphasis on the uniqueness of the body worker in areas such as nursing, for example. The link between the body, emotion work, creativity and the aesthetic must also be explored and acknowledged (Sheane, 2012:147) and was certainly something expressed in the interviews.

When I get to do a piece I really love or am interested in there is nothing I enjoy more than tattooing. Intricate, delicate work gets me really excited! The moment where people see the finished piece, and it's a design we've worked hard on together and they really love it is very special too - often they will hug me or get very emotional. There is just a different feeling with some - you get a connection, and it's an intimate space. This usually happens when the piece is something I have worked together with someone - when I just get given an image to copy that rarely happens- which is why I don't enjoy it very much - and why I don't tattoo so much. I prefer to wait until someone seeks me out especially because they want my drawing style.

Kirsty

I love the idea I can be giving other people confidence too through my work. Covering scars and old crappy tattoos, is a very gratifying thing. So many customers are like 'oh I can wear a shoulder-less top' or a bathing suit on holiday just because of a new tattoo. It's amazing!

Becky

These quotes illustrate the relationship between body work, emotional labour and the creative process and leads us to further question why previous research has created a binary between mind and body. Wolkowitz equates the relative neglect of the relationship between emotional labour and body work to the fact that much body work is done in private, or at least out of the immediate eye of the public, and so it is difficult to observe without invading the privacy of the client or patient (Wolkowitz, 2006:58). And yet, the moments of bodily contact are often the most significant moments of social contact (Wolkowitz, 2006:58) – this is reflected in the narratives of my participants, who described the personal interactions they have with their clients whilst they tattoo them.

I am a therapist. I have counselled people through so much, and just been that ear that the customer needed for a few hours. I have talked out so many situations with people. It's very important for people to feel like they have a safe place, where they are not judged. I hope that every customer that leaves the studio, feels better about life. By learning about other people's lives, I learn about my own. I've had customers that I've had deep spiritual conversations with, and they've made me think about everything, which actually was pretty depressing! Still, as much as I am there for my customers, I unload a lot too. I love getting people's opinions on aspects of my life. Just talking to people in an intimate environment, means they tell you things they would never tell anyone. After all, I don't know them. I won't judge them. I

love being the person they can talk too. It gives me a purpose outside of tattooing, which I love also.

Becky

Here Becky not only expresses how she is 'therapist' to her clients, but how she feels the interaction is mutually beneficial for both herself and the client. Kirsty's quote above also illustrates her enjoyment of the tattooing process. This offers a different view of emotional labour to previous work – especially that of Hochschild (1983) who suggested that workers learn to develop strategies for 'dealing' with the stress caused by having to manage the self and emotions at work and that workers felt a conflict between their 'true feelings' and the emotions they displayed. This has been since criticised (see Wolkowitz, 2006) and further research has suggested that workers cope with the emotional side of labour better than Hochschild (2003) once argued. This is particularly relevant to my research as the women's narratives present a pride and enjoyment in the emotional labour of tattooing; they do not talk of managing it or feeling burdened by it. The women I interviewed do not see their emotional labour as a performance, or certainly did not express it as such in their interviews. Their narratives showed the importance attached to emotional labour and an emotional investment into the care and positive experience that this offered the client. Of course, I am not denying that there might be times, as with any profession which involves high levels of emotion work, when the tattooer is exposed to stories or experiences that they may find traumatic. However, this was not expressed during the interviews and the women only portrayed positive insights into the emotional labour they engaged in and the benefit it had not just for their clients, but also themselves.

Along with a client's emotional needs, the women spoke about the physical needs of the client during the tattooing process. Emotional labour is fundamental in ensuring the artist provides support for the client through what will be a *physically* painful experience. As with clients' emotions, the artists placed an importance upon this support and linked the management of pain with the client's vulnerability and a lack of power during the process.

Power imbalance is a huge deal. I think there is an intrinsic imbalance: one person is marked forever; the other person is not. There's no bridging that, but I think many artists want to do their best to ameliorate the effects of that power imbalance on the interaction. I personally don't want anyone to go through with anything they are not one hundred percent down for, and I think that's the fear with the power imbalance: that the client will push themselves, or deny themselves (not asking for a bathroom break, agreeing to design choices that they're not really feeling, etc] so I do my best to invite my clients to be honest with me about what they want and ask for breaks whenever they need them.

Clio

I do believe that you put a lot of trust into a tattooist when you get a tattoo. You are in a vulnerable position for a number of reasons: your health and safety (which is paramount), you're putting trust in the skill of the artist, plus the physical position that you place yourself.

Amy

I also like the interaction with interesting clients.

Though it can happen that everyone wants to be my friend afterwards because I've spent three hours causing them pain and they've told me their most secret secrets.

I equate it to torture.

I'm causing them pain and all of a sudden they're spilling their guts.

it's funny.

Toni

These quotes illustrate the level of insight the women have into the client experience and how they can work to alleviate feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness and pain. As previously discussed, caring and nurturing are

traditionally seen as feminine traits, and so the issue of pain management and overcoming vulnerability may be another reason that clients seek out women artists specifically. There is a complex power dynamic at play: body workers, by the nature of the work they do, are in a position of power in relation to the bodies they are working on, regardless of their status or position within a wider hierarchical context (Wolkowitz, 2006:163). Clients are often in a vulnerable position due to the nature of the transaction. Further to this, women tattooers, as we have seen, have historically been placed in a position of powerlessness within the industry and yet they are able to use their feminine capital to reduce the power imbalance between them and their clients. It may be their femaleness that deems them powerless in the field, but it is their femininity that can break down power imbalances for the benefit of the client.

The women can reflect upon their own experiences as tattoo consumers and empathise with clients, which in turn affects their ability to deploy emotional labour to support the client. The ability and willingness to reflect upon their own experiences in order to improve their actions as tattooers is emotional labour in itself.

### **Commodifying the Self**

The body is, of course, not only a source of labour, but also the product or 'artefact' of labour (Wolkowitz, 2006:27); this is especially relevant for tattoo artists. The body of a tattooer is usually a 'worked on' (Wolkowitz, 2006:27) body as well as a body that 'works on' other bodies and so here we have one example of how aesthetic labour manifests itself for the tattoo artist. However, there are myriad ways in which aesthetic labour presents itself for the tattooer and unpacking these is a complicated task.

Aesthetic labour in the workplace is something previously explored by a number of sociologists (Pettinger, 2010; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007), and when I began to consider the aesthetic labour involved in tattooing, I realised that the

aesthetic labour of a tattoo artist in relation to their body is different from the more corporation-focused occupations researched previously (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). Whereas in previous research, aesthetic labour usually involves an expectation on the workforce to look a certain way to 'fit in' with company policy, or to attract clients or customers, the dynamics for the tattooer differs to this. The tattooer works for themselves primarily, and so any 'labour' they partake in is to, ultimately, benefit themselves (and to a lesser extent the studio they work in). However, what the narratives suggest is that the pressure and expectation to look at certain way, comes from the members of the sub-culture, clients and potential clients. Therefore, in order to understand and explore the aesthetic labour undertaken by the tattooer, we need to shift the focus from the employer-worker relationship to that of the worker-customer relationship (Sheane, 2012:146).

Another element of being a tattooist that is up for judgement is how many tattoos we wear ourselves. I believe it is expected of us to be a walking canvas of our trade. The public tend to want to see that the professional they are seeking has an interest in their profession, for instance a mechanic who drives a car or a hairdresser with a stylish haircut. I have worked with a tattooist who had no tattoos, and she often was questioned on why she had no ink yet would tattoo people every day.

Amy

I think I mentioned before that customers in the shop would downright ignore me when I didn't have visible tattoos. Some even commented that that was grounds for not trusting me...I'm on the fence with this one. I do think every tattooer should have at least a few...so they know what they are doing to people you know? So that they have been on both sides. But I still think it is unfair to judge an artist's work based on the tattoos they have...it's just silly

Asia

Almost every person I tattoo who doesn't know me comments on it [Kirsty's lack of visible tattoos] - I think it makes some of them nervous as they may not know how long I have been tattooing for, and they are too shy to ask if I'm new to it.

Kirsty

The narratives illustrate the pressure felt by artists and the expectation that potential clients have for their tattooist to be tattooed themselves. For the tattooist, the tattooed body, is a symbol of professionalism and authenticity, and maybe even of devotion to the industry. As Asia states, an un-tattooed body may even be grounds for not trusting the artist. Kirsty also alludes to the idea that a tattooed body is an indicator of the artist's ability – which of course, in reality it cannot be, and therefore the tattooed body acts somehow as a symbolic indicator of ability. Asia makes the link between aesthetic and emotional labour, suggesting that artists who are tattooed can show empathy towards clients who are getting tattooed. This echoes my previous suggestion that the women were themselves reflecting upon their experiences of being tattooed for them to provide a better service for the client. We can begin to see from these quotes how the level of aesthetic labour employed by the artists might influence the economic capital gained. Research conducted by Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) on the modelling industry and the aesthetic labour employed by the models in the field shows that although it is a very different field from that of tattooing, the employment of aesthetic labour holds similarities to the narratives in my own research. The research identifies models as being 'freelancers' rather than employees of organisations or corporations. It suggests that the pressures of aesthetic labour impacts upon freelance workers differently, because, like tattooers, it is themselves that models are marketing and commodifying, they are the product to promote (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006: 776), as illustrated here:

...workers seeking employment in aesthetic industries or occupations might also come to see their bodies as the 'hardware' and perform aesthetic labour to gain/maintain employment (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006:781)

Ashley Mears (2011) has also researched the modelling industry and talks about models as being part of a 'growing workforce of "aesthetic labourers", those workers whose bodies and personalities – the "whole person" – are up for purchase on the market' (Mears, 2011:13). Although the tattooist is not commodifying themselves to the extent seen by the fashion model - in which their *actual* body is the promoted product - the tattooist is similarly promoting their work, their trade and themselves as body workers, and their physical appearance is likely to influence people's perceptions of them. As the quotes above suggest, displaying their tattooed bodies in the 'right' way has a significant effect upon their ability to gain work within the sub-culture. The tattoos displayed on their bodies do not necessarily indicate the quality of their own work as tattooists because usually they were made by other artists, but as the participant quotes above show, heavy coverage still promotes in clients, a feeling of professionalism and authenticity. This suggests that *aesthetic capital* in the field of tattooing is another influential form of capital, one which relates to what Thornton would term 'objective capital' (1995:11). As previously discussed, objective capital can be displayed through books and art (Thornton, 1995:11) for example and so would include aesthetics, however aesthetics refers specifically to 'the look' and is also linked to professionalism and authenticity.

This illustrates a link between aesthetic labour, aesthetic capital and the subsequent conversion to economic capital. We can further relate this to gendered capital by exploring how these factors influence the women's ability to promote their business and make money – just as the models who promote themselves might do. Wolkowitz argues that some employers in the service sector choose to employ women in order to use their gender and (hetero) sexuality to increase profits by appealing to and pleasing male customers (Wolkowitz, 2006:81). The focus is on the utilisation of gendered capital to appeal to the male gaze, gratifying male customers who subsequently spend their money, aiding the conversion of gendered capital into economic capital. The use of female capital in the tattoo industry can be considered in some ways as contrary to this. What the participants suggest is that women artists manage, utilise and employ their own versions of female capital to appeal to clients, thus increasing their own economic capital at the same time as providing a women-

led service to their women clients, ultimately resulting in female capital benefiting women on both 'sides' of the 'transaction'. This is an empowering position for the women artists, and the clients, to be in, but also relies heavily on the women engaging in the 'right' amount of aesthetic labour for this gendered capital to be useful, and readily converted into financial success.

The client leaves with this lovely shiny exciting cool new tattoo and spends the next days showing and telling everyone about their tattoo and tattooist. Then prospective clients come in asking for so and so that did so and so's tattoo, so then you're in demand and....you know...that sort of thing.

Toni

I think the main reason my clients are mostly female, is because women talk. I've had a few customers that are really glad that they are getting tattooed by a female, but then obviously they tell their friends, who are also female and it goes on from there. In saying that, as a woman, it's much easier to be in an intimate position with another female, than a strange man.

Becky

Both Becky and Toni recognise that their client base and reputation are built from 'word of mouth' publicity – if women clients have a positive experience with a woman artist, the way in which subcultures and sub-cultures are structured and organised mean that it is likely that the client will share her experiences with other members of the subculture or community. There is a strength in this that does not exist in fields such as management or caring as discussed above, and this is due to the nature of the gendered capital and how it operates in the sub-cultural field of tattooing. Women artists do not necessarily have to rely on other (male) artists in order to succeed in the industry and can manage themselves as independent agents in the field. Wolkowitz argues that the body work enabling the (re)making of bodies often goes unrecognised in relation to who carried out the work – the 'wearer' of the

body work is credited with the cultural capital it produces and yet the body worker is not (Wolkowitz, 2006:168). This, however, is generally not the case for tattoo artists who often get credited for their work – within subcultures, it is common practice for fellow tattooed individuals to ask who did 'your work' and it is indeed how artists gain a prospective client base, as illustrated in both Toni and Becky's quotes above.

To manage and maintain levels of capital however, requires a degree of investment – both in terms of time and emotions. Entwistle and Wissinger describe how this degree of aesthetic labour can lead to the feeling of always 'being on' – finding it difficult to break from work, as the body is always a performance of the commodified self (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006: 791). Freelance work does not allow for a complete separation between work self and private self, and is often reliant upon the projection of 'personality' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006:787). We have already seen evidence of this throughout the narratives – in the previous chapter where women describe being approached when outside of work, and above where Becky and Toni discuss how business is promoted throughout the community via 'word of mouth'. This suggests that aesthetic labour includes and extends emotional labour (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006:791) and further proves that they should not be considered as independent from each other in the context of tattooing.

I've come to the conclusion that tattooing is more than a career for several reasons, it is a lifestyle. You can't really separate yourself from it if you want to be really successful. You work round the clock bringing in new clientele, drawing appointments, painting flash sets<sup>19</sup> ...I think I've found a way to be okay with that and now the struggle is to keep my own art separate from work so that it stays alive.

Asia

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<sup>19</sup> 'Flash sets' are sheets of designs drawn up by artists for clients to choose from. These sets are often displayed in studios for customers to browse, rather than having a custom design drawn up specifically for them by the artist.

Asia identifies here that tattooing is a lifestyle rather than a career, which further demonstrates the feeling of being 'always on' identified by Entwistle and Wissinger of freelance workers. As well as the labour of promoting business, there is the physical labour of preparing for appointments. With social media becoming such a crucial part of promoting business, aesthetic labour is also performed via the internet in the promoting of the artist and their work. This also increases the merging of work and leisure, and the feeling that the artist is never truly away from their work (Hracs and Leslie, 2014:66).

A further illustration of always 'being on' and the pressures of work versus home life can be found in a guest blog post written by one of my participants, Becky, for the tattoo blog *Inkluded*. I stumbled across this blog post whilst researching tattoo-related resources. When I conducted the fieldwork for my research, it was only Sarah who spoke about having children, and as I discussed in the previous chapter, Sarah found flexibility around childcare responsibilities an issue in one of the studios she worked in. Since completing the fieldwork, Becky has had a daughter, and writes in this guest post about how difficult it is to juggle tattooing and motherhood.

Some people today have rather massive expectation of the service we provide, as tattooists. It seems to be no longer acceptable that a tattooer is also human being. I am starting to realise that I am definitely too nice for this job [...] I get home, make tea, we put our little one to bed. I then spend all evening drawing, re-drawing or answering messages. If someone decides to cancel their appointment the following day, I go through my diary and see who I have waiting for appointments, message them, wait for a reply, and try and fill the slot.

Often as artists we spend our evenings receiving the all-too-frequent "?????" messages from potential clients. This is an attempt from them to chase us because we didn't get back to them instantly

Becky, *Inkluded*, 2017

The post resonated with me, not only when I realised it was Becky who had written it, but because amongst descriptions of her working week and busy days, Becky demonstrates how difficult it is for artists to leave their work in the workplace. For women, who are, the majority of the time, the main care-givers, having children adds to the pressures of balancing home and work, and as Becky states here, she feels she is 'too nice' to not answer messages straight away. Becky, who in the interviews compared the service she provided to therapy for her clients, exposes here how difficult this service is to sustain. Artists who are 'too nice' put themselves under pressure to provide a service to their clients whilst at home as well as at work. However, making attempts to manage this, and perhaps *not* answering messages from home, risks losing clients and therefore decreasing economic capital.

### **Managing the Self**

Aesthetic labour is of course also performed on a day to day basis in the tattooing transaction between artists and client:

In terms of presenting to clients I like to look smart and non-intimidating. That's because so many of my clients talk about how intimidating going in to a tattoo studio can be

Toni

However you present yourself as a tattooer with the style you chose to wear, makes a difference to how you will be perceived by some. Others won't notice. Again, I believe this is the same within so many careers and industries. I wear what I feel comfortable in, as I need to be at ease when I work. Although I do not really consider 'the customer's opinion on the choice of my clothes/hair etc, I will make sure that I am always tidy in my appearance, clean and sweet smelling, as I am a professional in my industry and I have to make sure that comes across

Amy

This quote from Toni illustrates just how aesthetic and emotional labour are intrinsically linked and how the artists themselves navigate this. Toni actively makes choices about her clothing and the way in which she presents herself to meet the emotional needs of her clients. Amy, too, is aware of the level of aesthetic labour she engages in, although unlike Toni, she does not consider her customers' opinions in her choice of clothing. However, Amy does link her aesthetic labour with her level of professionalism, and wants this to come across to clients. Interestingly, Amy also likens this labour to other forms of employment – even though in the previous chapter, Amy was one of the artists who distanced tattooing from 'other' forms of employment, arguing that tattooing allowed for greater freedom in the workplace. This suggests once again that there is a degree of negotiation and fluidity within the tattooing field. On the one hand, the industry allows playfulness and freedom, but on the other hand, the industry - just like any other industry - has its own unwritten 'rules' to which the artists adhere. Perhaps these unwritten rules are also experienced by men artists? If these pressures are coming from inside of the community in general – meaning tattoo consumers – perhaps the masculine ideal of the rock star image that seems so entrenched in the narratives of the women, is one that the men artists feel they too must live up to.

Kirsty was the only artist to talk about the environment in which she tattoos, and I put this down to the fact she is the only interviewee to tattoo from her home. Interestingly, Kirsty's narrative identifies yet another source of aesthetic labour, in the setting up and management of the tattooing milieu:

The main difference I could see that probably exists is that I set up a calm, inviting space which is rather aesthetic. I play calming music and I dress normally- also I tattoo from my house. So someone coming to me is having a very, very different experience from a parlour, where the vibe is often incredibly macho and intimidating. Tattooists seem often to enjoy propagating the stereotype of themselves as tough or scary- aligning with

'metal' culture, which also goes along with piercing. I'm not against that vibe, it is just not what I like to work within. If I worked in a shop I would find that very stressful, and to be honest it is one of the main reasons I haven't ever looked for work as a professional, even though my skill level is adequate- I try to avoid places in general where I feel I might be threatened or treated poorly because it a male dominated environment- so I suppose in that way gender is something which definitely effects my practice.

Kirsty

Here we see Kirsty's attention to detail such as music, atmosphere and clothing. I did ask Kirsty to explain her use of the term 'dressing normally', as she had previously told me that she dressed rather alternatively, with what might be deemed an alternative hairstyle. Kirsty wanted to emphasise that she purposefully did not dress in an intimidating manner, and as we can see from the quote above, it is important for Kirsty to set up an environment different to those she herself and her clients have experienced. Kirsty invests a lot of emotion and time in the constructing and creating of the environment to give her clients a positive experience – further illustrating the intertwining of both emotional and aesthetic labour.

Aesthetic labour is also used in the management of stigma attached to the profession, although there is a paradox at the centre of this stigma management. Having a tattooed body holds capital in the sub-culture, and because of their tattoos, the tattooer is taken more seriously as an artist. However, at the same time, on the outside of the community, artists who are heavily tattooed are often in a position of having to manage stigma attached to heavy tattoo coverage. There is, therefore, an amount of labour that goes into negotiating and managing any public display of the body. This relates to the discussion in the previous chapter around the tensions between internal and external sub-cultural capital – the capital held by tattooists outside of the community is different from that held inside the community. Labour is employed in the attempt to manage the way in which people see heavily tattooed people and/or tattooers.

I feel my role is to demonstrate that we aren't all drug addicted felons really. That we are normal people who just choose to do tattoos for a living

Asia

I'd like to think that this [the increase in women in the industry] is having a positive impact on society, particularly people who will never have a tattoo. The people who would usually look down their noses at a woman covered in tattoos, or think that only criminals have ink, maybe they will begin to change their opinions slightly once they meet these hugely welcoming, peaceful women who just so happen to have beautiful artwork etched in their skin.

Amy

The need to challenge the stigma attached to being a tattooed woman, and a woman tattooer, is expressed here by both Amy and Asia; they suggest this to be a very prominent factor in their embodied identity and daily experiences as a tattoo artist. Previous research on tattooed women, as discussed in the literature review, explored the stigma attached to the tattooed woman's body and how the norms and ideals of femininity in mainstream society affect the way tattooed bodies are viewed (Atkinson, 2002; Pitts, 2003). Heavily tattooed women artists, therefore, are placed in a context whereby they are constantly negotiating their own versions of femininity with society's versions of femininity. This is further complicated by having also to negotiate the gendered capital they hold *within* the tattooed community, which is sometimes conflicting with public perception. The way in which women tattooers are viewed, therefore, is in constant flux and tension, between being stigmatised and wanting to challenge these perceptions, to being highly regarded and awarded capital and status.

The women interviewed want to take an active role in positively affecting the non-tattooed public's perception of tattooed people and tattooers. The tattoo artist has historically been linked to the association with marginal and deviant groups, and therefore has held negative connotations (Adams, 2012:150). The role of the

tattooer could therefore, as Adams (2012) suggests, be deemed 'deviant labour' which entails what he calls, 'dirty work' (2012:150). As discussed in chapter two, Adams links cosmetic surgery and tattooing and explains that both industries specialise in the modification of the body with varying degrees of social acceptability (2012:150) and although both began as 'disreputable fields', both have achieved new levels of acceptability. Practitioners in both industries, Adams argues, have worked on renovating their images in the eyes of the mainstream public (Adams, 2012:149), wanting to legitimise their work and the fields/industries in which they make their living.

Adams argues, then, that both the tattoo and cosmetic surgery industries could be considered physically, socially and morally tainted industries – stigmatised and discredited based upon their public perception and the nature of the work (Adams, 2012:152). However, this is in stark contrast to how tattoo artists are respected and granted capital within the tattoo community. As I have discussed, with the growing television coverage and celebrity endorsement, the tattoo artist is no longer always seen as deviant or discredited. This change in attitude towards artists is not entirely down to television and media, however, and as Amy and Asia's quotes suggest, there are still many in mainstream society who do discredit the role of the tattooer, which means artists are engaging in aesthetic and emotional labour, such 'therapeutic' work with their clients, to challenge and change these public perceptions. We can perhaps understand the importance of challenging these perceptions when we consider the level of embodiment and emotional investment in tattooing work and, as discussed above, the feeling of being 'always on' – if tattoos or tattooing is criticised, it is not just the act of tattooing under scrutiny, but the embodied self of the artist also.

### **Conclusion**

In contrast to the previous chapter, this chapter explores femininity as something to be positively utilised by participants to gain capital, status and career advancement and satisfaction. Femaleness and femininity are considered here as

forms of embodied cultural capital, in relation to body work and emotional labour. Although in the previous chapter, being a woman was identified as a barrier to entry to the tattoo industry, this chapter illustrates how once in the industry, being a woman and utilising gendered capital can, in some ways, aid one's position in the field. The chapter looks at women tattooists' experiences of being a body worker, and what being a woman (or utilising traits associated with femininity) can bring to the body worker/body worked relationship.

The participants took pride in the way in which their femininity was employed to provide a better service to their clients, and this in turn, has the potential to disrupt the dominance of the hegemonic masculinity experienced as intimidating, oppressive and constraining by many individuals within tattoo culture.

Women actively negotiate and navigate between levels of femininity in their daily experience of being a woman artist in a male-dominated sub-culture and industry. Whereas the previous chapter discussed downplaying the aesthetic qualities of dominant femininities, this chapter highlights the conflict between *looking* feminine and *acting* femininely, and yet remaining 'tough' enough to survive a male-dominated industry. There appears to be acceptable and unacceptable performances of femininity, underpinned by notions of alternative versus hegemonic gender norms. In the previous chapter, I discussed how artists 'other' fellow artists, and this discussion is continued in this chapter, where participants appeared to be constructing their own boundaries surrounding 'right' and 'wrong' demonstrations and uses of femininity.

The capital held by the artist, therefore, is fluid and paradoxical in its nature and the artist cannot always predict if this capital will be useful, or if this capital will be meaningless in any particular setting or interaction. On the one hand, television and media coverage has increased the tattoo artist's capital amongst those who take an interest in tattooing. However, for those with a more negative view of tattoos and tattooing, the artists hold no capital and they are placed in a position of having to manage and negotiate public perception and possible stigma. Workers within once

deviant industries have had to strive to achieve social legitimacy, using both emotional and aesthetic labour, to enable the industries to grow and reduce the stigma within the mainstream (Adams, 2012:152).

Adams argues that it is important, in legitimising 'deviant' industries, that they are 'reframed' from potentially deviant cultural practices and focus is drawn to the 'non stigmatized aspects of the work' (Adams, 2012:158). By focusing upon the care and 'therapy' that artists provide for their clients, and how they present themselves in public, outside of the community, the industry begins to be legitimised. Emotional labour is also used in legitimising the self, it can also be used discursively as a way of reinforcing the body worker's sense of self as a professional and not 'just' a tattooer (Gimlin, 1996) – thus, not only legitimising the profession to the wider society, but on a more personal level also.

In this chapter, I have highlighted the inextricable, interrelationship between body work, emotional labour and aesthetic labour. Contrary to previous research on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), my research shows that emotional labour can be beneficial for both the worker and the recipient, and the participants alluded to their emotional labour as embodied rather than a purposeful and/or isolated performance. Emotional labour is also employed in the management of stigma associated with tattooing. Participants demonstrated how important aesthetic labour is in the tattoo industry, and although different from more organisational or corporation-based labour, tattooing retains a link between commodifying the self and increasing economic capital, at the same time as being used to manage stigma, much like emotional labour. A downside to the types of labour and the investment and commitment to the labour discussed throughout the chapter is the feeling of always 'being on'; this has increased with the popularity of social media to promote the work of tattooists and leads to a lack of distance between a home self and work self, which is something that the women artists have to manage both professionally and personally often with more constraints and pressures than men artists, who are less likely to be primary care-givers.

The next chapter will further explore the utilisation of femininity, by looking at various case studies. Rather than put the emphasis on how women manage and negotiate the existing sub-culture, I want to ask how are women attempting to create and change the sub-culture?

## Chapter Seven

### Resisting, Reframing and Rethinking the Tattoo Industry

Tattooing and body modification is a growing industry which, as discussed in previous chapters, is becoming increasingly associated with a mainstream aesthetic (Wicks and Grandy, 2007; Velliquette et al, 1998; Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson, 2005). As a tattooed person who began getting tattooed in the late 1990s, I have witnessed and experienced this shift first-hand. As discussed in chapter two and three, resistance to mainstream paradigms is a significant factor in the analysis of subcultural participation (Hebdige, 1979; LeBlanc 1999), but the mainstreaming of tattooing has brought into question the resistant nature of becoming tattooed. As Atkinson argues, the resistance associated with the act of tattooing is being diminished and diluted (2003:103) and the initial link between tattoo and political resistance is not as obvious as perhaps it was in the 1980s and 90s.

The relatively recent celebritisation<sup>20</sup> of tattooing in the West has had a significant impact upon the popularisation of tattoo; it has been a key influence in Western tattooing's route to the mainstream and subsequently the decline of its association with resistance. A good example of this is the media attention David Beckham received throughout the early 2000s, not for his football but his tattoos. Suddenly, this world-renowned football icon was the 'acceptable' face of tattooing; tattoos were being brought to the forefront of the public consciousness and young men who would not usually have been active within the tattoo community, were seen getting more and more tattooed. The power and status of tattooing as a sign of subcultural deviance and subversion was being weakened (Kosut, 2006:1038), and the shift from being a socially marginal leisure activity to a more mainstream pursuit, meant the clientele was changing and the industry began growing (Wicks and Grandy, 2007; Frederick and Bradley, 2000; Sweetman, 1999). Therefore, it is important to ask whether *resistance*, as a concept and distinguishing characteristic,

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<sup>20</sup> I use the term 'celebritisation' to describe how tattoos can become increasingly popular amongst celebrities, further legitimising tattoos in mainstream culture.

is still relevant to discussions around tattooing; and if it is, what part do women artists play in this resistance?

It became clear from my interview data that what some of the women artists were describing was their personal resistance during their route into tattooing, and that many of them continued to resist the hegemonic and oppressive masculine characteristics of the tattoo industry that have been so underlying and entrenched over time. Therefore, we can say that the women were not only resisting elements of the mainstream (such as dominant ideals of femininity), but were resisting internal elements of the community and industry they had been using as a vehicle for their external resistance to the mainstream.

Like so many tattooed women, for some of the women I interviewed becoming tattooed was initially a way of resisting mainstream femininity (LeBlanc, 1999:142) As LeBlanc has argued in her research on girls and women in the punk subculture, engaging in subcultural deviance has been theorised as a way of resisting the structures, constraints and inequalities of everyday life (LeBlanc, 2008:14). However, as LeBlanc also notes, these constraints are most often defined as inequalities attributed to class and less often to race, almost never to gender (LeBlanc, 2008:14). Therefore, if subcultures are the vehicle through which a resistance to the mainstream is constructed, what happens when the internal structure of the sub-culture is what requires resistance? When faced with a community and industry steeped in hegemonic masculine norms and values, many women feel they need to resist these dominant structures from within the sub-culture and not just the norms and values of the mainstream culture.

This chapter returns to LeBlanc's discussion on resistance, addressed in chapter three, LeBlanc argues that to re-conceptualise resistance both politically and theoretically, we need to explore subjective and objective accounts of resistance, studying not only acts of resistance but the motives behind these acts (LeBlanc, 2008:17-18). She describes three distinct moments in the act of resistance:

... a subjective account of oppression (real or imagined), an express desire to counter that oppression, an action (broadly defined as word, thought or deed) intended specifically to counter that oppression (LeBlanc, 2008:18).

With specific focus on these 'moments in the act of resistance', this chapter seeks to explore how women tattoo artists are resisting hegemonic gender inequalities, intervening in the masculinised culture of the industry, and attempting to reframe these cultural norms: how are women *thinking about* and *doing* tattooing differently?

The chapter will draw upon and connect themes and discussions from previous chapters, to deepen my analysis of how women are utilising their position within the industry, to make the world of tattooing a more welcoming space for the individuals who do not 'fit' within the hegemonic masculine construction of the sub-culture. How are women using their specific versions of femininity to offer something other than what the hegemonic masculinity of the industry has traditionally offered, and what effect does this have upon the industry?

By drawing on these same themes and discussions, the chapter will also explore, however, the idea that resistance cannot be romanticised and that there is a need to consider the difficulties faced by resistant members of the community. How do the participants describe their resistance, and what effect has this had upon their role and position within the industry? I want to show here that women are not just resisting culture, they are also creating culture.

### **Resistance in Action: *Doing* Tattooing Differently**

There are various ways in which women artists are doing tattoo differently; one of which being the attention given to emotional labour during the tattooing process. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is something that the participants highlighted as an important aspect of their role and something integral to their sense of responsibility as a body worker and artist. We know from the data discussed in chapter six that by using their female and feminine capital, artists are striving to offer

clients a more positive experience than some have previously encountered. Building upon this, the interviews revealed other examples of doing tattoo differently, including all-women or women-run studios, all-women art exhibitions and all-women tattoo conventions.

Clio was the only participant to work in an all-women studio, something she described as a positive experience, central to escaping the industry sexism, illustrating how all-women studios have the potential to become sub-cultural spaces of resistance. By learning from women, Clio and her mentors are breaking down the male-centred sub-cultural gatekeeping discussed in previous chapters.

I am lucky to have pretty effectively avoided the sexism of the industry by only working for women, and pretty much only working with women. It is a huge relief because I was afraid that I would not be able to learn because a lot of people believe you have to be friends with dudes to learn anything. This is super untrue. I have learned tremendous skill from women, women have taught me to do fine line technical soft grey watercolour effects, things that many people would tell you can't be done.

Clio

Although Kirsty works from home, and therefore employs her own methods of avoiding the sexist, masculinist nature of the industry, she endorses all-women studios:

I think the macho tattoo culture will shift - so many women are getting into tattooing, and a lot of shops are opening that are all women, or directly aimed at women. I think it's a great thing. Anything that allows women to feel safer, supported and appreciated is fully endorsed by me.

Kirsty

All-women studios have the potential to be the site of resistance for artists working in the studio, at the same time as offering opportunities for tattoo consumers to avoid and resist the more traditional all-male studios some consumers have previously found problematic. As Kirsty identifies here, women may feel safer, supported and appreciated in these alternative tattooing environments.

As I was writing this chapter, a Swedish news site published a piece on the opening of a new tattoo studio, launched by 3 women who had 'had enough' of the sexism they had experienced in studios and the industry. The headline read, 'Tattooists who have had enough of sexism open feminist studio'<sup>21</sup> (Lundberg, 2016), with the article voicing examples of the women's experiences in male-dominated, male-ran studios. The artists named the studio 'Queendom', and expressed wanting to, 'create an antithesis that is characterised by sisterhood where we take care of each other and support the hike'.<sup>22</sup> We would like to highlight other women who also work in the arts and culture' (Lundberg, 2016). This is taken from the studio website:

Queendom Crew is place free from prejudices and sexism. All are welcome whether you'll make your first tattoo or start your [back piece]. In the studio, we have tried to create a homely and relaxed atmosphere to make the tattoo experience as pleasant and soft as possible.

(<http://www.queendomcrew.com/>)

This 'blurb' reflects attention given to both emotional and aesthetic labour, as discussed in the previous chapter – to place emphasis upon creating a 'homely and relaxed atmosphere' suggests an awareness that some studios are seen and experienced by both artists and clients as intimidating or unwelcoming. On further research, it is clear that numbers of all-women studios are increasing and that it is not only community insiders or consumers who are interested in these studios, but media too. I discovered several articles from various local news sources, reporting

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<sup>21</sup> All quotes are my translation, based on Google Translate

<sup>22</sup> I presumed 'the hike' to mean the 'struggle' for equality

the opening of other all-women or women-led tattoo studios. Interestingly, there were significant similarities between the rhetoric of the articles, and the participant narratives produced in my own research:

About 25 years ago, Darius Sessions struggled to find an apprenticeship to become a tattoo artist. It wasn't because she lacked artistic skill, she said. Instead, it was for reasons beyond her control.

"All shops were male-dominated and they were upfront about how they thought women shouldn't be in there," Sessions said.

Sessions now owns Good Vibes Body Art in downtown Mount Vernon, reported the Skagit Valley Herald. Her shop bucks industry norms by employing more women than men as artists. She said although it's still less common to find women working at tattoo shops, the gender gap in the industry has narrowed since she started.

"The populous in general is desiring a softer side to this industry. [...] People are realizing there are a lot of fantastic female artists...It's slowly morphing to being a friendlier industry." she said.

Good Vibes Body Art is at the forefront of that positive change, Sessions said, with customers often expressing relief over its welcoming atmosphere.

(Weinberg, 2017)

Jackalope Tattoo in Minneapolis, one of the few tattoo shops in the nation with an entirely female staff, aims to capture that growing market [of tattooed women]... At first, tattoo artist Nichelle Gabbard describes the atmosphere in Jackalope Tattoo as family-like. But she's quick to clarify.

"It's like working with a bunch of sisters instead of working with a bunch of brothers who are gross and inappropriate," she said.

The shop employs seven female artists. That's a scenario that is almost unheard of in what remains a very male-dominated profession, said owner Bambi Wendt, who has been tattooing in the Twin Cities for more than a decade.

"The shops have been almost all male," Wendt said of the places she has worked. "Sometimes [there was] one other chick. But that was pretty rare."... Wendt said misogyny is common in the industry. Other Jackalope artists agree. They recall the co-workers who commented more on their bodies than their work — and patrons who rejected the very idea of a "girl" wielding a tattoo machine.

"I think that the industry is ready to see a kinder, gentler side," she said

(Tindel, 2015)

Very much akin to the participants' narratives, the artists cited in these articles are not only expressing their dissatisfaction with working in a male-dominated industry, but also their desire to provide a different service to clients and consumers. These articles focus on different studios, in different countries, and yet are identifying almost identical issues, highlighting just how prevalent the feeling is that the industry needs a 'friendlier, kinder, gentler' side. Of-course, 'friendlier, kinder, gentler' are terms often associated with femininity, and this is how the women are utilising them in this context. This highlights a complexity in this alternative discourse: it relies on a problematic essentialism which equates being 'friendlier, kinder, gentler' with femininity.

Media interest in all-women tattoo studios is likely to be a result of the novelty of an all-women studio. As Halberstam (2003) suggests, mainstream recognition of a subculture has the potential to 'alter the contours of dominant culture' (2003:317), but most media interest in subcultures is 'voyeuristic and predatory' (2003:317). Media coverage does mean that studios and artists have the opportunity for their voices and experiences of the once male-dominated industry to be heard and disseminated outside of the community. However, there is a risk that perhaps media interpretations are not representing a completely accurate portrayal, overlooking the nuanced and problematic dynamics of the tattoo industry. To state that the industry is ready for a 'kinder, gentler' side suggests that the attributes more

widely associated with women and femininity are welcomed by the industry, and yet, as this research has shown, there are certainly barriers to this emotion work being fully accepted by certain members of the industry and community.

The tattoo artists' resistance seen here, through women-led 'doing': pro-activity or action, is reminiscent of the active resistance created by the riot grrrl movement in the 1990s. As noted in chapter three, there are distinct similarities between women in music subcultures and women in the tattoo community and it is valuable to explore these, not only to centre the experiences of women within subcultures but also to document the resistance within these cultures. The focus upon, and the creation of, a safe space for women (and anybody who does not fall into the hegemonic masculine norms of the tattoo community) reminded me of the safe, creative spaces created by riot grrrls and the way in which the movement actioned their resistance against punk and grunge subcultures, as well as against mainstream society more generally. Like the tattoo community, punk as a culture is continually reproduced socially and culturally as masculine via sets of gendered spaces, discourses, and practices (Downes, 2012:207). As discussed in both chapter five and the previous chapter, women are often driven to become 'one of the boys' to succeed in a culture dominated by masculinity (LeBlanc, 1999). In both the tattoo industry, and the riot grrrl movement, it is this that compelled (some) women to resist and reframe the hegemonic structure. Both Clio and Becky spoke about their affiliation with alternative music subcultures, and so male-dominated spaces are familiar to them. Certainly, for Clio, resistance against these male spaces is also familiar and reminiscent of a riot grrrl ethos:

Employing punk sounds, spaces, and strategies, riot grrrl articulated a punk-feminist subculture that sought to rehabilitate feminine signifiers, encourage young women's cultural productivity, and facilitate connection between young women and girls involved in alternative cultures (Downes, 2012:209)

This resistance did, and does, not attempt to exclude men, but instead shifts the focus from a male-centred culture to one which places women, non-binary

and/or gender-queer people at the centre. As Downes identifies here, central to the riot grrrl ethos was to encourage and nurture young women's cultural productivity, and to create spaces where women and girls felt safe to express themselves. In her work on riot grrrl and feminist zine production, Doreen Piano uses bell hooks' concept of 'talking back' (hooks, 1989:5); in the context of zine production, 'talking back' becomes a method of theorising the self and its relation to dominant and subcultural discourses. The female body, which is usually associated with emotion, irrationality and sexuality, becomes a site where questioning can take place and where 'identity, community, and dominant discourses can be negotiated and where possibilities for resistance occur' (Piano, 2003:259). Piano argues that women within the riot grrrl subculture actively resisted cultural and subcultural structures that positioned women as 'silent bystanders' (Piano, 2003:258). Riot grrrls proclaimed resistance via the appropriation of traditionally male roles, highlighting issues of gender and sexuality through the disruptive positioning of their bodies throughout their music and lifestyle, which in turn allowed them space in which to become producers of the subculture, rather than merely consumers (Piano, 2003:254).

Women in the tattoo industry similarly take on roles that were very much traditionally male, and many attempt to resist the gendered hegemonic structures at play within the industry. Adopting a literal interpretation of riot grrrl's 'Girls to the Front' ethos<sup>23</sup>, the increase in all-women tattoo studios and exhibitions show casing women's artwork, drives women to the forefront of a formally male-centred culture, not only show-casing women's work but encouraging women in their transition from consumer to producer. All-women spaces and projects help to subvert and challenge the dominant gender norms of the tattoo community and attempt to question, challenge and disrupt the dominance of male artists within the industry.

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<sup>23</sup> 'Girls to the front' was both a slogan and ethos to live by for riot grrrls – meaning that girls should be allowed, and encouraged to enjoy gigs and concerts from the front of the venue, in a safe space created by the band. It offered an alternative to what girls were usually accustomed to – being pushed and shoved at the back of gigs by the men in attendance.

Another strategy for disruption, although one less frequent than all-women studios, is all-women tattoo conventions<sup>24</sup>. Tattoo conventions are specialised events, with a festival-like atmosphere, held typically over a day or a weekend, to showcase artists, trade stalls and entertainment. As noted in chapter two, DeMello, in her ethnography of the tattoo community, discusses tattoo conventions and the carnivalesque environment they embody. She describes conventions as reflecting the values and politics of Bakhtin's carnival: rowdy, bawdy and liberating spaces – where high culture is debased and dominant social order is subverted (DeMello, 2000:30). This can certainly be applied to many tattoo conventions, which create a micro-environment allowing tattoo enthusiasts to join in a shared interest without mainstream pressures to conform to societal norms. Tattoos are created, looked at, shared and bodies are displayed in a manner that they perhaps would not be in everyday interactions. An all-women convention therefore, could be considered as a space in which women artists can work, network and showcase their art in a safe and supportive environment.

Sharron Caudill, who worked the first UK female-artist only convention in Royal Leamington Spa (UK), talks about her experience:

When Dave the organiser approached me to do the show, I thought it was a great idea and my initial thoughts about it hasn't changed. Tattooing has evolved so much over the years and there is now a brilliant standard across the board male and female and it was a great opportunity to showcase the amount of top class female artists in one place

(Caudill 2011)

Sarah, in her interview however, expressed ambivalence towards all-women shows:

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<sup>24</sup> All-women conventions are conventions that show-case only women artists – men and women customers are welcomed.

I can remember, probably back in the late 90's, being told about a female-only tattoo convention in the states, and everybody said isn't that a great idea? And I actually thought no, I don't think it is. My argument wasn't so much that, well, I could see the positives, but my argument was that how would I feel if suddenly there was a male-only convention. To me, it wasn't about empowering, but suddenly if you're excluding, that's taking away... the whole point to me has always been to be equal, so to suddenly segregate, it didn't make me feel comfortable [...] I suppose I can see both sides of the argument, but I didn't want to be segregated, I wanted to be a part of the whole thing. I like that there are more women artists at the shows, that's absolutely fantastic, that is brilliant, but I don't feel I need my own separate show. But that's just me personally, I don't have a problem with other women choosing to work these shows. It's just there are male artists whose work I am inspired by that I want to see. I've heard lots of people say lots of positive things about it, there was a nice atmosphere but I think you get that anywhere

Sarah

On the one hand, Sarah likes that there are more women working conventions; however, she does not feel that women need or should want a separate event. There was mixed views and indecision around conventions from many of the participants: some women had not worked them, but held negative views towards them, others had worked them and not enjoyed them. Opinions around conventions, it seems, are similar today to when women started working conventions in the 1970s, as noted in chapter one and many of the criticisms are comparable.

Maybe I'd go to an international show and take Willow [Sarah's daughter]. I'd like to take her to a show, but it's finding one that I think is appropriate for her.

Some of them are over 18, some of them have things are just down-right inappropriate. I mean, they say burlesque show, be honest, and say ropey old

stripper. It's just some woman getting her norks out, whether she's doing it in a 50s style with feathers or not. Be honest!! [...] It goes back [to] the sexist days, you're a female artist, working the show, and there's a stripper on the stage. Why is it any different? Just because it's deemed arty, and therefore empowering – I'm sure the women back then felt empowered, they were getting paid. Or pick different entertainment; don't alienate certain types of people

Sarah

Here Sarah highlights an interesting conflict when considering conventions. Traditionally, convention entertainment includes performances such as burlesque and/or fire performances (usually performed by women). Sarah references conventions in general, and how having such performances could alienate many of the potential clients and visitors to the show. One might expect an all-women convention to attempt to provide a different level of entertainment, and yet when I attended the first all-women show in Royal Leamington Spa in 2011, part of the entertainment there was made up of burlesque performances and the show was indeed, an over-18 event<sup>25</sup>. In an interview with the show's creator, *Things and Ink* magazine asked about the entertainment at the show<sup>26</sup>:

*The entertainment was very similar to other conventions – dancing girls, pinups etc – why did you pick the same formula?*

The 1st Annual Female Tattoo Show had a very vintage feel. This theme came from the Art Deco and up-market venue, so the show was born from that. We are only a very small, one-day show and we put a lot of time and effort into the entertainment.

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<sup>25</sup> Subsequent shows were different in that children were allowed to attend (although entertainment was still, as the interview illustrates, “dancing girls and pin ups”).

<sup>26</sup> I contacted the show to request an interview with the creators, but they did not respond.

(Woodward, 2014)

Another interesting query was the choice of judges for the show competitions, and again, reminiscent of the criticisms aired in relation to all-women shows of the 1970s, and the 1995 all-women convention in Florida (as discussed in chapter one):

*Why was the judging done by three men when it is a female only convention?*

It wasn't something we gave a great deal of thought to be honest, in recent years we have had female judges, but like all tattoo shows we grab what judges we can as it's not a job everyone wants to do, it usually depends who's free and available at the time.

(Woodward, 2014)

This highlights the complex issues at play with what is framed as a women-centred space. I would suggest that the use of men judges in an all-women show is problematic. It brings into question gendered power and hierarchies, mirroring and perpetuating the previously explored notion that being a male artist equates to an authenticity and legitimised knowledge of the industry and undermines both the need for a women-only convention, and also that women artists should be 'taken seriously'. Returning to Halberstam's (2003) suggestion that subcultures are often objects of voyeurism, the women-only convention that places men in the powerful position of judging the artist's work could be seen as merely creating the convention for reasons of novelty and money-making, rather than equality and empowerment.

All-women art exhibitions are the final strategy I want to explore in this discussion of the ways in which women tattoo artists try to do tattooing differently. The 2017 Leeds Tattoo Expo is not a woman-only convention, and yet hosted an exhibition of women tattooist's artwork, to showcase up and coming women tattoo artists. The exhibition was curated and created by *Girl Gang Leeds*, a cooperative of women who organise art, music and activist events

(<https://wearegirlgang.co.uk/leeds/>). As identified in some of the interviews during my research, conventions can sometimes be male-orientated, male-dominated spaces which many women artists find intimidating; this exhibition illustrates how feminist collectives can use art and the showcasing of women artists to disrupt and intervene in this male space. It also highlights the potential interlinking of tattoo conventions and art exhibitions. As noted in chapter two, tattooing has undergone a development in the way it is viewed by (some) outsiders to the tattooing community and is now in many circles viewed as *art*, with similarities to more traditional painting, drawing and fine art, namely in terms of the use of exhibitions. Kosut discusses the 'artification of tattoo' (2013), noting that attitudes towards tattoo as a cultural practice have changed over time and tattooing has more recently been authenticated and given value by certain cultural specialists (Kosut, 2013: 2). Kosut argues that when cultural products are exhibited under the 'moniker of art within an institutional setting', the cultural products and culture surrounding them are inscribed with legitimacy (Kosut, 2013:2).

Indeed, there has been a recent rise in exhibitions to showcase tattoo art as *art* on canvas rather than skin, with exhibitions being curated by galleries as well as museums. These include exhibitions of women-only artwork. The curation of women-only exhibitions shows that there is a desire to showcase and engage with art by women artists, in turn, this contributes to the legitimisation of women tattooers and their work. Amy Mullin, who writes on feminist art and politics, argues for greater availability of feminist artists' work, and suggests that if the work is made readily available outside of its usual location, communication with a wider audience is developed and artists benefit from a broader appreciation for and understanding of their work (Mullin, 2003:206). Mullin, however, was referring to feminist 'fine-art', and when she describes locations outside of the norm, she is describing galleries as the norm. Tattoo art perhaps offers the antithesis to this in that galleries are not the typical location for tattoos to be displayed, but galleries are certainly being used to showcase the art form and communicate with a wider audience, which might in turn contribute to breaking down boundaries between the industry, the community and the mainstream.

The breaking down of boundaries between the industry, the community and the mainstream is, however, nuanced and complex. There is a conflict between artists and the industry wanting to resist the mainstream, but at the same time, wanting tattooing to be recognised as a form of 'art', and therefore aspiring to be legitimised by *some* aspects of mainstream culture. This relates to the discussion in the previous chapters surrounding acceptable and useful capital: some artists strive to gain capital in a mainstream art context because mainstream art is deemed legitimate and authentic. This mirrors the internal conflict experienced by some women artists striving to be taken seriously within the industry, but at the same time wanting to resist the hegemonic masculinity of the tattoo sub-culture. There is a risk that perhaps women artists are resisting the very structure they are striving to be legitimised by, thus a level of compromise and negotiation is necessary, as discussed in previous chapters. Perhaps it is this very conflict and need for negotiation that has driven some women artists to re-evaluate what tattoos or tattooing can do and mean?

**Resistance through thought: *Thinking tattooing differently***

As some participants expressed their resistance through action, others appeared to be re-thinking and re-conceptualising what tattoo has the potential to mean, to do and be. Tattoo in the interviews, was discussed in terms of both a political act and a spiritual act and both approaches were discussed in relation to what they could offer to the client – both specifically centring on women. Clio's political stance identified a feminist consciousness, whereas Kirsty's more spiritual approach was a way of focusing on women clients through a therapeutic lens, more than a political one.

Previous research on women and tattooing, as discussed in chapter two, considers tattooing as both a political act (Pitts, 1998) and a spiritual act (Pitts, 2003). Motives behind getting tattooed can certainly be analysed through a feminist lens, and much of the research discusses tattooing via feminist discourses such as reclaiming the body and empowerment (Pitts, 2003; Atkinson, 2002). What has not

been addressed, however, is the process, practice and the role of the tattooer. If becoming tattooed can be considered a political act, then perhaps the act of making the tattoo could also be considered a political act? For women who become tattooed to reclaim their bodies, subvert mainstream gender norms or even more overtly, carry political messages, they (most often) rely on a tattoo artist to create the tattoo, enabling this reclaiming and subversion. These strategies for feminist, political or spiritual cultural production should therefore be explored as such.

I feel lucky as a feminist to get to witness and aid women in claiming their bodies for their own. Most of my clients are women, and a number of them get tattoos despite what their parents or boyfriends want for them. I feel honoured to be part of women taking care of and taking control of their own bodies and at my best I can aid women in doing this, and not repeat experiences that disempower and subjugate them.

Clio

Clio self-identified as a feminist in her interview, and it was evident that being a feminist was an important part of her identity, and something that influenced her practice as a tattooer. Clio illustrates in the quote above how tattooing can be a feminist practice or process, with women making decisions about their own bodies despite what other people think. The tattoo itself does not have to be a feminist image for the act of tattooing to have feminist intent.

Clio also identifies the importance she attaches to avoiding making her clients feel uncomfortable and disempowered during the tattooing process. Several of the participants described the desire to reduce unequal power balances during the tattooing process, which is another example of the emotional labour employed by artists. This, I think, is comparable to the time and attention given to reducing the unequal power relations between the researcher and participants in feminist research. The similarities between the emotion work devoted to the breaking down

of these boundaries suggests that artists like Clio are engaging a level of feminist consciousness throughout and within their role and practices as a tattooer.

For the majority of the women I interviewed, the process of tattooing and ensuring a comfortable, equal, non-intimidating environment for their clients (regardless of gender) was as important as the end product, and this reflects what Amy Mullin (2003) describes in her paper on feminist art and political imagination. Mullin suggests that activist art and artists place equal care and importance on both the process of making the art and the final product, often seeing the process itself as part of this product (Mullin, 2003:203). Mullin also notes that feminist cultural production is often dismissed, and rarely considered 'art', due to 'misguided theories about the nature of art and the nature of politics' (Mullin, 2013:189). According to Mullin, 'good activist art works' do not need to convey a political message or propaganda, they may instead attempt to initiate dialogue or explore political alternatives (Mullin, 2003:195). Mullin is not discussing tattooing here, but this argument could helpfully be applied to the process of tattooing in some contexts; indeed, I discovered that although my research does not focus upon tattoo as art per se, I could draw upon work on feminist art to draw comparisons when considering tattoo as a political art in both form and practice.

Not all of the artists I interviewed identified as feminist, or even discussed feminism during their interviews, and therefore it is important to note that I am not arguing that women tattooing women is inherently feminist in theory or practice. Throughout Kirsty's interview, her narratives and opinions appeared to embody a feminist consciousness and I did therefore ask directly about the potential link between feminism and her work as a tattooer. Kirsty does not identify as feminist, although she did reflect on how her work might be perceived as 'feminist' in nature.

Rather than women needing to make Feminist spaces in terms of place, I just think, for me, making intense work that is political or challenging, or in typically 'masculine' mediums (such as painting) is how I want to push the

public. If I achieve that aim, then women will feel supported, included and spoken to, simply as a by-product.

Kirsty

What Kirsty says here is in slight contradiction to what Clio has expressed – rather than making safe, empowering spaces in order to challenge the dominant norms, Kirsty talks about the art itself challenging these norms. Although Kirsty is not presenting her work as feminist, there is an element of her work that politicises and challenges masculinity.

Asa Backstrom (2013), in her research on women in skateboarding, also notes that her participants rarely used the word *feminism* to describe themselves, but they used feminism as an influence and guide in ‘doing’ skateboarding culture differently (Backstrom, 2013:43). Kirsty works from home and so, like Clio, avoids the sexism and hyper-masculine studios prevalent in tattoo culture and is aware of her need to push boundaries and make a political statement. Kirsty created and founded an all-women tattoo project, which she spoke about in her interview:

I am currently working on a project that also happens to only include women that revolves around tattooing. I am working on what I call Spiritualist Tattooing, which involves the design of abstract symbols and patterns for women to have tattooed as identifying markers which say something about their history, their life and what they would like to represent them. The tattoos themselves will be situated only on the stomach/torso, breasts, neck, face or head, as these are key powerful areas for women to receive a tattoo. I am inspired in this project by Oceanic cultures, where in times gone by, only women were tattooists and only women were tattooed- I am very interested in the fact that in some places it was an activity only for women, in opposition to our generally macho view of it. So I want to bring some of this idea of ritual to my practice, and for the tattoos to hold a kind of strength for the women who get them, understanding that tradition.

Perhaps the tattoos' meaning will be a secret only between ourselves, but I think that's a beautiful idea...the women who receive these tattoos will know they are a part of a larger project, but I don't want to fall into this idea of it being a 'brand,' for want of a better word. It is simply the concept of women adorning themselves as a sign of strength and for a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves that excites me about this.

So maybe I am a complete Feminist, I don't know, haha.

I am interested in making work which allows people whose voices are marginalised to take up some of the spotlight, so I think this is why I do so many projects which involve women, rather than starting with it as a 'cause'. Also, I don't feel as though I have a right to work toward giving men the same space, as I don't have an intimate knowledge of their life experience, so I feel that would be patronising of me.

Kirsty

Here Kirsty describes and explains the motivation behind her all-women project. 'Spiritualist tattooing' is a term she has developed to identify her tattoos and tattoo project as different from 'other' forms of tattooing; it illustrates how, in some ways, Kirsty is thinking about tattooing differently from fellow artists. The areas of the body Kirsty named as being a focus for the project are areas that are still quite taboo for *anybody* to have tattooed, not only women – especially the face or head. Interestingly, this conflicts with what Kirsty said in her interview about her own tattooed identity, and that she has avoided having publicly visible parts of her body tattooed. Atkinson addresses the placement of women's tattoos and suggests the placement of the image is central to tattoo projects that are motivated by cultural resistance (Atkinson, 2002:229). Atkinson suggests that by tattooing exposed or exposable areas of the body, such as arms, hands, lower legs and necks, women consciously engage in breaching established norms of femininity (Atkinson, 2002:229).

Kirsty also talks about the *ritual* of the tattooing and this indicates that the process is as important (if not more so) than the tattoo itself. This, as discussed previously, relates to Mullin's work on feminist art and the focus upon process over product. Kirsty does not identify as a feminist, nor does she equate the project with having feminist intention. Kirsty states that the project is woman-focused without it centring on a 'cause' – so although Kirsty does not see the project as feminist per se, it places women at the core without being explicitly political about that. However, Kirsty is not opposed to using her art for political reasons as she states her work can be political and challenging. This perhaps mirrors the bigger issue of the complex relation between self-identification and the labelling of acts as *feminist*. Although certain acts, actions and ethos' seem feminist to some, others may resist labelling them as such, which sometimes results in a disidentification with feminist consciousness (Scharff, 2010). This is illustrated in some ways by Kirsty above. When she says, 'So maybe I am a complete Feminist, I don't know', she queries her own self-identification and alludes to perhaps not being sure whether she is a feminist, or not.

#### Tattoos for Survivors

As I was writing up my research, another strategy for 'thinking' tattooing differently was being highlighted by the media, via several articles focusing on tattooists who were offering tattoos to survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. These artists included both women and men artists, and illustrates how emotional labour has infiltrated some parts of the industry consciousness to influence the use of tattoo for more than decoration or aesthetics. As discussed in chapter two, the reclaiming properties of tattoo have been researched extensively (Pitts, 2003; Pitts, 1998; Kosut, 2000; Craighead, 2011), but this previous research predominantly focuses upon the perspective of the individual survivor rather than the artist who is offering survivor tattoos as a 'service'. The media articles describe tattooists as 'healers' and 'therapists' (Mifflin, 2014) and highlight projects such as *Survivors Ink* – a project tattooing survivors of trafficking, abuse and addiction who were previously tattooed as a stamp of ownership by pimps, and raising funds for those women to have their tattoos covered up (Kelly, 2014). Articles such as these not only allude to the shift in

how tattooing is utilised, but wide coverage of these projects and artists mean that non-tattooed members of the public are being presented with an alternative perspective on tattooing.

Tattoos for breast cancer survivors have also become increasingly prevalent and show an interesting intersection between medicine and subculture – some medical professionals offer medical tattooing on the breasts of women who have undergone mastectomies and reconstructive surgery, to imitate the nipples they lost through surgery. These tattoos lacked a degree of realism however, and soon tattoo artists were offering the same service, but with a wider range of ink shades than were available to surgeons and doctors, they could replicate a more realistic nipple. It is not only women artists who offer this service, and indeed one of the most notable artists offering this service is a man. However, similar to tattoos for survivors of abuse, this approach to tattooing illustrates how tattooing is being considered as something other than the aesthetic adorning of the body and the subverting rebellion of a subculture.

Amy Black is a tattoo artist offering nipple tattoos to survivors, and is somebody I interviewed via email about her work, having learned of her project via Twitter. Amy founded *The Pink Ink Fund*, which raises funds for breast cancer survivors in the US who need support with funding for medical treatment, reconstructive surgery and/or post-surgery tattooing.

I got cold called in early 2011 from a cancer survivor who had been able to retain her natural breast on one side but had a mastectomy on the other side and then gotten a single implant. They offered a medical version of nipple tattooing at their offices but the patient was looking for something different. The medical version tended to be very flat and simple in nature, and she had seen a tattoo artist named Vinnie Myers in Maryland who was doing some incredibly realistic 3D nipple/areola tattooing for post mastectomy breast reconstruction.

She wanted to see if she could find a woman tattooer to do it, and also stay close to home (Richmond) instead of having to drive 3 hours to have it done. She had been doing her own research and been calling multiple shops around Richmond up to the day she called me. When she asked if I thought I was interested and capable of what she wanted: a realistic looking 3D tattoo to match her natural nipple/areola on the other side - I said Yes without missing a beat.

Amy Black<sup>27</sup>

Although in many ways tattoos for breast cancer survivors are more like a medical procedure than the more traditional tattoo, it is a good example of how the world of tattooing – once so stigmatised and attached to deviancy – is increasingly crossing over into more mainstream fields. In her interview, Amy Black commented that many of the women who opt for nipple-tattooing are not women who would, in any other circumstance, get tattooed, and this is a significant distinction, one which differs from the tattoos for survivors of abuse. Many breast cancer survivors see the tattoo as a medical practice and so this is a good example of how the image of tattooing and what tattoo can do and mean for people, is developing and changing.

### **Queering Tattoo: *Thinking and Doing Tattoo Differently***

In her interview, Clio identified as genderqueer and, like her feminism, this was an integral and influential part of her identity as a tattoo artist. Clio told me about the studio she works in, and how it is a safe space for more vulnerable clients:

I have had a number of trans and genderqueer clients. Also tattooing in the Bay Area put me in touch with a lot of queer people of color, and this has been wonderful to me because I want to be in service to queer people,

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<sup>27</sup> Amy Black was interviewed in addition to the other artists, and is different from 'Amy', who features throughout the analysis.

disabled people, genderqueer people, and people of color. These intersectional experiences of oppression can make it hard for clients to want to be vulnerable, be undressed, etc. in a tattoo setting, so I feel lucky that I have worked in shops that are designed to serve marginalized people as well. I think the shops I have worked at have a long way to go in being more welcoming to people of color, there is something very "for white people" about the shop I work at now, in part because it is in Oregon, but I recognize that the shops I have been lucky enough to work in are being accessed by my community.

Clio

Although Clio celebrates the studio for its inclusionary ethos, she also criticises it for its inherent whiteness. Clio identifies as mixed Arab gender queer, and as I discussed in chapter four, was the only participant to discuss race and racism in her interview.

I think being Arab gives me a really clear stake in racial justice. I think because I have passing privilege, enjoying the benefits of whiteness in the United States, I am aware that if my skin was darker or if there were other indications of my Arab-ness I would encounter many more barriers. I have seen a dear friend of mine who is an African American artist have to fight against bizarre underestimation and negligence from white male mentors, so I know what this industry does to women of color who are trying to attain skill tattooing. Many women of color who are tattoo artists are powerfully discouraged by people who are in a position to help them achieve what they want. I think many women of color, and many women artists internalize messages that their work is inadequate, so the people who do work tattooing have survived a number of trials. In my own experience, feelings of self doubt, inadequacy and fraudulence feel related to a mixed race identity. A lot of mixed race people are confused about who they are vs. how people perceive us, don't feel we fit in, feel like we're the "only one" like us.

Clio

I told Clio she was the only participant to address race in the interviews, to which she responded:

That's too bad no one else is talking about race! I think finding a way to make the practice of tattooing less racist is the absolute most urgent development called for in tattooing. There are a lot of amazing artists of color making work, including very talented women, but it seems like the industry is deeply segregated.

Clio

Clio offers invaluable insight into the dynamics of race, racism and whiteness within the industry. Clio describes her 'passing privileges' and says that because of this, she has not experienced the level of race-related prejudice her friends have. Clio also shared with me an essay she wrote, 'calling out' an individual tattoo artist for tattooing a racist image, and describes how she challenged a tattoo magazine for printing the 'most racist image she has ever seen in print', for which she received an apology from the editors. Clio asked me not to share the essay as she did not want to cause more embarrassment or problems for the artist she criticises, and so I will not quote from the essay here to respect Clio's wishes. The essay discusses the prevalence of racist and culturally appropriative imagery in tattooing, and how very often these images are disguised as Americana nostalgia. Clio also calls to artists to create open and welcoming studios for people of colour, and argues that artists need to work on changing the industry to become a better place for people of colour. Clio is a good example of how some artists are engaging in activism within the industry, and how this has the potential to instigate and encourage change within tattoo culture.

As I was writing up my analysis, there was an increase in online media articles focusing on how genderqueer artists specifically are working towards changing the industry, and this reminded me of Clio and the way in which she focused on what she termed 'vulnerable clients'.

*Huck* magazine<sup>28</sup> published an article titled, 'The Queer Tattoo Artists Reviving the Craft's Rebel Roots: The Power of Ink on Skin' (Al-Kadhi, 2017). The article is written by Amrou Al-Kadhi who identifies as a genderqueer person of colour. The article focuses on how tattoo in queer culture can be seen to be bringing tattoo back to its original, rebellious roots; Al-Kadhi argues that tattoo culture is dominated by straight, white, male artists who 'ignore the queer symbolism' of queer tattoos (Al-Kadhi, 2017).

When it comes to queer tattoo culture, the customer isn't just another blank canvas. This is an empathetic exchange that allows non-conformists to express their identity on their own terms.

(Al-Kadhi, 2017)

The article is both an example of how tattoo itself can still be an act of resistance, and how important it is for queer consumers of tattoo to find queer-friendly artists. Even though tattoo has a history of being linked to queer scenes and queer politics (Pitts, 2003; DeMello, 2000), this article illustrates how difficult it is to find queer-friendly, safe-spaces – for both consumers and artists:

With shop apprenticeships usually unpaid and notorious for bullying, the fledgling queer tattoo scene is also helping newcomers navigate the industry.

(Al-Kadhi, 2017)

Esther Arocha runs *Sacred Art*, a tattoo studio in Stoke Newington (London, UK), celebrated in the article by Al-Kadhi as being a welcoming and safe-space for queer tattoo clients and artists.

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<sup>28</sup> *Huck Magazine* is an online magazine, featuring articles focusing on arts and culture, travel and current affairs

We really work hard to create a welcoming and safe environment [...] The staff at Sacred Art are queer or female, so we have all suffered discrimination, abuse, hate crime... at some point. I think that shapes the way we approach our work and the way we share it with our customers.

Esther Arocha

Here, Esther illustrates the emotion work employed by her and the other artists to create the safe space, highlighting how personal experience can influence and shape how artists respond to their clients – much like the examples given by the participants in my research, as discussed in previous chapters.

*Things and Ink* Magazine interviewed Charline Bataille, an artist based in Montreal, who identifies as queer femme. Charline, like Kirsty, tattoos from home and furthers the idea that working from home can be an act of resistance:

I mentioned in an interview that a lot of people couldn't have access to the tattoo industry, because of systemic oppression, and therefore, will find ways to learn and create in safe spaces. In response to this interview, I got a lot of messages, a lot of them calling me a stupid cunt but also a lot of them respectfully disagreeing and pointing out the danger of tattooing at home without proper knowledge. I don't think I need to explain how apprenticeships and traditions are considered sacred and are needed. So I made a lot of people angry suggesting that it is possible to break tradition safely and that, in a general way, misogyny, fatphobia, cissexism and racism were too present in tattoo shops and made those spaces at best unpleasant and at worst unsafe for a lot of people.

(Charline Bataille, [www.th-ink.com](http://www.th-ink.com) )

It was interesting to see Charline expressing many of the difficulties faced by the participants of my research as, in many ways she embodies much of what my research focuses on. Having found it difficult to break into the tattoo industry, Charline taught herself how to tattoo and began working from home, building a

network of queer artists and sharing ideas and knowledge with them. The quote above illustrates the entrenched prejudice, discussed in previous chapters, towards self-taught artists and the reaction this provokes throughout the industry. Charline is suggesting that apprenticeships and traditions of the culture are considered sacred, which echoes Kate's comment analysed in chapter five. Like Al-Kadhi's article, Charline's interview not only illustrates the cultural and systemic issues surrounding queer clients and artists, but it also highlights the need for safe-spaces and shows how the creation of safe-spaces can be an act of resistance. Charline not only creates queer spaces in which to tattoo, but she creates tattoos that could be considered queer, as she said in her interview:

I want to queer what tattoos look like. I know there isn't only one way to tattoo and I want to break down the good/bad dichotomy! When I draw my tattoos, I always collaborate with my client. To me, their agency is very important.

(Charline Bataille, [www.th-ink.com](http://www.th-ink.com) )

Charline echoes much of what has been discussed in the previous chapters; wanting to 'queer what tattoos look like' and breaking down the good/bad tattoo dichotomy is a comment reminiscent of the good/bad artist binary I have previously discussed. In chapter four I discussed how my own socialisation into tattoo culture influenced my prejudices regarding what constitutes a good or bad artist, and for the same reason, what a 'good' tattoo should look like. Reading experiences and opinions such as Charline's has enabled me to question and acknowledge my own prejudices, and I welcome the idea that tattoos should not fit neatly into a 'good' vs 'bad' categorisation. I like that Charline terms this as queering tattoo. Producing tattoos that do not necessarily fit with the current dominant fashion amongst tattoo designs is also an act of resistance, which challenges what tattoo culture expects, and what tattoo culture comprises of, at the same time as challenging personal prejudices (like my own), through feminist and queer methods of cultural production. Charline, however, has experienced some degree of backlash for her resistance, as noted

above, and this is a significant issue in performing and enabling resistance, and one which must be acknowledged.

### **Resistance Doesn't Always Pay the Bills: The Risk of Resistance**

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that women, whilst resisting the hegemonic sub-cultural gender dynamics, may also have to negotiate their position and compromise to some extent. In considering how some women artists are attempting to do and think things differently through their tattooing, it became apparent to me that compromises do indeed have to be made. Previous chapters have explored issues such as women 'colluding' with male artists or having to perform as 'one of the boys' to fit in. This chapter has focused upon strategies they use for disrupting the masculine nature of the industry, one of which is the focus on the process as well as the product, and I have linked this to theories and discussions around feminist art. Returning to, and furthering, this discussion, some of the participants spoke about the collaboration between artist and client during the designing (of the tattoo) process and this was an important and enjoyable aspect of the process for many of the women.

I particularly love when I ask a client what they would like and they say-I don't mind, just anything of your art.

That pleases me greatly because it shows me they love my art, trust me and I get to do what I am most comfortable.

I did my time banging out old skool [sic] style or stuff brought in from the internet but now it is generally my style with a bit of collaboration on colour etc from the client.

I love it for the same reason that I love drawing.

Toni

Here Toni expresses her preference for unique, bespoke tattoo – or what insiders to the community would term 'custom work'. This, as Kosut identifies, is another consequence of the 'artification' of tattoo – once a craft and a trade,

tattooists would provide sheets or books of designs, called 'flash', for customers to choose from. However, now the more discerning customer will want a custom design from an 'artist', rather than a template 'flash' design associated with the traditional tradesman tattooist (Kosut, 2013:8).

I still have to do the staples of tattooing, the little fad tattoos that pay the bills, but I get to do my own stuff every once in a while, and I'm overjoyed when I do [...] I just don't really find any fulfilment when I do a pre-drawn tattoo. I want to put some of myself into it. I don't want to follow all the rules, I want to push the walls and explore different directions

Asia

Asia also expresses her preference for custom art work. The idea that she enjoys putting some of herself into the work reflects the discussion around the importance of the process and not just the resulting product. Artists do not want to merely replicate somebody else's work, they want to be the author and creator of new work. Tattooing, for many artists, is no longer stencilling a design on to skin, it centres on art being produced as a collaboration between artist and client, and both the artist and the client benefiting from the interaction. Although previous research (DeMello, 2000; Sanders and Vail, 2007) has suggested this is due to the influx of middle-class art students to the industry, I would question women's role in this also. If as my research suggests, women have introduced and nurtured an increase in emotional labour in tattooing, this is likely to have had a substantial impact upon the process of being tattooed; a focus upon collaboration means the process has become one of dialogical co-production – for both the artist and the client.

Wicks and Grandy (2007) also noted that the tattoo artists in their research placed importance on providing unique designs for customers (2007: 355); however, the research did not address the idea that tattooing *only* unique designs on clients is unrealistic for many artists, and that many artists still need to produce work from flash sheets. To be able to 'indulge' in custom work sometimes comes with a compromise: tattoo artists often have to create tattoos from flash sheets, designs

they have no emotional attachment to. As Asia notes above, the smaller, possibly less challenging or artistic, designs are often unavoidable as the artist still needs to make money, which also means that perhaps there is a limit to how much of the 'self' can be given in the process. The foregrounding of self in this context is perhaps another insight into how the industry has changed from a working-class trade to a middle-class art form in a neoliberal society. More recent neoliberal attitudes have centred 'the self' as a primary concern in contemporary Western societies (Scharff, 2016), whereby the 'self' is an individualised brand in many respects. Customers want unique, distinctive tattoos that become an extension of themselves and their identities. At the same time, artists want to create these unique designs, to reflect their individuality as artists within not only a saturated industry (in which they have to stand out to succeed), but a neoliberal context that encourages the promotion of the self. This leads to a clash of capitals: flash design sheets are a quicker and easier way of increasing financial capital, but more authentic sub-cultural capital is earned by producing custom designs and building a reputation for unique and individual tattoos.

You work round the clock bringing in new clientele, drawing appointments, painting flash sets...I think I've found a way to be okay with that and now the struggle is to keep my own art separate from work so that it stays alive

Asia

Here Asia illustrates the need to negotiate and sometimes make compromises around her work to make money but remain creative and fulfilled. This highlights an important aspect surrounding the act of resistance. As Asia identifies, artists still need to earn enough to make a living, which places them in a position of resisting certain aspects of the industry, at the same time as conforming to other aspects of it. In other contexts, artists who resist the industry norms may have to compromise in other ways, such as being awarded less capital and subsequent authenticity or respect than their colleagues.

This complex negotiation of resistance underlines theoretical issues surrounding structure and agency, and relates to the dilemmas analysed by Maddie Breeze, in her work on roller derby (2015), discussed in chapter three. Breeze argues that in managing seriousness, women are also confronting issues surrounding structure and agency; women are 'playing the game', whilst questioning, challenging and changing the 'rules of the game' (Breeze, 2015:146-7). Although women artists see problems with the industry and want to challenge and change what they see as being at fault, at the same time, many of the artists I interviewed felt a sense of loyalty and devotion to the industry. Some, such as Sarah, specifically stated that they had gained a lot from the men they had worked with and felt uncomfortable saying anything to undermine this positive relationship. The complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between individual artists and the industry as a whole also relates to the bigger structural issue of mainstream legitimisation – the conflict between wanting to be taken seriously as an art form, but also wanting to retain some degree of resistance and subversion to the mainstream.

This forms a somewhat difficult relationship between the tattoo industry and the mainstream. The industry and the artists within it appear to be in a constant state of flux and liminality between resistance/conformity, acceptance/revolt, wanting to be taken seriously by mainstream culture as legitimate artists and yet wanting to retain some degree of subversion and deviance. This is further complexified by the fraught and ambivalent feelings relating to capital: all artists, women, men or non-binary, need to make a living, and resistance is both a unique 'selling' point and something that cannot pay the bills.

The tattoo artist Charline Bataille offers a striking example of these paradoxes that arise from difficult compromises of capital, amidst nuanced negotiations of resistance. Charline appears to only tattoo images and designs that she is happy with, designs that are the product of her and the client's collaboration. She does not talk about having to produce work from other artists' flash sheets, as many artists in the industry have to do. Charline does not 'play the game' either in her style of tattooing, or in her resistance to the hegemonic tattoo culture. This means that she is both well-

known and is increasingly well-revered in queer tattoo *sub-sub-culture* but at the same time she may not be particularly well-known, well-respected or indeed taken seriously in the 'core' tattoo sub-culture. However, not being taken seriously in traditional tattoo culture is what makes her and her work revered amongst the queer tattoo community. As I noted previously, Charline's 'unique selling point' is also her method of resistance; this attracts some clients, at the same time as making it difficult to earn financial capital as readily as artists who conform to the dominant sub-cultural norms.

As I am sat writing this section of the analysis, I have found myself wanting to refer to the traditional, dominant tattoo culture, as the *mainstream*, in comparison to the tattoo culture nurtured by artists like Clio and Charline. Besides confusing and amusing me, the desire to refer to the dominant, supposedly alternative, tattoo culture as mainstream, suggests that the queering of certain elements of tattoo culture, or nurturing a queer alternative alongside *mainstream* tattoo culture is a micro-sub-culture that women and artists from minority groups have formed. Many do not wish to be a part of the *mainstream* tattoo sub-culture and have broken out, creating a micro-culture. In some respects, the dominant tattoo sub-culture has become the (queer) micro sub-culture's mainstream, the norm against which it seeks to resist. This is a good illustration of how problematic it is to create and reproduce binaries between the mainstream and subcultures or sub-cultures. Once again, we see the fluidity and the flux not only between cultures but *within* cultures and it is important to unpack the dynamics of the intra-sub-cultural relations and interactions.

### **Conclusion**

Tattoo culture has had, and continues to have, a complex and nuanced relationship with ideologies and acts of resistance. Although, in many ways, becoming tattooed is no longer seen as an act of resistance, there remain resistant acts within tattoo culture. The fluid interaction between resistance and conformity has also been highlighted by my research as integral to these discussions. Dominant

tattoo culture and the individuals - especially women and minority groups - acting within the culture are an embodiment of how agentic actions do not necessarily equate to resistance, in the same way that conformity does not straightforwardly equate to a lack of agency or resistance (Mahmood, 2011). Becky and Amy, for example, may appear to 'collude' with the hegemonic masculinity within the industry, and therefore conform to the dominant norms. However, this 'playing the game' allows them to gain space within the industry, and in turn, to shape and frame the way they work once in the industry.

My research suggests there is intra-sub-cultural resistance, women are not colluding with the hyper-masculinity of the culture, but instead are creating women-only space and/or queer spaces which are open and welcoming to not only women but queer, non-binary, trans people and people of colour, as well as other vulnerable or minority groups. Many women artists have successfully introduced a focus upon emotional labour, which is used to combat feelings of powerlessness amongst women and minority groups.

These resistant acts and activism however, do not avoid challenges, some being more prevalent than others. Experiencing verbal abuse and criticism for your tattoo practices when you are in fact working within the legal industry framework, but not adhering to the male-stream 'rules' of apprenticeships and studios, is perhaps a symptom of the remaining masculine hegemony and hierarchy of the industry. However, women continue to intervene and disrupt the dominant structure, and in doing so they are challenging the hegemony, but also creating micro-cultures of safe spaces for women and other minority groups. Tattooing, when considered in this context, could be deemed a mode of feminist cultural production. Artists such as Charline Bataille are pushing the boundaries of what is and is not 'acceptable' within tattoo culture, and not only creating safe spaces which employ a feminist ethos, but creating tattoos that are feminist, queer and challenging to the hegemonic ideals of the good vs bad tattoo and artist.

DeMello describes the tattoo community as having undergone a ‘middle-class turn’ (DeMello, 2000:43) and attributes the increase in ‘artification’ (Kosut, 2013), and the focus on emotions and narratives in the tattooing process, to this appropriation by the middle-classes. Since DeMello wrote this over seventeen years ago, I would argue that tattooing has been undergoing another cultural shift – not only influenced by the shift in class, but also by the shift in gendered influence within the community. The community could perhaps also be considered to have undergone a *gender* turn, and this is partly due to the increase of women to the sub-culture. Women are navigating the industry not only through tattooing, but through language, media, community and ways of thinking about tattooing. Many women are centralising the experience of getting tattooed, placing the customer and the customer’s experience at the forefront, and emotionalising the interaction. Women have been and continue to be influential in the resistant micro-cultures within the sub-culture, producing different knowledge which in turn, challenges the dominant sub-cultural systems. If we consider gender as a discursive framework (Cohn, 1993), we can see how many women tattoo artists are creating *new* discursive frameworks – producing, creating and maintaining spaces for those who are women, queer and people of colour.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion: Deconstructing Binaries, Exposing Paradoxes

Researching a culture that was once so familiar to me has revealed numerous contradictions and conflicts that I could not have predicted. As a researcher, this makes for a fascinating project; from a personal perspective, it leads me to reflect upon and question whether I really knew the culture at all. How can a sub-culture that seemingly promises freedom, community and autonomy create such profound feelings of restriction, exclusion and conformity?

What surprises me, as well as disappoints me, is the similarities between the experiences of the women artists discussed in chapter one – the women artists who paved the way for the artists of today – and the experiences of the women I interviewed for this research, centuries later. Issues such as male gatekeepers, male bias, sexism and ambivalence towards women-only spaces were all documented by the first women artists of the 19th Century and continue throughout the 20th and 21st Centuries. The analysis of the interviews and subsequent discussions throughout each chapter of this thesis have exposed these similarities with historical experiences, but also unexpected paradoxes within the narratives themselves. I found in participants a sense of ambivalence towards how to navigate and negotiate those paradoxes, whilst attempting to manage relations within and outside of the industry. Conflicts between counter-culture and the mainstream, resistance and conformity, and dominant and alternative femininities were all central to the research findings, underpinned by various negotiations of capital and status, and complicated by the juxtaposition of sub-cultural leisure activities, labour and employment. By exploring the nuances of these complex negotiations, I can begin to answer the original research question, and consider in depth the gender relations within the tattoo industry.

In chapter four, I discussed several limitations I felt characterise the research. Some were more avoidable than others, and if conducting the research again I would certainly address these issues. A more comprehensive focus on women of colour and

non-binary identifying artists would improve the scope of this project and is something I would highlight in future studies. Although interviews via email allowed me to reach artists outside of the UK, an increase in face-to-face interviews, or even a more ethnographic approach, would offer an interesting and diverse standpoint to the one adopted in this thesis. However, I do feel that the email interviews generated a useful amount of very rich data, and I have the participants to thank for that. The research would not have been possible or successful without their willingness to take the time to write and share their stories in such depth and detail.

### **Sub-cultural Paradoxes**

Chapter five explored women's experiences of the tattoo industry. Many of the participants described a career in tattooing as offering an opportunity for freedom in the workplace, to 'be themselves', and avoid the constraints associated with more mainstream occupations. However, as the interviews progressed, what appeared amongst the narratives of freedom and choice was a paradox between an individual sub-cultural career that promised a sense of personal independence and autonomy, and a hierarchical sub-cultural industry, structurally built around a hegemonic masculinity with a bias against women artists. This left many of the women artists in a position whereby they were either compelled to conform to certain industry norms, or resist, with possible consequences. The very field offering freedom and choice to women who affiliate with an alternative femininity, was also a field that constrained and restrained the same women artists.

These constraints were further illustrated through the difficulty experienced when the participants tried to establish themselves within the industry. Male gatekeepers often chose men over women to take up apprenticeships, and male capital meant that being a man in the industry often held an immediate position of status and authenticity when compared to women. The ability and opportunity to be 'themselves', therefore, was not an opportunity open to all women who attempted to enter the industry. Previously accumulated sub-cultural capital did appear to be useful in the transition from consumer of tattoos to producer. Women who had

participated in alternative subcultures and associated with counter-cultural lifestyles were able to use this capital to gain a 'foot in the door' – they may have known artists or studios and engaging with an alternative 'look' meant they held a degree of aesthetic capital also. However, the participants were aware of the existence of a hegemonic masculinity within the industry, and sometimes presented or acted as 'one of the boys' to fit in and succeed. Many of the women who described 'fitting in' with the dominant masculinity did not consider this a purposeful act, but rather described themselves as routinely identifying with certain aspects of 'masculine' behaviour (identifying as a 'tomboy', for example) and therefore, being 'one of the boys' appeared to be easy for them.

This leads to another important paradox within the narratives. The structure of the sub-culture is one which, on the one hand, can free women from mainstream employment pressures, and on the other hand, is dominated by hegemonic masculinities and male gatekeepers. It is also evident that once women have secured their space within the field, they are sometimes expected to adopt or appropriate the masculine nature of the field to remain and thrive in the industry. What the interviews also illustrated, however, was that many of the women, once they had secured their position in the field, were then able to, and actively did, use their 'femininity' to progress their work, their role and their economic capital by giving them a distinctive profile. This profile set them apart from men colleagues and generated a unique 'selling point'.

### **Not too Feminine, but Feminine Enough**

The participants, many of whom had been engaging with alternative subcultures since their teens, displayed their alternative femininities through dress, lifestyle and now occupation. They had actively resisted mainstream notions of femininity, dyeing their hair, becoming tattooed and/or pierced, and had actively sought a non-mainstream career historically framed as a 'man's job'. However, during the interviews, many of the women talked about utilising their femininity in their role as tattooists. Traits associated with being feminine, such as caring,

listening, being attentive, were all aspects of tattooing that the participants said they paid particular attention to for the benefit of their clients and for their own professional fulfilment, and many felt this was an imperative part of their career as a tattooist. And so, the women who had actively resisted, avoided and subverted mainstream notions of femininity, and very often performed or displayed alternative femininities in terms of aesthetics, were now using the qualities very much associated with dominant versions of femininity to offer a better service to their clients; thus, highlighting the ambivalences involved in performing and displaying femininities.

The participants described being able to offer a different kind of service than their male colleagues, focusing strongly (though not exclusively) upon the typically feminine traits already identified. Men can, of course, adopt these supposed feminine traits, but women artists are using traits typically associated with being a woman to stand out from the hegemonic masculinities, not only offering a different service to what many of the men artists can offer but, in turn, increasing their economic capital when clients choose them over male artists. The discord arises, therefore, when we consider that the qualities the women are using to distance themselves from the hegemonic masculinity of the industry, are the qualities associated with typically 'feminine' women, and therefore, qualities that reinforce mainstream gender norms and stereotypes. The distinguishing factor associated with women artists disrupts the gender order and simultaneously reinforces the stereotype many of the women strive to subvert.

It appears, therefore, that there are two elements of constraint at play for women in the industry. Firstly, on initial entry to the industry, being a woman can in some cases inhibit or hinder the transition from consumer to producer. Secondly, when working within the industry, women who utilise their 'femininity' risk reinforcing some of the gender stereotypes they were originally attempting to subvert. There is, thus, a nuanced negotiation to navigate – between being 'one of the boys', appropriating masculine capital for the sake of a place within the field, and utilising typically feminine traits to distinguish oneself from the hegemonic

masculinity, and offer clients something different, without compromising the notion of 'alternative femininities', or reinforcing gender stereotypes.

The complexities of being a woman tattoo artist are evident throughout the narratives, but what my research also illustrates is that artists are attempting to disrupt these constrictions and obstructions, by *reclaiming constraints as an agentic act*. Indeed, for many of the women, it was important that they were making a purposeful difference to the experience they were offering their clients. There was a distinct focus on emotional labour as part of the body work experience and this became apparent as being equally important in the tattooing process as the tattoo itself. Although the presumption that women artists by nature are more caring and attentive than men artists risks reinforcing the essentialist notion that women are 'natural' care givers and men are not, focusing upon *feminine* capital, rather than *female*, means we can uncouple the two and explore the possibilities of men utilising this capital for the benefit of clients, further disrupting the very narrow hegemonic masculinity of the industry.

The uncoupling of feminine and female capital is more complex than this, however, and it is therefore important to unpack the nuances surrounding both forms of capital, and how they are utilised by men and women artists. In chapter six, I suggested that women are often not rewarded for displaying typically feminine qualities in the workplace, due to an expectation on women to utilise these qualities 'naturally'; unlike men who, with no expectation to uphold typically feminine qualities, do in turn, get rewarded. However, I also argued that this may differ for women who regularly display alternative femininities, because women who do not conform to mainstream notions of femininity are often deemed 'unfeminine' and therefore presumed 'lacking' in qualities associated with dominant versions of femininity. This, therefore, further illustrates the complex and often contradictory nature of femininity within the sub-culture. Women who do not always adhere to dominant norms of femininity, and therefore are not deemed typically feminine by those who value dominant gender norms, but display typically feminine traits (caring, listening, being attentive for example), may experience rewards for this in terms of

increase in clients, economic capital and positive client feedback. However, some aspects of femininity were also dismissed by artists – both women and men – and this led to the downplaying of elements considered too feminine, and too ‘girly’, such as the use of pink tattoo equipment. During the interviews, and as discussed in chapter five, overly-feminised equipment was identified as something to be avoided, in order to be taken seriously by fellow (men) artists. Being *visibly* overly-feminine appears to be criticised, and yet *invisible* femininity is not. This demonstrates the continuous flux and negotiation of femininity that women artists engage in, in order to manage their positions within the industry.

Holland’s (2004) use of *flashing femininity* and my own discussion around a *masculine masquerade* can both be considered as a form of gendered emotional labour and as discussed above, women tattoo artists utilise both masculinised and feminised emotion work in order to succeed in the industry. I would argue therefore, that perhaps the type of emotional labour displayed here is not *gendered labour* as such, but rather *gender labour* and relies upon the individual utilising specific gendered traits in order to succeed in their field. I argued in chapter six that feminine traits, and therefore *feminine capital*, can be appropriated and utilised by men artists much like masculine capital was appropriated by some of the women I interviewed. However, the women also illustrated the presence of *female capital*, and this is something the men artists are unable to access. Female capital was useful capital when clients simply, for various reasons, wanted to be tattooed by a woman. There is no doubt that some tattoo clients – women, men and non-binary - will actively seek out and choose women artists over men, in the same way that patients opt for a woman GP, for example. This could illustrate a presumption (by the client/patient) regarding the emotional labour or the qualities a woman practitioner might offer, or, it could mean that due to the body work involved in the transaction, the client simply feels more comfortable with the body worker *not being a man*. By navigating a space in the industry, therefore, women are providing services to those clients, of various genders, who for whatever reason, prefer to be tattooed by a woman. This is of benefit to both the artists and the clients and is an example of reclaiming the original

constraint of *being a woman artist* and converting this into a capital-yielding and profitable agentic act.

### **'Selling out' or just Selling? Ambivalence and the Mainstream**

Not only did the interviews show the complex dynamic between gendered capitals and hegemonic versions of gendered traits, they also exposed a nuanced relationship between sub-cultural capital and the mainstream.

As discussed in chapter five, with tattooing becoming increasingly popular outside of sub-cultural aesthetics, tattoo artists are often granted levels of capital amongst mainstream culture. Because of this I would argue that we could consider the tattoo sub-culture as a *mainstreamed sub-culture*. Throughout the narratives, there was a degree of ambivalence surrounding this capital – depending upon who held the capital, who awarded the capital and how the capital was utilised. Capital gained and maintained within the sub-culture, was always useful, respected and appreciated by artists. This was not the case for capital held within the mainstream, which was not always useful and was sometimes disregarded or actively dismissed. The narratives illustrated how this ambivalence was centred around the *wrong or right* kind of capital.

The ambivalence derived from the fact that many of the artists felt fondly towards tattooing as a culture, and one that had until relatively recently been somewhat of a 'secretive' counter-culture, existing on the peripheries of the mainstream. However, with the influence of television shows and the advertising industry, the celebrityisation of tattooing, and the general increase in interest in tattooing as an art form, the mainstream in many Western countries has begun to appropriate tattooing and see tattoo artists as individuals who hold status and capital. For many artists, this is problematic. There is, for some, a desire to keep tattooing as a sub-cultural art form and retain a distance from a mainstream culture which threatens to dilute the significance of the counter-cultural aspects of this sub-culture. However, this desire is matched with a want for tattooing to be taken seriously as an art form and to be legitimised and viable as a career choice and

livelihood. Economic capital is important: tattoo artists must make money, and an increase in interest from the mainstream leads to an increase in clients, and a rise in economic capital for the artist. This leads to a sense of wanting to remain on the peripheries of the mainstream, and yet wanting also to utilise the mainstream's opportunity for seriousness and legitimacy, at the same time as not wanting to be considered as 'selling out' by one's peers. There is, however, a degree of unavoidable conformity that needs to be upheld if tattoo artists want to be successful in their field. Legal issues - including obtaining a council license to open a studio and strict health and safety policies and procedures - are all vital in the professionalisation of the industry and central to the viability and success of the artist and the studio. And so, artists need to utilise mainstream structures to succeed and progress, and are because of this, in many ways, legitimised by these mainstream institutions, at the same time as striving to retain their sub-cultural status.

Kat Von D is a good example of the paradox between 'selling out' and being successful outside of the sub-culture, and further illustrates the additional layer of negotiation required by many women artists in the industry. Women are frequently placed as the 'other' within the sub-culture, a sub-culture that is already negotiating its own seriousness status within the mainstream. Thus, women are left wanting to be taken seriously both inside and outside of the sub-culture. Kat Von D became somewhat of an embodiment of this conflict between the mainstream and counter-culture, and the ambivalence felt by her fellow artists vis-à-vis mainstream success. She was criticised by some participants for 'selling out' to the mainstream and for using her femininity in a way that some of the participants felt uncomfortable with. However, she was also praised and respected by some participants for the positive influence she has had upon women artists, and for encouraging more women into the industry.

Many of the women I interviewed also talked about wanting to, or feeling the need to, manage the 'image' of the tattoo artist, and attempting to influence the perception of tattoo artists held by people outside of the sub-culture. This not only illustrates the complex relationship between the *insider* and the *outsider* of the sub-

culture but is another example of how the women *laboured* to manage impressions and relationships. Both emotional and aesthetic labour were described by many of the participants as a way of managing the paradoxical relationship between wanting to remain on the peripheries of mainstream culture, but also not wanting to appear *too* deviant. My analysis also identified a complex fluidity between aesthetic *capital* and aesthetic *labour*. What constituted aesthetic capital inside of the sub-culture (having extensive visible tattoo coverage, looking 'alternative', for example) did not always function as aesthetic capital outside of the sub-culture, in fact alternative aesthetics often operated as the antithesis to capital outside of the sub-culture. And so, aesthetic labour was required to enable the women to manage their aesthetic capital successfully and create a balance between being taken seriously outside of the sub-culture, avoid being labelled as *too* deviant by outsiders but at the same time, be *deviant enough* to retain a degree of aesthetic capital (and subsequent professionalism) inside of the sub-culture.

### **Resistance is not Futile?**

Resistance is fluid and complex. As my research illustrates, some participants exercised their agency but were not necessarily displaying resistance. Likewise, conformity to hegemonic structures did not necessarily indicate a lack of agency; conformity was sometimes used as a vehicle for resistance. For instance, as discussed throughout the research, some participants were able to utilise elements of a hegemonic masculinity to gain space within the industry with intention to 'change' or 'improve' the culture from their position as an insider.

Resistance is further complicated when considered in the context of mainstreamed sub-cultures and alternative femininities. To describe and analyse potential resistant action as either resistant or conforming creates a false binary and is therefore problematic. Saba Mahmood (2005) is at the forefront of the discussion surrounding the relationship between resistance and agency. In her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, she argues that discussions surrounding agency and conformity, resistance and submission are more complex

than these binaries suggest. She argues that agency can be present ‘not only in those acts that resist the norms but also in multiple ways in which one inhabits norms’ (Mahmood, 2005: 15). It is important to note the complexities and problems of conflating resistance with agency, in relation to tattoo culture, and my research further illustrates the complex negotiations at play within the sub-culture. Firstly, conformity does not necessarily mean a lack of agency and it is important to question the dominant binary of agency versus conforming. Secondly, resistance within subcultures is the norm – as I discussed in chapter three, subcultures are historically associated with resistance and subverting mainstream norms – and so, to *resist* the mainstream from a position of subcultural or sub-cultural insider, is in fact, to *conform* to the norms of the sub-culture.

In chapter seven, I discussed how, with tattooing shifting from being a counter-cultural practice to one embraced by numerous groups within the mainstream, becoming tattooed can no longer be considered as an entirely resistant act. However, as my research shows, there are elements of resistance within the tattoo culture, and these narratives expand upon previous discussions surrounding resistance and compliance by academics such as LeBlanc (1999), Pitts, (2003) and Atkinson, (2002). A further example of the fluidity of resistance is my analysis of alternative femininities and their relationship with dominant versions of femininity. As discussed previously, women displaying alternative femininities (and therefore seemingly resisting mainstream notions of what it is to be ‘feminine’) are embracing the more traditional notions of ‘femininity’, such as caring, listening and being attentive, as a way of resisting the hegemonic masculine norms of tattoo culture. This not only illustrates, as discussed above, the complex relationship between alternative and dominant versions of femininities, but also the nuances of resistance. The participants resisted certain elements of the hegemony, at the same time as they reproduced other elements of the sub-cultural hegemony and/or the broader social hegemony. Although I discussed above the problematic reinforcing of gendered norms through focusing on ‘feminine qualities’, I would argue that by resisting certain elements of gendered hegemony, the participants are also able to disrupt mainstream ideologies of femininity and masculinity. Resistance to gender norms,

therefore, exists hand in hand with complicity with and conformity to, these norms. As discussed in chapter three, Haenfler (2004:408) argues that resistance is contextual and fluid, and this is further illustrated here.

**Conclusion: How do women negotiate their position within a male-dominated, sub-cultural industry?**

The answer to the original research question requires a three-fold approach to the analysis in order to consider how women negotiate their position within the industry. Firstly, as I have previously discussed, women engage in continuous negotiations surrounding gendered norms and often need to downplay their femininity in order to successfully manage their everyday experiences of the tattoo sub-culture. Secondly, as I have also discussed, women utilise certain gendered traits for the benefit of both their client and themselves. Thirdly, women are found to be creating and producing a new language and framework of femininities, and in turn are beginning to create a new system of norms surrounding femininities, alternative identities and sub-cultures. Drawing upon DeMello's (2000) suggestion that there is a 'middle-class turn' in tattooing, I have suggested that tattooing has undergone a *gender turn* which has led to a significant shift in the gender relations within the tattoo sub-culture.

This gender turn has seen an increase in women to the tattoo sub-culture (both in terms of customers and artists) and the emotional and aesthetic labour invested by many women artists means that the masculine culture, and image, of the industry has the potential to shift. Have women helped to transform mainstream perceptions of tattoo culture? A review of the literature showed the relatively new phenomenon of clients sharing their life stories, life experiences and reasons for getting tattooed with their artists, and some (DeMello, 2000; Pitts, 2003) have argued that this has been associated with a middle-class 'self-help' discourse within tattooing. This then, could be further related to the 'tattooist as therapist' narrative discussed in chapters two and six. However, what the literature does not consider is that the 'self-help' narrative equated with the middle-classes could also be the result

of the influence of more women artists in the industry. Conversation, sensitivity and being more emotionally aware are often seen as more feminine traits, and this has been overlooked in research on the changing nature of the industry. Why equate emotion work so readily with the middle-classes but not with the increase in both women artists in the industry and women clients in the community? Dominant masculinities and femininities have been problematised throughout my research, and women's narratives describing the uses and value of feminine and female capital illustrated how both can be utilised productively and positively to disrupt hegemonic versions of gender. Therefore, my research expands upon work by Ross-Smith and Huppertz (2010), exploring gender as a form of capital and appreciating both femaleness and femininity as forms of 'embodied cultural capital' (2010: 549). This, in turn, supports the women artists in their agentic acts of resistance and conformity.

Existing literature on tattoos and tattooing has focused upon women as consumers rather than producers, because historically more women have been customers than tattoo artists. However, with numbers of women tattoo artists increasing, literature and research needs to evolve. Previous research has not fully addressed the intersection of tattooing as an industry or form of employment and gender relations within the field. Neither has existing literature explored what it means to be a cultural producer within a sub-cultural field which is rapidly being embraced and appropriated by mainstream culture. The tattoo industry, as my research illustrates, is still a predominantly masculine space, and yet, existing research has largely ignored gender in its exploration of tattooing as a changing field of production and employment and has failed to consider tattooing as a gendered sub-cultural space or acknowledge the negotiations navigated by women in relation to gender, capital, labour and resistance.

With a focus on gender, my research has also highlighted important discussions surrounding subcultures, sub-cultures, and the fluid movement between counter-culture and the mainstream. I have explored the structural organisation of male-dominated subcultures and found the tattoo industry to be both emancipatory and constricting for women entering and continuing to work in the field. The

conflicting nature of the industry led to nuances in how the women managed their position in the field, underpinned by complex negotiations of capital: both sub-cultural and gendered. I suggested that tattoo artists are *trans-sub-cultural practitioners*, who transcend various subcultures and sub-cultures, whilst working in a collective of artists that at times is subcultural-like in its structure and intra-relations. This is further complexified for women, women of colour and non-binary artists as they not only strive to be taken seriously in mainstream culture, but the *mainstream* of the sub-culture *and* the *sub-sub-culture*. This, as my research illustrates, can lead to resistance from minority artists.

The participants were often resisting elements of both the mainstream and the sub-culture, meaning the women were in a position of resisting the alternative space they had originally sought for safely resisting the mainstream. This led to contradictions and ambivalence. Along with this resistance, came a level of conformity to elements of both the mainstream and the sub-culture, and so there appeared to be a continuous flux of resistance and conformity between both the sub-culture and the mainstream, illustrating how fluid resistance and conformity are.

Not only does this research expose this fluidity between conformity and resistance, but also between mainstream and counter-culture, and dominant and alternative femininities. Throughout the analysis in the thesis, I have problematised and deconstructed the binaries surrounding these three key areas, illustrating how they are not always binary in structure, and do always exist in opposition to each other – in fact, in the context of my research they are rarely in opposition, but instead are fluid, contingent and context-specific. It is vital to unpack the normativity and the norm-creating expectations of a sub-culture or subculture. Are there really clear and concise boundaries between a ‘mainstream’ and ‘subculture’? My research shows a fluidity and flux between sub-cultures and what might be deemed the mainstream; just as there is between resistance/submission and agency/conformity. Within subcultures (or sub-cultures), being resistant *is normative*. Therefore, in this context enacting a resistance to the mainstream is expected by the sub-cultural norms, and is, in its own way, conforming. Some, but not all, women tattooers today

are placing themselves at the centre of a resistant space, dominated by both mainstream and sub-cultural norms. Artists such as Charline Bataille offer another level to this nuanced resistance as she, like other minority tattoo artists, resists the 'norms' of the sub-culture and offers an alternative to what have become the norms of the sub-culture. Examples from my research are women artists working from home and thus using *home* as a resistant, safe space for customers; self-taught tattooing and the creation of women-only studios, or safe-spaces for minority tattoo clients.

### **Beyond the Sub-culture: My research in a wider context**

This research contributes to ongoing academic discussions surrounding alternative femininities and resistant acts, but also male-dominated subcultures and women's negotiation of their position within these cultures. Although the research is seemingly focused on a niche sub-cultural context, findings from my research could be applied to similar male-dominated spaces – both in subcultures and in employment or work cultures. My research offers insights into the negotiations of both dominant and alternative femininities in the workplace and/or male-dominated spaces and opens opportunities to continue these conversations. I also identify a complex inter-dependent relationship between alternative cultures and the mainstream, intersected by complex notions of both sub-cultural and gendered capital, which is further complicated by the dependency on economic capital and ambivalent investment in professional success. Engaging in research and subsequent theorising around the negotiation of femininities can be useful in a wider context of male-dominated fields – both in subcultural and mainstream cultures. By engaging with alternative versions of gender and utilising multiple versions of capital, individuals and collectives can intervene, interrupt and disrupt the hegemonic masculinities so dominant and problematic within male-dominated cultures and fields, like tattooing.

Women tattoo artists embody the intersections and complex relations between subcultures, mainstream culture, gender, employment and different forms of labour: body, emotional and aesthetic. Without exploring women in the tattoo

industry, it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to see how these seemingly opposing spheres are so intrinsically interrelated. Women have had to, and still are, negotiating their femininities and challenging the boundaries of social acceptability at the same time as using tattoo as a vehicle for independence, whilst navigating a male-dominated, narrowly masculine culture. Women tattoo artists exist in a culture that prides itself on being resistant and yet whilst existing in the sub-culture, women are continuously managing sets of norms, differing versions of capital and negotiating conformity. The sub-culture, in many ways, offers a sense of liberation, freedom and choice for women tattoo artists and yet in many ways, the daily lived experiences of women show sub-cultural constraints and dominant norms for women to resist.

I previously argued that tattoo literature needs to evolve to include and represent the growing number of women in the field of tattooing and what this means for the gender relations in the sub-culture. I am now arguing that sociological analysis needs to learn from its participants and evolve in order to better represent the flexibility exercised in the everyday lives of society. Throughout my analysis, I have used specific theoretical concepts such as capital, power and resistance, all of which are familiar to sociological analyses of subcultures. Women tattoo artists demonstrate a flexibility in terms of negotiating the complex and often paradoxical relationships within the tattoo culture. It is important to recognise how in real-life, power, resistance and negotiation are fluid and flexible. We as scholars could learn from the ways in which women tattoo artists negotiate this flexibility on a daily basis, and draw on that learning, in the concepts we use to explore sub-cultures and subcultures, addressing them in a more fluid, flexible and nuanced way. Women tattoo artists not only embody the complex relationships between gendered capital, sub-cultural capital, mainstream and counter-culture, but they also act as a timely reminder of how important it is to deconstruct common binaries in our sociological analysis surrounding gender, resistance and sub-cultural spaces.

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## Appendix A

### Details of the Research Process

I want the research process to be enjoyable for you, and don't want you to feel uncomfortable or unhappy at any time. You are under no obligation to respond to the questions I ask, and it is your right to withdraw your contribution to the research at any point. Please let me know if you are unhappy with anything, or if you would like to withdraw from the research for any reason.

This part of the research will be conducted via email, mainly due to ease and convenience – and allowing you to answer in your own time, giving you time to think about your response which a face-to-face interview doesn't always allow.

I'm not going to dictate how I would like the first piece of correspondence to look, or what I want you to include or talk about. I will merely send you some open-ended questions. The idea is for you to write about your experiences, in any way you are comfortable with... as little or as much as you'd like to tell me. I will then (if it's ok with you), follow up these questions with some more, once I have read your initial responses.

The emails and the analysis of the emails within my project will be read by tutors at The University of Warwick and external examiners; when the project is completed, it will be stored for reference in the library at the university and therefore will be accessible to students and teachers. In relation to this, you have the option to remain anonymous throughout the research process - by either the use of a pseudonym (chosen by you) or indeed, to remain 'nameless' and perhaps be referred to as Miss X or Miss Y, for example. This is your choice and I will respect any choice you make.

The data collected from your email will be stored on a memory stick and kept in a secure place.

You will be given the opportunity, after the final email, to feedback on the research process and let me know 'how it was for you'! Any feedback will be greatly appreciated and will be a vital part of the research - feminist research prides itself on its commitment to the respondent and the importance of you having your say in every area of the process.

## Appendix B

### Short Biography

#### **A little bit about me....**

If you are taking part in research for somebody you've never met before, I think it's nice to know a little bit about them as a person before you start.... !

I am a PhD student at The University of Warwick, studying in the Centre for Women and Gender Studies (part of the Sociology department).

I teach social research methods within the Sociology department, and am currently working as a research assistant on a gender and sexualities project. I also work in Gloucestershire as a domestic abuse outreach worker.

I do a little bit of writing for Things & Ink Magazine.

I'm a mum to a 4-year-old boy, and live in the Cotswolds.

I have been getting tattooed since 1998, although very intermittently so am not as covered as I'd like to be!

My interests include – tattoos and body modification, feminism and music

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Emma Beckett (PhD University of Warwick)

**Name of interviewee:**

(This can be your alias or 'preferred name' to be used throughout the interview)

**Date:**

- I confirm that I am over 18 years old [ ]\*
- I confirm that I have been given and understand information regarding the research process and my involvement in this [ ]\*
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I can withdraw my contribution at any time [ ]\*
- I understand that I can remain anonymous if I so wish - this can be discussed with the researcher at any point in the research process [ ]\*
- I understand and agree that all information and data collected will be held securely and in confidence [ ]\*
- I agree to take part in the research [ ]\*

***\*Please initial***

**Please note that due to the research being conducted solely via the Internet, there is no opportunity for you, the respondent to sign the consent form in person - the IP address of the computer you respond from will therefore stand as a valid electronic signature.**

## Appendix D

### Initial Email to Participants (Using Becky's as an example)

Hi Becky,

Thanks for getting in touch via Twitter.

I am currently researching for my PhD, looking at women tattoo artists - experiences of the industry, how women are 'making a mark' on the industry and subculture.... and I am interviewing women either by email or Skype, or in person if geographically possible.

I wondered if you would be interested in taking part? Via whichever format suits you best.

No worries if not, I completely understand it's not for everyone and also that people are incredibly busy!

best wishes

Emma

*Hi lovely. I'd be happy to. Would email be okay? I can sit and do it in my free time then :) xx*

Hi Becky,

Email is absolutely fine - many of the women I am speaking to are communicating with me via email, it seems to suit most people - like you say, you can respond in your own time and hopefully it won't impact too much upon anything!

I will attach some info about me and the project.

Here are some initial questions:

1. Could you give me a little bit of background to your career as a tattoo artist and where you're at with it now?
2. Why tattoo - why this as a career?

3. Have you had any gender-specific experiences either has a tattooed woman, or a tattoo artist? (positive or negative!)

4. How do you think women tattoo artists are perceived within the industry (by colleagues) or in the subculture (by fellow tattooed people)?

Thanks again - I really appreciate you taking part :)

## Appendix E

### Cold Email to Artists

Dear ,

I am a (tattooed) PhD researcher from the UK looking at women tattooers and heavily tattooed women. I wondered if you would like to take part in my research? It would involve writing to me (letter format but via email if easier!) about your experiences of being a tattoo artist, and tattooed woman.....

If this sounds of interest to you, here is some more info! ....

I wanted the research to focus upon **women's experiences of *being tattooed and being the tattooer: being the artist, the art and the gallery curator***, if you like!

So to begin with, the research will primarily be focusing upon tattoo artists, but may extend to heavily tattooed women who aren't artists (I'm playing it by ear on this one!).

There was a lot of research carried out in the 90's on women and tattoos, and although there has been lots of work done since, much of it is theoretical and not experienced-based. Also, not much has been looked at in terms of the tattoo artists themselves and the experiences of being a tattooed woman, and an artist.

**I'm asking women to write to me... in whatever format you like, about being a tattoo artist/a tattooed woman.** I'm not going to be prescriptive about what you should write about – that's up to you. It could be a chronological 'story' of when you started getting tattooed, or when you started tattooing... or it could be recounting certain experiences you don't mind sharing. As I said, it's completely up to you!

It's probably easier to send it to me as an email, and once I receive the correspondence, I might contact people to ask about a follow-up interview (on-line), but I might not. This is just a pilot stage at the moment so I'm not sure how it's going to go!

Hopefully it will be an exciting, interesting and stimulating exploration of women and tattoo.

If you are interested in taking part, I can send some more details, and consent forms etc... the nuts and bolts of an academic research project!

If it's something you may be interested in, fab! If not, thank you for taking the time to read this email - I appreciate it :)

Best wishes

## Appendix F

### Example Interview Schedule: Asia

#### **Email One:**

09.05.13

*Hello all,*

*I have had some feedback about the initial question I am asking people in that it might be too general, too broad and therefore perhaps quite a daunting task, leaving people not really knowing where on earth to start with a response!*

*So, if you are still interested in taking part, and need a more specific set of questions, here goes:*

- 1. What made you want to become a tattoo artist?*
- 2. How did you get into tattooing as a career?*
- 3. What are your experiences of working within the Tattoo Industry?*

*Hope this helps narrow it down a little, and I'm sorry I was perhaps too vague to begin with! (we live and learn!). I hope to follow these questions up with some more once I receive a reply, if you don't mind....*

*If of course you haven't got time to take part, I completely understand - send me an email to let me know and I won't bother you anymore.*

*Thank you :)*

*Very best wishes*

#### **Email Two:**

11.05.13

*Dear Asia,*

*I can't thank you enough, and I can't express how excited, interested, and humbled I am to read women's voices and experiences.*

*I've read through quickly, what I'll do is re-read, and get back to you with further questions if that's ok? There are already some really interesting points I'd like to follow up on.*

*Thanks again, this really means a lot to me :)*

**Email Three:**

19.06.13

*Hi Asia,*

*I have some more questions if you don't mind? If you don't have the time, please don't worry and please do ignore this email! I appreciate your input so far and understand if you can't do anymore.*

*You mention that some people commented that you only got the job because 'you're a girl' and that women still have to fight for the respect given almost automatically to men; and that women aren't taken seriously. Could you expand on your thoughts/opinions/experiences on this?*

*I'm really interested in the fact you say you weren't happy with the reproducing of other people's designs, the small, off the wall flash type work and that you weren't 'making art' - could you tell me a bit more about this? I'm interested in tattoo artists being authors of a subculture and a certain aesthetic, and I think your statement relates to this!*

*Some of my other interviewees have mentioned the influence/effect of Kat Von D on the industry... could you tell me more about why you think she/other celebrity tattooers have made it worse for other artists?*

*There seems to be a real juxtaposition for women tattooers and the way they are received/treated... on the one hand, you're not 'trusted' to tattoo, but then on the other hand, you are almost fetishized, sexualized and singled out because you are a woman. I suppose this was just a clarification and comment really, rather than a question! But if you'd like to say more about this issue, please do!*

*"gender plays such a role in my reputation as a tattooer" - love this statement. It says so much.*

*Do you have much involvement with the tattoo subculture? How do you see your role/position within the subculture?*

*Do you enjoy your job? If yes - why?.... if no-why?!....*

*I hope that's all ok - as I said, please don't worry if you don't have the time, I appreciate what you've contributed already.*

*Thank you for your time*

**Email Four:**

23.01.14

*Hi Asia,*

*Thanks again for your email & responses.*

*I have some comments/further questions - if you don't mind? If you don't have time, or don't want to respond to these, I completely understand and want you to know there is no pressure, I appreciate what you've contributed so far!*

*In case you do though....*

*\* It's an emerging theme within my research that women artists are fetishized at some point in their careers, in some way - as you say, men wanting to be tattooed by you because you are a woman, regardless of your talent or style. So this is something I will be exploring. You're also not the first to say that sometimes you are 'not trusted' because of your gender. urgh!  
(ok, not a question, merely a comment!).*

*\*I really like what you say about art: it seems that art is of paramount importance to you, and that skin just happens to be your choice of canvas. I will be exploring women artists and how this relates to tattoo. I will also be exploring feminist art, and if i can relate this to tattoo.  
I think parallels can be made between women tattooers and more traditional women artists - both have fought to be taken seriously along the way.*

*I like what you say about striving to keep your own art separate from work. This must be difficult I would imagine.*

*\*You say that your local subculture is "pretty gross" - how come?*

*Do you think there are changes to be made in the industry/subculture as a whole?  
Can women have an influence on this?*

*Thanks again for your participation,*

*Very best wishes*

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## Appendix G

### Participant Information

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Year started Tattooing</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Route into Tattooing</b>
Amy C	2009	Oxfordshire, UK	White, British	Apprenticeship
Asia	2010	Travelling artist, currently working in the US	White, Canadian	Apprenticeship
Becky	2008	Herefordshire, UK	White, British	Apprenticeship
Clio	2007	California, US	Self identifies as Mixed-Race White/Arab	Apprenticeship
Kate	2011	Wales, UK	White, British	Taught by friend
Kirsty	2008	Melbourne, Australia	White, Australian	Self-Taught
Sarah	1994	Worcestershire, UK	White, British	Apprenticeship
Toni	2012	Currently travelling in the US	White, Australian	Self-Taught