

**PULLING TOGETHER:
MAKING MEANING OF EXTREME FLESH PRACTICES**

By

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Abstract

This thesis puts forth an ethnographic, contextual social constructionist account of the non-mainstream body manipulations practiced at the annual *Body & Soul* body modification event in Western Canada. The radical practices at this event include sewing limes and other items to one's body, flesh hook pulling, and/or receiving "third eye" piercings and cheek skewers; thus, it constitutes an example of extreme deviance subject to negative reactions from outsiders. This research assumes that meaning is discursively and symbolically constituted by people via an active process of claimsmaking wherein competition for definitional control of reality ensues. From a qualitative stance, data were derived from a combination of participant observation fieldwork at *Body & Soul* and subsequent in-depth interviews with participants. The results demonstrate a trend in the (counter)claimsmaking activity of practitioners of this extreme form of body modification wherein paradoxically the nature of their deviance is reconstructed and aligned with conformist goals via discursive, corporal, and symbolic claims that simultaneously offer an implicit critique of mainstream Western culture. The results are interpreted as part of a discursive competition for definitional control of extreme body modification, strategy in the negotiation and management of a stigmatized identity, means of implicit social criticism, and an unconventional expression of conventional values.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Physical deviance, such as obesity, deformity, cutting, extensive tattooing and other such “abominations of the body” are interpreted as indicative of moral failing by conforming members of the mainstream majority in Western culture (Goffman 1963:4). In other words, individuals with bodily deviations harbour what Erving Goffman (1963) referred to as a “spoiled identity” and are thus subject to stigmatization, informal social control, and attempts to label their physical attributes or body practices as abnormal, dangerous, and wrong. While uninvited stigma such as birth marks or deformities might elicit a degree of sympathy from “normals” (Goffman 1963), “achieved stigma” that is constructed as a form of “self inflicted damnation” is less apt to do so (Falk 2001; Allon 1982). Consequently, individuals interpreted as having invited their plight are constructed as residing in the universe of moral blameworthiness (Loseke 2003) and thus must negotiate more damning charges of double deviance for having actively embraced stigma and consciously violated cultural and social body norms.

In terms of rationalization, the process of stigmatization results from the human need to categorize and assign meaning to the objective world; while practical and necessary, categorizations “often simultaneously construct the types of *people* who inhabit these categories” (Loseke 1993:207; Emphasis in Original). Consequently, individuals interpreted as belonging to a “deviant” category are subject to *stigma*; a term described by Goffman (1963) as a result of the interplay between a “deeply discrediting” attribute, stereotypical imagery and discrimination. Hence, the discredited individual carrying a stigma is cast as a certain type of person and othered by society; subsequently,

“[w]e believe the person with the stigma is not quite human...[w]e construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing animosity based on our differences” (Goffman 1963:5). Inevitably, the perceived fault of the stigmatized person is established as a master status onto which “we impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” (Goffman 1963:5). Not surprisingly, this consequence is exacerbated for individuals who willingly achieve stigma, confront the judgements of mainstream society and problematize conventional social norms.

As the driving force behind this thesis, the question as to *how* said individuals go about managing achieved stigma in terms of contending with the objections and prejudices of participants in mainstream culture is considered from the perspective of social constructionism. Currently the primary theoretical approach to the sociological study of deviance and social problems, social constructionism was too considered radical or “deviant” when its pioneering scholars contended that reality is a process and product of social definition rather than a result of objective conditions (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Spector & Kitsuse 1977). In terms of deviance and stigma management, the social constructionist position orients inquiry toward the claimsmaking activity of different groups and individuals vying for the successful accomplishment of definition; in other words, the construction of behaviours, thoughts, or physical attributes of certain individuals as “deviant” is achieved discursively and symbolically by the successful claims of those with a vested interest in its definition.

While some members of stigmatized groups might negotiate the management of a negatively constructed identity by attempting to “pass” or hide their stigma from the view

of the moral majority (Goffman 1963), other stigmatized individuals are “coming out” by forming groups, politicizing deviance and challenging mainstream assumptions (Kitsuse 1980).¹ For these individuals, (counter)claimsmaking activity is intertwined with cultural and identity politics (Pitts 2003); indeed, as demonstrated in this analysis, radical body modification practitioners who are “out” with regards to their deviance engage in (counter)claimsmaking activity as part of individual and collective negotiations in identity and culture. Taken together, these claims constitute what social constructionists refer to as a “deviant account” and are typically comprised of justification and/or rationalization for behaviours successfully constructed in mainstream culture as “deviant” (Goode 2008).

Early social constructionist studies have documented the deviant accounts of hit men (Levi 1981) and corporate criminals (Benson 1985); and in terms of physical, behavioural and bodily deviance, recent social constructionist contributions have considered the accounts of people who are “hugely obese” (Gimlin 2008); endorse and have adult-child sexual contact (de Young 2008); and practice sexual spanking (Plante 2008). Likewise, with respect to achieved physical deviance, non-medical body modifications such as extensive tattooing have relatively recently emerged as a sociological area of interest (Sanders and Vail 2008; Silver, Vaneseltine & Silver 2009; Pitts 2003; DeMello 2000; Kosut 2000, 2005, 2006; Vail 1999; Atkinson 2003, 2004b). These contributions are part of a trend in academic literature toward conceptualizing certain forms of physical deviance as artistic (Kosut 2005; Vail 1999) or individual expression (Forsyth & Simpson 2008) rather than evidence of criminal atavism and risk taking as posited in earlier academic analyses (Lombroso 1911). Nonetheless, while body

¹ Examples include the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Stonewall rebellion and the contemporary “fat acceptance” movement (Kwan 2009).

modifications such as minimal tattooing and piercing have arguably gained mainstream acceptance (DeMello 2000; Kosut 2005, 2006; Sanders & Vail 2008), more extreme practices such as scarification, flesh hook suspension, branding, cutting, flesh stapling, sub-dermal implantation, amputations, “growing” horns, sub-incision² and tongue splitting remain on the margins of social acceptability and likewise have received little to no scholarly attention, particularly within the contemporary Western context (Forsyth & Simpson 2008; Pitts 2003; Atkinson & Young 2001; Vale & Juno 1989).

The present study attempts to address this gap in sociological literature by offering an ethnographic, social constructionist account of the radical body practices carried out at *Body & Soul*; an extreme body modification event held on a secluded islet off of the coast of Western Canada. An annual tradition, *Body & Soul* is comprised of modification and other practices such as nudity, dance, flesh hook pulling, cheek skewering, “third eye” piercing, and the sewing of limes onto the flesh of one’s back. The primary focus at this event is flesh hook pulling; this involves inserting surgical steel hooks into one’s chest and subsequently pulling from the flesh against the weight of one’s body (or another participant) for several hours, often until an “altered state” is achieved. The atmosphere of *Body & Soul* can be described as simultaneously an individual and collective experience characterized by spirituality, intimacy, vulnerability, mutual support and joy. These practices violate normative and conventional assumptions about “appropriate” uses and beliefs about the body in Western culture; consequently, as practices of this sort are highly deviant, *Body & Soul* is strategically and covertly

² Sub-incision refers to the bisection of the underside of the penis.

organized by its members so as to keep its execution outside the boundaries of mainstream consciousness.

Noting this, these radical body modifications are conceptualized here as exemplifying an expression of *extreme* deviance subject to stigmatization depending on the extent to which it is known to “normals” (Goffman 1963). This study asks what participants at *Body & Soul* do to manage the discredited or discreditable stigma associated with radical body modification and how they make sense of their experience and normalize their behaviour; in other words, how do practitioners of flesh hook pulling account for their behaviour to themselves and to others? This research illuminates the conceptual and discursive resources that members employ to challenge mainstream definitions of body modification and (re)construct the nature of their deviance by framing *Body & Soul* as a particular kind of event. Thus, the primary focus of this research is to understand extreme body modification as interpreted by extreme body modification practitioners; that is, to recognize the “interior experiences” of practitioners in terms of what they perceive at *Body & Soul* and how they interpret their perceptions (Stebbins 1996; Weiss 1994:1). To accomplish this, this study considers members’ (counter)claimsmaking activity and narrative accounts as discursive and/or symbolic strategies for establishing normative definitions of radical body modification, managing discreditable or discredited identities and problematizing cultural body myths.

As this thesis puts forth a social constructionist, ethnographic account of *Body & Soul* as sociologically relevant phenomena and example of extreme deviance, it contributes to the recent scholarly interest in body modification and addresses a gap in sociological literature by forging a new line of inquiry in terms of both substantive topic

and methodological approach. Via qualitative means, the present analysis locates claimsmaking activity in its subcultural context and offers the deviant accounts of practitioners of a form of extreme body modification ritual referred to as flesh hook pulling. In doing so, this analysis puts forth an appreciative³ sociological account of *Body & Soul* as an example of extreme deviance that elicits negative reactions from outsiders. To maintain the confidentiality and protection of participants in this study all names, titles, and locations have been replaced with pseudonyms.

In Chapter Three the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the thesis are discussed in more detail; beginning with an outline of the emergence of the social constructionist perspective, its primary contributors and theoretical assumptions. This chapter details the epistemological debates within the constructionist camp and argues that the contextual (as opposed to the strict) social constructionist approach is a useful, fruitful, and practical approach to the study of extreme deviance and social phenomenon more generally. In addition, the tools of social constructionism, specifically the language of claims, claimsmaking, underdog claimsmaking and (counter)claimsmaking are detailed here. Chapter Four bridges the theoretical assumptions of this research with the methodological strategies employed by situating methodological choices within the tradition of contextual social constructionist analysis. Next, this chapter details how I gained access to this deviant population as well as the methodological and ethical dilemmas that I was confronted with throughout the research process.

Chapter Five details the results of the study: extreme body modifiers' accounts of *Body & Soul*. The first section in this chapter addresses how participants in *Body & Soul*

³ See Matza (1969).

create meaning around their practices at the event through discursive, symbolic and behavioural claimsmaking which in turn facilitate the adoption of a positive interpretation of *Body & Soul* by new members. The second section, derived from in-depth interviews, considers how participants construct a narrative account of their behaviour and reinterpret the nature of their deviance through critical evaluation of mainstream cultural resources. The final chapter begins by explicating participants accounts in terms of social constructionism; specifically, this section reviews the techniques that participants use to reinterpret their physical deviance as positive, establish definitional control of *Body & Soul*, and critique what they claim to be the oppressive features of mainstream Western culture. Likewise, this chapter considers the sum of these claimsmaking strategies as comprising a coherent account of their experience that functions to justify their behaviour to themselves and others. This chapter closes with some concluding comments and a discussion of opportunities for future research.

Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman (1963), this short chapter has introduced the relationship between deviance and stigma and suggested that stigmatization results from conceptual processes of categorization and the successful accomplishment of definition. Correspondingly, the extent to which a behaviour, trait or belief is constructed as “deviant” is inextricably connected to societal reaction; thus, how people negotiate stigmatization is contingent on the extent to which their deviance is known to outsiders and constructed as indicative of a discredited moral character. Noting this, this chapter introduced *Body & Soul* as a useful site of exploration into the relationship between physical deviance, stigmatization and the account-making process. The following chapter offers an overview of how sociologists conceptualize deviance and subsequently locates

practices carried out at *Body & Soul* within the realm of extreme deviance. Likewise, for the purposes of contextualizing the analysis and illuminating the significance of social context with respect to the construction of social definition, Chapter Two outlines shifting interpretations of physical deviance in sociological, psychological, medical and popular discourses and charts the emergence and (re)construction of corporal deviance within the body modification movement.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Degrees of Divergence: Defining & Conceptualizing Extreme Deviance

Deviance, as a sociological area of study, is historically characterized by contention with respect to a concrete definition (Ben-Yehuda 1990). A term that is “both too inclusive and too exclusive” (Kitsuse 1980:2), deviance is a label conceivably transferable to any group or person contingent on context; consequently, as Hathaway and Atkinson suggest “...definitions of deviance are shifting, sociological theories describing, explaining, and predicting deviant behaviour are concomitantly in flux” (2001:354). These conflicts arise at a basic level from two general orientations toward the problem of defining deviance: the objectivist and subjectivist perspectives. While the philosophical foundations of the debate over the subject/object divide is complex, litigious, and exceeds the bounds of the present discussion, a crude overview of the two standpoints as they pertain to deviance is offered here for the purposes of introducing the subsequent chapter and contextualizing the analysis.⁴

Proponents of the objectivist position define deviance as that which is inherently objectionable; and because deviant behaviours, acts and beliefs embody an objective and identifiably “deviant” essence, they are generally agreed upon. The absolutist perspective reflects an objective orientation toward delineating between deviant and conforming behaviour. For instance, the contributions of founding sociologist Emile Durkheim reflect

⁴ Issues pertaining to subjectivity and objectivity are more fully elaborated in Chapter Three.

this view. Durkheim argued that there is a general agreement in society regarding various behaviours or actions that are inherently wrong and objectively deviant; accordingly, he posited that rules reflect consensus and the “collective conscience” of a society. Simply stated, the objectivist stance contends that certain people or behaviours are intrinsically deviant apart from and regardless of our subjective judgements (Adler & Adler 2009). Proponents of the objectivist position typically identify deviance by statistical rarity, harm, negative societal reaction and normative violation (Bereska 2008); however, these concepts are often integrated into subjectivist analyses as well (Becker 1963). In contrast, the subjectivist approach rejects inherent, observable characteristics as a fundamental basis for identifying deviance (Adler & Adler 2009). From this perspective, deviance is not objectively established by identifying the innately “deviant” essence of a characteristic or behaviour; rather, it is interpreted as forged from a process of social creation and definitional accomplishment. Deviance cannot exist apart from our subjective interpretations and likewise it is inextricably intertwined with the socio-historical context within which it is constructed (Best 1993).

Contemporary constructionist studies that reflect a relativist position toward deviance continue to be influenced by Howard Becker’s (1963) seminal contribution *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Opposing an objectivist stance, Becker contends that “deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits”; rather, it is a product and a process of social definition of “right” and “wrong” behaviour. Maintaining that judgement is variable, Becker argues that:

...social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders...[t]he deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (1963:9; Emphasis in Original).

Consequently, both the “labelers” and the deviant person as one who acts in opposition to the established rules of a particular group can be conceptualized as “outsiders” as either might subjectively interpret the other as violating an accepted group norm. Thus, interpretations of deviance are dependent on context; as demonstrated in this analysis, a single act can be constructed as deviant or conforming depending on the socio-historical and immediate contexts in which it occurs.

Similarly, as reflected in the distinction between primary and secondary deviation, the extent to which an individual’s deviant behaviour places them “outside” convention is variable; as morality is contingent on subjective judgement, deviance can usefully be interpreted as a matter of degree. Over a decade before Becker’s (1963) *Outsiders*, prominent sociologist Edwin Lemert (1951) addressed the shifting nature of deviance in his discussion of primary and secondary deviation. According to Lemert (1951), primary deviation is a violation of normative, conforming behaviour but that which is typically of fleeting significance and minor consequence if detected. Conversely, secondary deviation is pervasive to the extent that (knowing) audiences interpret both the act and the person as deviant. Likewise, at the stage of secondary deviation the deviant person interprets themselves as deviant and begins the process of assuming the requisite identity.

Noting this, this study interprets the deviant beliefs and body modifications practiced at *Body & Soul* as marginalized to the extent that it can usefully situated at the *extreme* end of the deviance continuum. In a book by the same title, Goode defines extreme deviance as:

...behaviour, beliefs, or physical traits that are so far outside the norm, so unacceptable to a wide range of different audiences, that they elicit *extremely* strongly negative reactions. For many of the people who know about these behaviours, beliefs, and traits, ordinary, routine interaction becomes almost impossible. Their reaction

frequently borders on horror; they reject, stigmatize, and abhor the persons who have engaged in the behaviour, hold the beliefs, or possess the traits (2008:xi; Emphasis in Original).

Deviance situated within the realm of the extreme is met with fear and rejection; consequently, as “deviant” individuals such as participants in *Body & Soul* come to believe that they are “deviant” they assume deviant identities at both the individual and group level. However, despite the negative construction of extreme deviance by outsiders outlined above, the present analysis is consistent with Kitsuse’s (1980) position that the acquisition of a deviant identity is not necessarily interpreted as negative or particularly stigmatizing by the “deviant” person.

Many stigmatized individuals defiantly problematize “expert” evaluations of their conduct and “challenge conventional conceptions and judgments” (Kitsuse 1980:3). In 1980 constructionist theorist John Kitsuse (1980) suggested that deviants were “coming out” by actively embracing deviance as self-affirmation and demanding a change in their negative construction by members of mainstream society. Thus, like deviance, the identity management of deviants can too be interpreted as residing on a continuum; at one end, the stigmatized individual described by Goffman (1963), painfully attempts to manage a sullied identity by engaging in “passing” or otherwise disguising discreditable stigma; at the other end of this scale are stigmatized individuals of the sort that Kitsuse (1980) describes. These individuals have progressed into “tertiary deviance”; that is, in response to the negative construction of their behaviour or traits, they confront and reject the “negative identity imbedded in secondary deviation” by promoting the “transformation of that identity into a positive and viable self-conception” (Kitsuse 1980:9).

While the flesh practices described above are an example of extreme deviance in the contemporary Western context, the majority of members of the *Body & Soul* ritual body modification event are conceptualized here as having moved through a process of primary, secondary, and finally tertiary deviation to arrive at a conception of self that is positive and empowered; indeed, that sense of empowerment is directly attributed to the very thing that attracts stigmatization: extreme body modification. As discussed in subsequent chapters, via (counter)claimsmaking activity members (re)construct their deviance as normative and self-affirming and successfully accomplish a positive definition of extreme body modification *amongst members of their group*. Nonetheless, while the majority of conforming individuals in Western culture are likely unaware that the specific practices performed at *Body & Soul* exist (such as flesh hook pulling and the sewing of limes to flesh), the history of stigmatization of other forms of body deviance such as tattooing, piercing and cutting, suggests that these extreme practices are likely to elicit a reaction of horror and rejection described above by Goode (2008).

Context and Meaning: Competing Constructions of Body Deviance

In the psychological, medical and sociological discourses, explanations of body deviance have traditionally been couched in terms of mental illness and pathology; specifically, in scholarly literature physical deviation has been constructed as symptomatic of disturbed criminal and/or risk taking behaviour and at other times simply dismissed as a “fad”. These claims have and continue to be reflected in popular culture. In the contemporary context academic constructions have shifted toward conceptualizations of body deviance as pro-social (Atkinson 2004a) or individual and artistic expression as

opposed to criminal inclination; similarly, some scholars have suggested that the appearance of tattoos on the bodies of celebrities (Gerard 2001); the middle class (DeMello 2000); and even Christian youth as a means of spiritual expression (Firmin et al. 2008) is indicative of its “de-deviantization” and thus its legitimacy in mainstream culture (Sanders & Vail 2008). Nonetheless, like all social reality, the phenomenon of body modification must be considered as inextricably connected to its social, political, historical and immediate contexts.

Shifting Constructs in Scholarly Literature

In early sociological and criminological literature physical deviance was constructed as indicative of a criminally degenerative or atavistic quality. Cesare Lombroso, the father of modern criminology, is perhaps most famous for drawing an association between criminality and identifiably “deviant” physical traits in his formulation of the “born criminal”. In his book *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, Lombroso contended that from physical abnormalities one could rightly infer weak moral character:

[C]haracteristics presented by savage races are very often found among born criminals. Such, for example, are:...low cranial capacity; retreating forehead; highly developed frontal sinuses;...the thickness of bones of the skull;...greater pigmentation of the skin; tufted and crispy hair; and large ears. To these we may add...anomalies of the ear;...relative insensibility to pain...ability to recover quickly from wounds...laziness; absence of remorse; impulsiveness; and...cowardice....Unexpected analogies are met even in small details, as, for example...the custom of tattooing...(1911:365)

As this excerpt demonstrates, Lombroso understood both natural and achieved physical deviance to be indicative of criminality; indeed, in an earlier statement, he argued that

“thieves” could be marked out by their “propensity for tattooing” (Lombroso 1899 in Dekeseredy 2000:124).

These sentiments are reflected in the promptly discredited “science” of physiognomy whose proponents contended that when “two people are suspected of having committed the same crime, the uglier one should be regarded more likely the guilty party” (Curran & Renzetti 1994:39). From this, the study of phrenology, championed by Franz Joseph Gall, emerged to propose that a person’s character and intelligence could be evaluated by examining the shape and bumps of their skull. Likewise, in the early 1940s body type theories, most commonly associated with the work of William Sheldon, contributed to the association between physical deviance and flawed moral character by suggesting crime is a product of biological inferiority. As theories of this sort draw a connection between physical deviation and moral failing, during this time period people with physical deviations were highly stigmatized as the crime prevention implications of these theories suggested criminality was effectively remedied via isolation, sterilization or extermination.

The idea that physical deviance is indicative of personal deficiency continues to be reflected in claims about body modification in medical and psychological discourses that work to deviantize and pathologize this behaviour. Because body modification is persistently framed both in terms of “self-mutilation” and “self-harm” the social legitimacy of body modification practice in these contexts is consistently undermined. Commonly interpreted as indicative of risk taking, delinquency, mental illness and perversion, body practices such as tattooing and piercing have also been conceptualized in psychological, psychiatric, and medical discourses as a pathologized form of “self-

help”⁵ and while the medical community is divided on the issue of lobbying for the legal prohibition of non-therapeutic body modifications (Schramme 2008; Benjamin 2008), the negative association between body modification and medical risk persists.

With respect to tattooing and piercing, recent medical accounts claim that because these practices involve breaking skin, body modifications of this sort are associated with tissue trauma and bacterial infections (Armstrong et al. 2007); the viral transmission of hepatitis B and C (Health Canada 2003; Franz 2001; Haley & Fischer 2001); and transmission of other blood borne diseases such as HIV (Tweetan, 1998). Piercings have also been claimed to put one at risk of syphilis, and tuberculosis and to cause “dangerous” pseudomonas and candidal infections constituting a medical “emergency” (Donohue 2000). Accordingly, because body modifiers are claimed to rarely consider the medical risks associated with their practices (King & Vidourek 2007), some members of the medical community encourage the maintenance of a “non-judgemental” attitude for the purposes of facilitating the communication of health education regarding health related risks (Millner & Eichold 2001). Claims about tattooing and other modification practices as dangerous to one’s health and body are typically supported in the public imagination with stereotypical imagery of the “dirty” tattoo parlour as located within the “unsavory parts of town”; indeed, such claims have at times resulted in the temporary restriction or banning of tattoo practice (Gay & Wittington 2002:35) and more recently, tongue splitting (Sprague 2009).

⁵ Favazza (2002) suggests that self-mutilating behaviours can be divided into two categories; those that are culturally sanctioned and associated with healing, spirituality and/or social order, and those that are “deviant-pathological” meaning compulsive, episodic, and repetitive.

Within psychological and medical discourses cutting and other forms of modification have been framed in emotive terms such as “self-mutilation”; defined as “the direct, deliberate destruction or alteration of one’s own body tissue without conscious suicidal intent” (Favazza 2002:225). Likewise, tattoos and piercings have been associated with other “very high-risk” behaviour such as unprotected sex (Burger & Finkel 2002); impulsivity, exhibitionism (Manuel & Sheehan 2007); and drug use (Nathanson et al. 2006); as well as “negative” childhood experiences (Stirn & Hinz 2008); eating disorders (Preti et al. 2006); borderline, histrionic and antisocial personality disorders (Favazza 2002); physical and/or sexual abuse and other psychosocial risks (Aizenman & Jensen 2007). Behaviours of “self-injury” such as cutting have been linked to anorexia and/or bulimia (Favaro & Santonastaso 2000); as well, repetitive cutting has been associated with “delicate self-harm syndrome” constructed as a condition specific to adolescent Caucasian females (Pitts 2003). Similarly, if not interpreted as indicative of serious medical risk, the meaning of brandings and scarification, as well as other body modifications are trivialized within medical and psychological literatures as a “fad” or trend in “teenage rebellion” further undermining the cultural and social legitimacy of these practices (Donohue 2000).

Shifting Constructs in Popular Culture

To some extent, the claims of the medical and psychological communities are echoed in the body modification mythologies of popular culture. Although tattoo scholars Sanders and Vail (2008) suggest that tattooing is popularized by television programs such as *Inked* and *Miami Ink* and thus to some degree the practise has gained cultural

legitimacy, the construction of physical attributes as evaluative bases for moral character is a consistent theme in contemporary popular culture. Consequently, this reproduces negative stereotypical imagery of physical deviance and the stigmatization of people with body modifications. For instance, characters in children's media that violate norms of physical beauty are often depicted as morally bankrupt or otherwise blameworthy and feared individuals.⁶ Fouts and colleagues (2006) suggest that films of this sort teach children to demonize "bad" behaviour; in other words, the stigmatization of people with physical deviations is reproduced in popular film by consistently being paired with moral blameworthiness (Loseke 1993).

Likewise, in adult media body modifications such as tattoos and piercings are commonly depicted on the bodies of "deviant" characters and used to identify the "bad guy" (Beeler 2006). Films such as *Cape Fear* (1991), *No Escape* (1994), *Death Sentence* (2007) and *Eastern Promises* (2007) reinforce the stereotype of the "tattooed criminal" by juxtaposing this image against praiseworthy, conforming, and non-tattooed characters. In film, tattoos operate as a symbolic form of claimsmaking that construct characters as "good" or "bad"; in turn, physical deviance is put forth as an interpretive resource for audiences to evaluate the morality of characters. In a similar way, tattoos are used to indicate the moral failing of female characters who deviate from cultural standards of femininity and fail to uphold the contemporary cultural "beauty myth" (Wolf 1990).⁷

⁶ For instance, Ursula, the antagonist in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), is a female "sea hag" depicted as dark, ugly and obese as compared to the other characters. The "evil" stepmother and stepsisters in *Cinderella* (1950) are constructed as "ugly" and have unusually large feet. In *The Lion King* (1994) the aptly named "Scar" is depicted as a manipulative and evil lion who is outcast from the pride. In this film deviant physical appearance is used to construct the antagonist in opposition to the morally praiseworthy protagonists; in comparison Scar is less attractive, less physically able, and most obviously carries a physical stigma in the form of a facial scar.

⁷ See for example the female prostitute characters in *The Dead Girl* (2006) and *Hustle & Flow* (2005).

However, to some extent more recent examples reflect the mainstreaming and increasing social acceptance of certain forms of tattooing.

Drawing on themes of the “tattooed convict”, in the recent film *Brothers* (2009) the audience is encouraged to evaluate the moral fibre of character Tommy Cahill by drawing a connection between his large visible neck tattoos and his status as an unmotivated ex-criminal. The image of his visibly and heavily tattooed body is contrasted with images of the minimally and discretely tattooed brother (a brave military officer) and wife (a dutiful mother and homemaker) characters.⁸ *Brothers* (2009) is an example of the use of body modification imagery to categorize and differentiate between characters residing within the universe of moral blameworthiness or praiseworthiness (Loseke 2003). Interestingly, to some extent it also reflects the commodification of the tattoo and the cultural impact of the “tattoo renaissance”, that is, the recent shift in meaning of tattooing in the Western context and changing trends in tattoo practice, design and clientele (Sanders & Vail 2008; DeMello 2000; Pitts 2003).

Still, the cinematic depictions of other forms of body modification remain well within the realm of the “freak show”. For instance, in the horror/science fiction thriller *The Cell* (2000) a psychotherapist journeys inside the “twisted mind” of a serial killer wherein she is briefly confronted with menacing depictions of a flesh hook suspension. While this practise is an under-researched and extreme form of body modification, a very small body of contemporary work suggests participation in flesh hook suspension is motivated by conventional or normative goals such as individual fulfillment (Forsyth & Simpson 2008) or leisure (Williams 2009). Nonetheless, films such as *The Cell* (2000)

⁸ These two characters are married and have small tattoos of each other’s names. The husband’s tattoo of his wife’s name is on his chest; the wife’s tattoo of her husband’s name is on her shoulder.

and *Gamer* (2009) that respectively depict flesh hook suspension as the product of an unstable criminal mind or twisted fantasy symbolically facilitate the construction of this form of modification as deviant, wrong, and outside the borders of mainstream acceptability. These examples suggest that popular fears of mental illness and criminality continue to be reproduced in popular culture and are intertwined with images of physical deviation and moral bankruptcy.

Films of this sort can be interpreted as perpetuating and reproducing the stereotypical and exploitative elements of the “freak show” established in early Western public amusements and exhibits. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American entrepreneurs began displaying tattooed natives at world’s fairs where “fairgoers could observe Alaskan, Hawaiian, or Samoan families in an “authentic” cultural environment” (DeMello 2000: 48). Claiming to educate through entertainment (Nasaw 2003), these shows “relied on the continuing association of tattooing and savagery in order to sell tickets”; in effect, the image of the “freak” was used to claim both the “cultural and biological superiority of white America” send an “implicit message of social hygiene” (DeMello 2000:53,54). Human oddities ascended in popularity during this time period and appeared increasingly at circuses and carnivals; subsequently, the success of fairs of this variety fostered the image of the “freak” by exploiting individuals with physical disabilities and abnormalities. In turn, social and cultural norms and beauty myths were reinforced in the consciousness of the mainstream majority through the stigmatization of “freaks”.

Likewise, during this time period many Americans etched out a living as carnival sideshows or “freaks” such as James F. O’Connell, the first tattooed American to be put

on display at P.T. Barnum's American Museum (Gay & Wittington 2002); and Captain Don Leslie, tattoo enthusiast, sword-swallower and fire eater (Vale & Juno 1989). Drawing on this legacy, other "freakshows" such as the Coney Island *Side Shows by the Seashore* and Ripley's *Believe it or Not* have respectively featured Tattoo Mike "The Illustrated Pain-proof Man" and Fakir Musafar, the "father" of the Modern Primitive movement (Vale & Juno 1989). In the contemporary context, performance groups such as Constructs of Ritual Evolution (CORE) continue the freakshow tradition by selling tickets to entertainment shows wherein live flesh hook suspensions are performed.⁹ Likewise, touting the values of "transcendental Satanism", industrial/metal/rock band Society 1, features flesh hook suspension in their theatrical performances and music videos.¹⁰

Much like the early carnivals and midways, groups like CORE and Society 1 capitalize on shocking images of extreme body deviance. While some members of the non-mainstream body modification community embrace the carnival sideshow as a positive experience and to some extent can be interpreted as (re)claiming the "freak" discourse (Sprague 2009), the persistence of the term in the contemporary cultural context also contributes to the stigmatization of individuals with both uninvited and achieved physical deviations via the perpetuation of stereotypical imagery. Likewise, claimsmaking activity in medical, psychological, and popular discourse that construct physical deviants as diseased, unstable, and dangerous "freaks" work to invalidate body modification practice and contribute to the othering of modified individuals. While some body modification practitioners embrace the "freak" image, as will be demonstrated in this analysis the construction of radical body modification as a freakshow is resisted by

⁹ See CORE's website at <http://www.wearecore.com/>.

¹⁰ See Society 1's *MySpace* page at <http://www.myspace.com/society1music>.

other members of the body modification “movement” who attempt to normalize their behaviour by aligning their practices with conventional goals.

Modern Primitives & The Contemporary Body Modification Movement

The body modification “movement” refers to the increasing diversity and popularity of non-mainstream body modification practices amongst various subcultural groups. Encompassing not only the escalating visibility and mainstreaming of tattooing practices resulting from the “Tattoo Renaissance” (Sanders & Vail 2008; DeMello 2000), the movement has emerged from a growing interest in other non-mainstream body modification practices as evidenced by the rising numbers of body modification studios and artists; as well as the increasing number of websites,¹¹ conventions,¹² magazines,¹³ books¹⁴ and films¹⁵ that speak to the topic. The movement draws on elements of the punk, queer activist, pro-sex feminist, SM/leather fetish, New Age spiritualism, and Western tattoo movements (Pitts 2003); consequently, as the contemporary practice of body modification emerged from a number of subcultures, its meanings are multiple, diverse, variously constructed, and contingent on context.

For example, while the meaning of tattoos in the contemporary context has been reformulated in terms of artistic and individual expression (Sanders & Vail 2008), tattoos were initially introduced into Western culture as “marks of savagery” following the

¹¹See for instance the body modification ezine at www.bme.com and Fakir Musafar’s webpage at www.bodyplay.com.

¹² See for example, ModCon (www.modcon.org), a semi-annual “heavy body modification” event featuring speakers and demonstrations.

¹³See for example Fakir Musafar’s magazines *Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* and *Piercing Fans International Quarterly*.

¹⁴See for example Vale, V. & A. Juno (1989) *Modern Primitives*. Re/Search Publications. San Francisco.

¹⁵See for example *Modify* (2005) and *Dances Sacred and Profane* (1987).

colonization of people of the South Pacific (DeMello 2000:49). In the American context, at the same time as the aforementioned display of “exotic” tattooed native peoples at American public amusements, within working class culture the tattoo began to be reconstructed as a mark of patriotism in large part due to the number of sailors who had received them during their explorations (DeMello 2000:49). Likewise improvements in tattooing machines made the practise cheaper and faster consequently contributing to the “spread of tattooing through the lower classes and...subsequent abandonment by the rich” (DeMello 2000:50). The association between tattoos and patriotism was strengthened in working class culture, and amongst military and army personnel during the two world wars, otherwise known as the “Golden Age” of tattooing; subsequently, the link between tattoos, soldiers and sailors solidified (DeMello 2000).

The postwar period brought both a decline in popularity of tattooing and military influence on design, as well as the emergence of a “biker” style of tattooing; thus, as tattooing was reinterpreted as a mark of defiance, negative views of the practice in middle-class mainstream culture congealed. Subcultural groups such as bikers, convicts, and Chicano gang members began to wear tattoos, designs splintered, and the image of the tattoo once again became a “mark of marginality” (DeMello 2000:67). This led to a third major shift wherein the tattoo became a sign of resistance worn by members of groups opposing “heterosexual, white, middle-class values” (DeMello 2000). Within the era of the Civil Rights, Black Power and women’s liberation movements tattoos became images of resistance and took the form of peace signs and other symbols associated with the 1960s; importantly, as these designs were more feminine, the popularity of the tattoo

increased amongst women and members of the middle class.¹⁶ Previously constructed as “a badge of dislocated, ostracized and disenfranchised communities” (Atkinson, 2004a:126); the tattoo as a mark of stigma was (re)claimed by marginalized people and reinterpreted as “a mark of disaffection for groups who sought to stage symbolic rebellion...create a subcultural style...[and] to create personal and political body art” (Pitts 2003:5).

As the tattoo became a tool in identity and cultural politics, other modification practices were adopted by marginalized subcultural groups to indicate group affiliation or estrangement from mainstream convention. For instance, the punk movement adopted a style of body modification including facial piercings, “Mohawk” hairstyles, military clothing and spiked belts that some have suggested reflects anger, confrontation and resistance to authority (Wojcik 1995). The gay liberation movement of the 1980s incorporated leather, tattooing and piercing practices to celebrate alternative sexuality, leatherlife and S/M practices (Pitts 2003; Mains 1984; Thompson 2004). Pro-sex feminists have used body modification such as branding and cutting to “reclaim” their bodies from what they perceive to be the patriarchal, violent, and oppressive forces of mainstream culture (Pitts 2003). Thus, from these subcultural practices and rebellion, body modification itself became a movement of “marked persons” (Pitts 2003:7) who had “rejected the Western cultural biases about ownership and use of the body” (Musafar 2002:326).

¹⁶ DeMello (2000) notes that also during this time, the introduction of Japanese style tattooing solidified interest in the practice among members of the middle class and facilitated a shift from earlier associations with bikers, criminals, and sailors.

Fakir Musafar is perhaps the most recognizable figure within the contemporary body modification movement, particularly within a subset of the movement coined by Musafar as “Modern Primitivism”.¹⁷ The Modern Primitive movement was “born” in the mid-1980s when Musafar and other modification artists contributed to the publication of a series of interviews in the much celebrated book *Modern Primitives* (1989). Musafar claims that with this book:

...thousands of people, mostly young, were prompted to question established notions of what they could do with their bodies – what was ritual, *not* sickness, what was physical enhancement, *not* mutilation. The role models and archetypes...encouraged a whole new generation of people to use their bodies for self-expression– to search and experiment with the previously forbidden “body side” of life (2002:327).

Comprised of “non-tribal” people who respond “to primal urges and [do] something with the body” (Musafar in Vale & Juno 1989:13), Modern Primitives interpret their modification practices as aligned with worldviews that are more spiritual and authentic (Pitts 2003) and accordingly implicitly claim that radical body modification is an expression of sacred ritual rather than deviant belief.

Some of the body modifications that Modern Primitives practice originated in Hindu, Sufi, and Native American ritual (Forsyth & Simpson 2008); for instance, flesh hook suspension is reminiscent of the ceremonial practices of the Mandan tribe as well as the rite of the Sun Dance performed by Sioux Indian people (Forsyth & Simpson 2008).¹⁸

¹⁷ Currently Musafar operates a school in San Francisco to teach body modification practice and the Modern Primitive lifestyle. He has “mastered body modification by contortion, constriction, depravation, encumberment, fire, penetration, and suspension” which include practices such as “penis stretching, corsets, encasement of the body in plaster, wearing heavy iron manacles, branding, flagellation, body piercing, and suspension by body hooks” (Favazza 2002:283, 284). Other ‘non-mainstream’ body modifications practiced by Modern Primitives include scarification, cutting, subdermal implantation, tongue splitting, ear stretching, ritual suspension, and a number of other “flesh journeys” (Atkinson & Young 2001).

¹⁸ On this note, some scholars argue that the term “Modern Primitive” reproduces the discourse of “primitivism” by aligning “itself with a tradition which played a significant role in the justification of colonial rule and subordination” (Klesse 1999:18). While this is a significant point of contention, full discussion of this issue is outside the scope of the present study.

Other modifications have been derived from African practices (scarification), Indian culture (Kavandi),¹⁹ Polynesian tradition (tattooing) and numerous other cultures (Pitts 2003; Vale & Juno 1989). However, while Musafar suggests that the spiritual and ritual component of contemporary Modern Primitive body modification is strong; motivations are highly diverse and can include: rites of passage, fun, sexual enhancement, pain aesthetics, group affiliation, or shock value (Favazza 2002; Vale & Juno 1989). Indeed, the practices of contemporary radical modification practitioners are reminiscent of a diversity of cultures and traditions that have been “appropriated and celebrated, alongside other practices inspired by the techno/leather/latex aesthetic of S/M and fetish subculture” (Pitts 2003:4).

Most recently, body modifications have been increasingly reinterpreted by practitioners as a means articulating or accessing self-actualization (DeMello 2000); self-expression (Pitts 2003; Forsyth & Simpson 2008; Sanders & Vail 2008); identity, personal status passage, spirituality, and healing²⁰ (Sweetman 1999; Atkinson & Young 2001; Pitts 2003); lifestyle choice (Atkinson 2003b); and self-help (Pitts 2003; DeMello 2000); and are decreasingly associated with rebellion and criminality. For instance, as certain forms of tattooing have moved into mainstream culture and been claimed by members of the middle class; tattoo “narratives” are increasingly self-reflexive and typically emphasize the individuality of the wearer, the sacredness of the body, or reflection of personal growth (DeMello 2000). Likewise, some sociologists have called

¹⁹ Hindu-based ritual involving dancers who “wear” frameworks to hold long metal spears that pierce the skin. The frame holds two dozen or more of spears.

²⁰ For instance, in *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, Margot Mifflin suggests that tattooing is used by some women to cover mastectomy scars in order to bring “balance” as well as make an aesthetic and political statement.

for the de-medicalization of so-called “self-injurious” behaviours such as cutting, burning, branding, and bone-breaking (Adler & Adler 2007). Several scholars have documented the accounts of extreme modification practitioners who claim that their practices are part of an individual and collective journey; a passage that marks the intersection of personal biography and culture, a process of interpersonal bonding, or cultural ritual and boundary transcendence (Vail 1999; Kosut 2005; Forsyth & Simpson, 2008). Other radical body modification practitioners claim that these physical “ordeals” can produce “psychological and spiritual awakenings through an alteration of consciousness” and can offer emotional and psychological healing for individuals who have suffered trauma (Favazza 2002:284; Pitts 2003).

Likewise, the highly individualized “body projects” (Shilling 1993), “flesh journeys” (Atkinson & Young 2001), or “fleshworks” (Mercury 2000) of radical body modifiers contribute to the most recent construction of achieved physical deviance as individual expression and personal choice. These include the elaborate body manipulations of artists such as Eric Sprague the “Lizard Man”;²¹ French artist Orlan, who uses medical technologies in the context of body modification performance art;²² and Dennis Avner, otherwise known as Stalking Cat, who is using body modification expertise to transform his physical appearance to that of a tiger.²³ Claims that body modification is an expression of one’s individuality is rooted in rhetoric of the “customized body” (Sanders & Vail 2008; Randall & Polhemus 1996) and the invented

²¹ See Eric Sprague’s (2009) book *Once More Through the Modified Looking Glass*. Independently published from a collection of columns from 2003-2009 originally written for the Body Modification Ezine at www.bmezine.com.

²² See Orlan’s website at <http://www.orlan.net/>.

²³ See Dennis Avner’s webpage at <http://www.stalkingcat.net/>.

self (Pitts 2003); like constructions of body modification in terms of pathology, illness, criminality, defiance, rebellion and resistance, the contemporary interpretation of body modification as an individuating practice must be understood within the current cultural context that encourages personalization, individualism, narcissism (Twenge & Campbell 2009) and consumer capitalism/commodification of the body (Prosono 2008).

Stigmatized, popularized, pathologized, and medicalized; the body, its uses and its meanings are indeed a contested terrain (Pitts 2003). As constructs of physical deviance shift across time and space, body modification practice is alternatively constructed as deviant or normative depending on the social and cultural context. To account for this, the subsequent chapter puts forth the contextual social constructionist position as a useful approach to explaining how the meaning of body modification is altered, created, sustained or discarded. Because this perspective understands that what we take for granted as “reality” is a product and process of the successful social constitution of definition, it is a fruitful resource for illuminating the implications of interpretations of extreme body modification in terms of how the stigmatization of modified individuals is manifest, how members of this groups negotiate a negatively constructed identity, and how the (counter)claims of modified individuals attempt to rationalize and/or normalize the practice.

Chapter Three

Theoretical Groundings, Epistemological Considerations & Ontological Queries

Constructs of a Deviant Character: Identity as Socially Constituted

This chapter illuminates the theoretical and epistemological predisposition guiding the present analysis of meaning-making among participants in the non-mainstream body modification ritual, *Body & Soul*. Primarily, the aim of this chapter is to elucidate a theoretical relationship between social constructionism and processes of stigmatization and identity management as substantively applied to ritual body modification. As noted above, the stigma associated with the “discredited” and “discreditable” identities of radical body modification practitioners flows from out-group constructions and social problems work in academic, media and folk accounts of modified bodies (Goffman 1963). Consequently, resistance to stigmatic labels and challenges to conventional norms manifests in practitioner’s (counter)claimsmaking activity as part of a discursive competition to successfully establish positive definitions of non-mainstream body modification and ritual.

Flowing from the identification of these competing constructions are questions as to the nature of ritualistic body modification practice, the motivations and interests behind (counter)claimsmaking activity and the resilience of claims when subjected to empirical evaluation. Queries of this nature are not embraced unanimously by theorists of social construction; thus, the heterogeneity of epistemological concerns within the constructionist camp necessitates theoretical justification for proceeding with a contextual

social constructionist analysis of meaning-making amongst *Body & Soul* participants. Noting this, this chapter articulates theoretical assumptions and offers justification for the present analysis as one drawing on themes of strict and contextual social constructionism. Secondly, this chapter outlines the major proponents, research goals and analytic tools of constructionism employed in the analysis.

Social Constructionism: Epistemological & Ontological Considerations

Social constructionism is concerned with how people construct or make sense of their experience and environment. This perspective is informed in part by academic traditions in symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and Durkheimian sociology and has produced what Gubrium and Holstein (2008) refer to as a “mosaic” of academic works. Specifically, scholars working under the umbrella of social constructionism address topics as diverse as the social construction of the mind (Coulter 1979); the self (Marvasti 2008); wife abuse (Loseke 1992); child abuse (Johnson 1995); motherhood (Tardy 2000); pregnancy (Brooks-Gardner 2003); sex trafficking (Weitzer 2007); spanking (Davis 2004); satanic ritual (Best 1993); the crack cocaine “epidemic” (Reinarman & Levine 1995); and deviance, crime, and stigmatization (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Sacco 2003; Best 1995). Indeed, social constructionists are concerned with a number of substantive areas of research; however, for the purposes of contextualizing the present analysis the following examines social constructionist theory as applied substantively to deviance and social problems.

Theoretically, social constructionists are concerned with the conceptual processes that formulate, alter and sustain meaning (Spector & Kitsuse 1977). Specifically,

constructionist scholars emphasize primarily not *why* people behave in ways that are deviant but *how* deviance and social problems are *constructed* (Loseke 2003). The self-evidence implicit in the former is displaced in constructionist theorizing; rather, a processual conceptualization of deviance as *accomplished* by claimsmaking activity is central to the constructionist elucidation of the fluidity characterizing moral evaluation. In short, the social constructionist's approach calls attention to the social processes of claimsmaking and meaning-making as they pertain to the construction of phenomena typically shrouded in a taken for granted banality.

This approach represents a drastic departure from more conventional modes of theorizing that rest on objectivist postulations. Frameworks informed by an objectivist theoretical approach operate under the assumption that actual conditions exist in the social world and that these conditions are the definite source of tangible harm (Loseke 2003). Because objectivist perspectives assume social problems result from social conditions, analysts working within this frame are predisposed to questions relating to institutional and individual failure to see problems as well as the measures that can be implemented to rectify what is interpreted as a condition violating a theoretical premise regarding how the world "should" be (Loseke 2003). Consequently, these assumptions prompt little concern over individual and group delineations of "social problems" in terms of how meaning is actively constructed or made by social actors.

The social constructionist perspective offers a challenge to these conventional methods of theorizing by conceptualizing social problems as definitional accomplishments (Miller & Holstein 1993). A celebrated account of social constructionism (Best 1995; Holstein & Miller 1993; Holstein 2009), *Constructing Social*

Problems (CSP) by Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse (1977) offers the quintessential statement on this approach. Noting the lack of coherent constitutional definition of the “sociology of social problems”, Spector and Kitsuse crafted *CSP* with an aim to “prepare the ground for the empirical study of social problems” (1977:1). While functionalist approaches to social problems dominated prior to the 1930s, Spector and Kitsuse (1977) argue that functionalism, and later social disorganization, directed analyses toward the origin of conditions by drawing attention to societal “norms”; consequently, definitional aspects of social problems were neglected. Likewise, Spector and Kitsuse criticized the value-conflict school for drifting away from definitional components of social problems by typifying “*conditions*, not definitions of conditions” (1977:48; Emphasis in Original).

In *CSP*, Spector and Kitsuse attempt to redirect sociologists’ attention by offering a definition of social problems “amenable to empirical elaboration in which the process of definition and not the “objective conditions” is the central concern” (1977:7). Specifically, the authors approach the “social construction of social problems” as a process of claimsmaking, or “*the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions*” (1977:75; Emphasis in Original). In other words, from the social constructionist perspective social problems are constituted via the active process of making claims about *putative* rather than *actual* conditions. Hence, the constructionist defies traditional approaches by focusing on the “process through which definitions of social problems are constructed, sustained, changed, or abandoned” (Spector & Kitsuse 1977:7).

Effectively, Spector & Kitsuse’s argument called into question the validity of objectivist and structural functional approaches to social problems that held falsifiable

conditions “out there” exist independently of the sociologist’s interpretation (Miller & Holstein 1993). Thus, the functionalist declaration that “*a social problem exists when there is a sizable discrepancy between what is and what people think ought to be*” (Merton 1976:7; Emphasis in original) was problematized by Spector & Kitsuse’s (1977) formulation. The radical suggestion that social problems emerge from rhetorical constructions rather than existing conditions complicated the tidy separation between subject and object; consequently, epistemological queries as to the possibility of separating the *is* from the *ought* generated much controversy among social problems theorists.

The seminal critique of discursive construction of social problems was delivered in 1985 by Woolgar and Pawluch who charged social constructionists with “ontological gerrymandering”. According to Woolgar and Pawluch (1985), the social constructionist formulation of social problems adhered to a problematic pattern wherein analyses rest upon the same assumptions as successful social problems construction. Specifically, they suggest:

In naming, identifying or describing conditions, these authors [constructionists] inevitably give definition to the putative behaviors and conditions they discuss. While the claims of the claims makers are depicted as socio-historical constructions (definitions) that require explanation, the claims and the constructive work of the authors remain hidden and are to be taken as given (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985:216).

Furthermore, Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) argued that social constructionists rely on the empirical evaluation of claimsmaking activity in terms of assessing the merit of claims. This is problematic because while constructionist studies might not overtly express assertions of objective reality they rely implicitly on the objectivity of conditions (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985; Best 1993).

Woolgar and Pawluch conceptualize ontological gerrymandering as a strategy for creating distinctions between problematic and infallible assumptions; in turn, the “boundary work” resulting from ontological gerrymandering “creates and sustains the differential susceptibility of phenomena to ontological uncertainty” (1985:216). Furthermore, because constructionist studies aim to position claimsmaking activity within socio-historical contexts, the disjuncture between claimsmaking and conditions that results from the work of ontological gerrymandering is crucial. Indeed, Woolgar & Pawluch (1985) suggest that at least some reference to an objective condition independent of our understanding of it is an intrinsic component of constructionist analyses. Consequently, ontological gerrymandering as an analytical strategy is evident in the patterned nature of constructionist accounts of social problems wherein: a) a behaviour or condition is identified; b) various competing claims are identified; and c) the implication that claim variability as relative to condition invariability results from the social circumstances of claimsmakers rather than “actual change” in the condition (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985:215).²⁴

²⁴ For example, this pattern is exemplified in Reinerman and Levine’s (1995) analysis *The Crack Attack: America’s Latest Drug Scare, 1986-1992*. The authors claim that “[d]rug scares are phenomena in their own right, quite apart from drug use and drug problems... [drug scares] have recurred throughout U.S. history independent of actual increases in drug use and drug problems” (Reinerman & Levine 1995:147; Emphasis mine). Identifying the innovation and prevalence of smokeable “crack” cocaine as a social problems condition, Reinerman and Levine move to a discussion of claimsmaking activity firmly establishing that “a gap existed between official statistical evidence and the prevalence claims of the media and politicians” (1995:150). The gap created by this boundary work permits the authors to situate politicians and media claimsmaking activity within socio-historical contexts by considering capitalist and political motivations behind the framing of crack cocaine as an “epidemic”. Reinerman and Levine’s (1995) study relies on ontological gerrymandering by retaining invariable objectivity in the conditions (the “actual” prevalence of crack cocaine as evidenced by official statistics) in order to evaluate the merit of media and politicians claims. Woolgar and Pawluch might interpret this analysis as employing an “obvious objectivist commitment” by drawing on official statistics to attest to the actual “existence, constancy or extent” of crack cocaine and subsequently conclude that the analysis goes “beyond the relevance of claims-making activities” by scrutinizing the legitimacy of some claims (media and politician) and not others (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985:219). Similar to Woolgar and Pawluch’s critique of Stephen Pfohl’s (1977) constructionist examination of child abuse, Reinerman and Levine’s (1995) analysis conforms to a pattern wherein

Consequently, Woolgar and Pawluch's (1985) critique appeared to suggest that constructionist theorists were at an impasse: either embrace ontological gerrymandering as an analytical strategy and sacrifice theoretical consistency- or, avoid ontological gerrymandering by refusing to evaluate claimsmaking and retain theoretical integrity. This dilemma instigated controversy amongst constructionist theorists and subsequent efforts emerged to address the following questions: "Is it possible to establish a form of discourse which is free from the tension engendered by espousals of relativism within the conventions of an objectivist form of presentation?" and "What would an argument free from ontological gerrymandering look like?" (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985:224).

Getting on with it: The Emergence of Strict & Contextual Constructionism

The critique of ontological gerrymandering stems from a more fundamental question about the nature of reality. The subject-object dichotomy- that is, the divide between subjective imagination and the objective world- stirs up a dizzying confusion of epistemological and ontological concerns with respect to the sociological explanation of phenomena "out there". What became a pressing concern was whether social constructionists could negotiate the epistemological issue of an individual consciousness coming to possess knowledge of an objective world and could differentiate between knowledge based on experience of that world versus knowledge based on one's subjective imagination.²⁵ This is the fundamental criticism contained in charges of ontological gerrymandering; in terms of explanation, how is the constructionist to justify privileging

ontological gerrymandering is inevitably employed as a strategic and analytical tool to "get on with" the argument (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985:223).

²⁵ See Gergen, K. (1999) *An Invitation to Social Construction*. London: Sage Publications.

some claims to knowledge (constructionist analysis) over others (social problems construction) while retaining theoretical integrity? This tension ultimately resulted in a divide between what Joel Best (1989) terms “strict” and “contextual” constructionism.

With respect to strict constructionism, an analyst “completely brackets references to the world beyond our understanding of it”; in other words, strict constructionists avoid all implicit and explicit assumptions about objective reality (Loseke 2003:198). In favour of a strong, “programmatically” strict constructionist reading of Spector and Kitsuse’s *Constructing Social Problems* (Best 1993:120), Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) offer clarification of the constructionist approach and address the issue of ontological gerrymandering in an article titled *The Vernacular Constituents of Moral Discourse*. Ibarra and Kitsuse urge constructionists to avoid ontological gerrymandering by reconceptualizing putative conditions as “condition-categories” or “typifications of socially circumscribed activities” (1993:26). In this sense condition-categories “[a]s parts of a classification system...are first and foremost units of language” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:26). Indeed, recent versions of *CSP* include a new introduction by John Kitsuse who asserted that the “task of the sociologist of social problems” is not to “verify and/or assess the validity of what claimants assert to be a problem” (2001:x in Spector & Kitsuse 1977).

Still, while the strict constructionist approach retains constancy in theoretical backing by evading to some extent the practise of ontological gerrymandering, some scholars doubt the practical possibility of indefinitely avoiding contamination by implicit objectivity (Best 1989). Indeed, Best argues that Ibarra and Kitsuse unproductively seek to shift the constructionist’s attention “away from claimsmaking activities and onto the

language of claims” (1993:120). In resolving to never “leave language”, the strict constructionist is able to more closely approximate an analysis untainted by objective relativism; however, in doing so these theorists run the risk of painting themselves into the proverbial “armchair” (Best 1993:118). Put another way, strict constructionists operate as a mind-in-a-vat; an isolated mind residing in a metaphorical “vat”, gazing on at an outside world but refusing to exit its discursive encasement to engage with the objectivity of that world (Latour 1999). As observed by several theorists (Best 1993; Woolgar & Pawluch 1985), this poses two distinct problems: a) whether avoiding implicit objective assumptions is possible; and b) in striving for theoretical purity, do strict constructionists sacrifice utility, substance and explanation in their analyses.

With reference to the former, while the strict constructionist could plausibly succeed in refraining from “outright declarations about objective reality”, Best contends that “implicit assumptions about objective conditions will almost inevitably guide researchers” (1993:117). Indeed, even prior to the commencement of analysis, strict constructionists are conceivably guilty of relying on implicit assumptions about objective reality by virtue of identifying as “social constructionists”. Science studies theorist Bruno Latour (1999) rejects altogether the idea of a separation between subject/object and human/ non-human instead referring to the “collective”; an inclusive term he uses to replace “society” and “nature”. Within this collective Latour (1999) emphasizes the interconnection, complication, and web-like reciprocal constitution of a multiplicity of relations in the “space” between object and subject; consequently, “reality” is a process of co-articulation between subject/object, human/non-human. Albeit a complex illustration, the point is that even in identifying as a social constructionist, the strict constructionist

relies on an implicit assumption about the objective world as one that is “socially” constructed.

Strict constructionist analyses are *ad infinitum* subject to the critique of ontological gerrymandering; hence, in persistent futile attempts to resist assumptions about objective reality and in reiterating the irrelevance of “truth”, strict constructionists inevitably sacrifice the utility of their analyses. Perhaps even more damning than chasing an impossible immunity to objective relativism is Joel Best’s query as to how “an analyst who refuses to presume anything about a case [can] identify its interesting features” (1993:117). Indeed, while the strict constructionist’s “elusive, unattainable goal” (Best 1995:343) of avoiding all instance of ontological gerrymandering is theoretically defensible (Loseke 2003), it has sold its utility for “a mess of epistemology” (Best 1993:123). Consequently, the strict constructionist’s allegiance to internal theoretical consistency prevents the evaluation of logically verifiable claims inexorably leading to an inability to offer useful explanation of phenomena. In this sense, denying certain lines of inquiry out of a refusal to engage in ontological gerrymandering not only fails in avoiding the practise but potentially undermines the constructionist project (Best 1989).

In Defence of Utility: Contextual Constructionism

In light of the problematic nature of a strict constructionist approach, this study employs a contextual constructionist analysis in the interest of producing a more fruitful and practical discussion of meaning-making at *Body & Soul*. While the study draws on the tools of rhetorical analysis offered by strict constructionism, it accepts Best’s (1993) argument for the limitations of a strong reading of Ibarra and Kitsuse’s (1993)

clarification of *Constructing Social Problems*. Indeed, subscribing to the strict constructionists ostensible suggestion that constructionist analysts are prisoners of language is counterproductive to the constructionist's primary purpose of producing sociological research and analyses that might offer information and insights into the processes of deviance and social problems construction (Best 1995).

Unlike strict constructionists, contextual constructionists seek to "locate claimsmaking within its context" (Best 1995:345) and emphasize the utility of ontological gerrymandering in terms of "explaining why and how social problems claims emerge within sociohistorical contexts" (Miller & Holstein 1993:8). Contextual analyses exemplify "the continual play between objective facts and representations of those facts" and use ontological gerrymandering as a tool to manage this "all-pervasive tension" (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985:224). Less confined than the strict constructionist in exploring issues of practical relevance, the contextual constructionist considers the specific contexts wherein claimsmaking activity takes place, asks questions of obvious concern, and uses empirically based claims to evaluate the validity of claimsmaker's assertions (Loseke 2003; Best 1995). Emphasizing utility and productivity over theoretical "purity", contextual constructionists ask why certain problems capture the attention and concern of audiences, how successful social problems work encourages audience reception to the importance of certain claims, and how successful constructions alter both the objective world and how people evaluate that world and each other (Loseke 2003).

To exemplify the utility of contextual constructionism, Best (1993) considers the incidence of Satanic human sacrifice. Noting that while both AIDS and Satanic cults have been claimed to have killed thousands of people annually, Best points out that the strict

constructionist is confined to merely noting these claims without considering their relative truth, a move that would require assumptions about the objective world. Put another way, Donileen Loseke (2003) notes that the strict constructionist cannot violate theoretical purity to assess even the most absurd claims of Holocaust denial. Conversely, the contextual constructionist can ask questions about who might be inclined to believe the proliferation of carnage said to flow from satanic sacrifices and why, can consider motivations behind Holocaust denial, and can rely on tangible evidence to confirm that a large number of people have in fact died from AIDS. While each perspective rests on the assumption that knowledge is socially produced, the contextual constructionist offers more practical analyses by “leaving language” to assess the consistency of knowledge with the material world.

Still, while the strict constructionist may be prevented from contributing anything at all to an analysis by adhering to the prohibition on leaving language (Best 1993), the contextual constructionist approach raises questions as to where to draw the line with objective assumptions (Loseke 2003). Inquiring as to what point and to what extent objective assumptions are justifiably permissible is problematic as it “raises a host of questions that social constructionism was designed to overcome in the first place” (Loseke 2003:199). While this appears to be a weak point in light of the current analysis’ reliance on contextual constructionism, Best reminds us that “the issue should be whether particular assumptions somehow damage an analysis” (1995:346). Indeed, not only are assumptions an unavoidable part of analysis they are useful components of theorizing that

ought not to be “considered a flaw until a critic can demonstrate why that assumption should be called into question” (Best 1995:347).²⁶

Knowledge Production, Conceptual Resources, & Analytical Tools

Prior to proceeding with a discussion of the nature of claimsmaking, it is crucial to reinforce that conceptual processes of meaning-making and interpretation inevitably construct reality itself. In 1966, Berger and Luckmann argued that “*the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality*”; the construction of social problems and deviance then, is part of an intricate process of knowledge production and reality construction (1966:3; Emphasis in Original). Indeed, noting the epistemological and ontological tangles with which social constructionists have been preoccupied and the semantic snares incapacitating some strands of constructionist theorizing, it is evident that the construction of social problems and deviance is intimately connected to issues of knowledge and reality. Thus, while the present analysis is directed toward the social construction of non-mainstream body modification, it acknowledges and emphasizes that these are fundamentally constructions of reality that have

²⁶ External to the constructionist camp, critiques of social constructionism more generally have questioned the extent to which constructionism constitutes a significant and authentic departure from objectivist frameworks (Loseke, 2003). The critique of ontological gerrymandering pointed inescapably to the constructionist’s reliance on objective conditions (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985). While this critique prompted a divide among constructionists into the “strict” and “contextual” camps, further analysis suggests that strict constructionism is merely a restrained version of contextual constructionism as it too, albeit to a lesser extent, is reliant on implicit objective assumptions. This raises the question as to whether contextual constructionism (and social constructionism in general) is merely a different sort of objectivism to which it initially emerged in opposition (Best 1995). With respect to an apparent distinction, Hazelrigg suggests that “objectivism and constructionism...are confunded [*sic*] in a nexus of issues in such way that they are not, and in their own terms cannot be, sufficiently distinctive or free of each other to make a question of a choice between them workable” (1986:S8). Nevertheless, he proceeds to note that “[o]bjectivity,” then, “the objective,” is a production of consensus among actors, a production of agreement in a practice of life” (1986:S10). On this point, as no theoretical orientation escapes “the objective”, social constructionism can be distinguished from “objectivity” or objectivist positions in terms of an agreement about rational practise. Noting the complexity of the two approaches in terms of definition and focus, Best concludes that “it is not simple to reconcile objectivism and constructionism in a single, integrated theory” (1995:338).

implications for how we internalize the reality of the social world and externalize assumptions in our interactions with “deviant” others. Thus, social constructionism is not only a useful approach to the study of social problems and deviance; it is a theory of knowledge.²⁷

A seminal work in social constructionist literature, Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) prompted sociologists to reconsider the reality of everyday life by concerning themselves with “everything that passes for “knowledge” in society” (1966:15). The authors emphasize that reality is constituted via the interplay between individual and social world; specifically, they argue the “relationship between knowledge and its social base is a dialectical one, that is, knowledge is a social product and knowledge is a factor in social change” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:87). Moreover, language plays a pivotal role in the construction of reality; the “knowledge” that passes between individuals “is a matter of social definition”, a reference to a common understanding of what is “socially defined as reality” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:70). Noting this, Berger and Luckmann aimed to redefine the task of the sociology of knowledge by moving it to the “very center of sociological theory”; specifically, they argue that inquiry into the ways in which “reality is constructed” is sociology’s primary task (1966:10).

Reality then, is a social product; it is a socially constructed agreement regarding our knowledge of the objective world that is continuously constituted via a process of

²⁷ Berger and Luckmann note that the sociology of knowledge has been preoccupied to a large extent with Karl Marx’s postulations of human thought as “founded in human activity” and the “social relations brought about by this activity” as well as Nietzsche’s notion of “human thought as an instrument in the struggle for survival and power” (1966: 6,7). Likewise, Karl Mannheim’s concern with ideology as applied to the sociology of knowledge implies that “no human thought...is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:9).

institutionalization and internalization in everyday life (Berger & Luckmann 1966). In our daily mundane experience, this construction of knowledge slips easily into banality; consequently, of interest to social constructionists and sociologists of social problems and deviance is uncovering the constitutive processes that form both the “natural attitude” and taken for granted phenomena. To elucidate the “how” aspect, social constructionists analyze the “work” of social problems construction (Miller & Holstein 1993); specifically, the labour of claims, claimsmaking, typification, and rhetorical construction, and for contextual constructionists, the situation of these processes within socio-historical contexts specific to time and place.

Claims & Claimsmaking as Interpretive Organization

As a theory of knowledge, constructionism emphasizes the social production of taken-for-granted, common sense conceptions of reality and the processes by which social actors negotiate the amount of information in the world. Specifically, categorization is a “primary characteristic of the way we understand our world” and organize information into a coherent system referred to as common sense (Loseke 2003:14). As a definitional process, categorization involves the pairing of words to “*types* of things or *types* of people” via interpretation; this allows us to move forward in our daily interactions with a mental handle on the “particular categories and their particular contents” (Loseke 2003:15). Subsequently, because definitional categories do not necessarily flow from material objects, the types of people and objects produced are investigatable social constructs (Loseke 2003).

Frames are organizational devices that link categories together for ease of reference and “require us to see similarities among things, conditions, or people” that are far from homogenous (Loseke 2003:17). In other words, because phenomena can potentially be constructed in any number of ways, claimsmakers utilize framing as an organizational tool and conceptual and rhetorical resource to encourage audiences to interpret particular social problems as reflective of particular categories.²⁸ Flowing from category construction and framing is *typification*; a term described by Loseke as “an image in our heads of typical kinds of things” (2003:17). In framing social problems, claimsmakers often offer a typifying example to reinforce and justify a particular construction of an issue (Best 1995). As an integral component in social problems work, typification enables claimsmakers to stress certain aspects of an issue, endorse specific orientations and “focus on particular causes and advocate particular solutions” (Best 1995:9). Because of the complexity and magnitude of available information in the world, constructionists urge that categories, frames and typifications “should be understood as *social resources*” and unavoidable, crucial components of our processes of mental organization (Loseke 2003:18; Emphasis in Original).

Claimsmaking activity capitalizes on these social resources by reifying and reaffirming taken for granted, commonsense constructions. Specifically, while claims and claimsmaking can be explicit declarations of fact they are also imbedded in mundane human interactions that shape what ultimately becomes taken for granted knowledge. Secondly, because claims are socially constructed, Spector and Kitsuse note that

²⁸ The copious consumption of alcohol and its associated problems, for example, has been framed as a medical issue (Pageaux et al. 2009); a psychiatric issue (Marques-Fidalgo et al. 2008); a moral issue (www.madd.ca); and an “Irish” problem (Strivers 2000).

“[a]ctivities outside of the usual conventions may be used to make claims, or may be interpreted as claims” regardless of their intention; subsequently, these (un)intended claims “may succeed or fail to sustain a definition...[of] an instance of claimsmaking” (1977:80). Thus to understand what, if any, claims are explicitly being made contextual constructionists argue that it is necessary to situate claims and claimsmaking within the particular socio-historical context in which they occur.

Rhetorical Claimsmaking as Reality & Morality Construction

Claims are conceptualized within constructionist theorizing as communicative assertions of knowledge and/or rhetorical devices used by claimsmakers to persuade “audience members to think in particular ways” (Loseke 2003:27). Performative claims are made to convince audience members that a problematic condition exists which is “wrong, widespread, and changeable...[and] *something needs to be done*” (Loseke 2003:7; Emphasis in Original). Hence, *claimsmaking* has been conceptualized in constructionist theorizing as a “language game into which actions are translated as publicly (and variously) readable expressions” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:27).²⁹ As part of a reality construction game, claims can take explicit rhetorical, visual, and behavioural forms (Loseke 2003); nonetheless, more subtle forms of claimsmaking that operate at the everyday interactional level contribute significantly to audiences’ natural attitude toward the mundane realities of daily life (Miller & Holstein 1993). Whether rhetorical

²⁹ The term “language game” was coined by influential philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958) to refer to the dialectic between language and action; specifically, he argued that words derive meaning from their use in language. In constructionist analyses, the notion of language as a “game” is closely tied to the concept of rhetorical claimsmaking, with the derivative “rhetoric” connoting a persuasive and performative function. Wittgenstein’s protégé J.L. Austin suggested that language has a performative character in terms of its functioning within a relationship. See Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to Do Things With Words*. New York: Oxford University Press.

“publicity” (Gubrium 1993) or the local accomplishment of mundane reality, claims and claimsmaking are constitutive and interpretive tools in the social construction of reality and “social problems work” (Miller & Holstein 1993; Loseke 2003).

Strict constructionists have contributed a number of tools to analyze rhetorical claimsmaking as discursive meaning-making (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993). Scrutinizing competing rhetorical forms, strict constructionists seek to uncover how language is manipulated by members to construct social problems and other phenomena (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993). Ibarra and Kitsuse’s (1993) discussion of vernacular resources contributes significantly to the repertoire of analytical tools employed in this study.³⁰ Vernacular resources at the disposal of claimsmakers include discursive devices such as rhetorical idioms, counterrhetorics, and motifs, each of which contribute to specific claimsmaking styles and are “investigatable topics” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:31; Loseke 2003).

Rhetorical idioms speak to either the morally depraved or incorruptible aspects of an issue rather than to the scale or existence of a problem by exploiting or embodying “commonsense constructions of ‘moral competence’” and enhancing the “readability” of the structure and urgency of claims (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:32). For instance, the rhetoric of “heroism”, “chaos”, “beauty” and “crisis” each connote a degree of moral contamination or purity that oblige audiences to “acknowledge the import of the values expressed” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:32).³¹ Idiomatic rhetoric is a discursive resource employed to enhance claimsmakers’ articulation of a condition and to dictate the focus of

³⁰ In the interest of maintaining the preference for a weak reading of Ibarra and Kitsuse’s reformulation of *CSP*, this discussion strips the strict constructionist’s rhetorical tools of their ascribed intent as conceptual tools that direct analyses away from ontological gerrymandering.

³¹ A more concrete example is the environmentalist’s charge that we “save the planet”; this employs the rhetoric of loss in a manner that presumes a defensive heroic character rather than a reactionary one (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993).

a problem by establishing “hierarchies of value” that only the artful dissenter can “disagree without discrediting oneself” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:38). Subsequently, as social problems are foremost about disagreements (Loseke 2003); as expected, counterrhetorics emerge to stymie both characterizations of an issue and “the call to action” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:38). Of interest to the constructionist then, are the uses of rhetorical and counter-rhetorical strategies and the consequences for sustaining or losing credibility flowing from the adoption of certain claimsmaking styles.

Likewise, motifs are a conventional vernacular resource employed recurrently by claimsmakers in shaping social problems and raising concerns (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993). Of interest to constructionists with respect to motifs is the constitutive power connected with their application; specifically, the success of motifs depends on the “versatility of members’ vocabularies given the constraints imposed by their vernacular origins and standards of idiomatic articulation” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993:43). As strict constructionists, Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) suggest that this issue raises questions pertaining to motif innovation and application. However, in the present contextual constructionist analysis these questions are considered in combination with queries as to motivation for using certain claimsmaking styles, the merit of successful claims, and how these relate to stigma management and interpersonal identification among non-mainstream body modification practitioners at *Body & Soul*.

Ibarra & Kitsuse assert that assessments of claimsmaking “failures” and “successes” in terms of collective redefinition of a phenomena “inhibits theoretical development” in the sociological analysis of social problems (1993:44). In contrast, this analysis considers both the success and failure of certain claimsmaking styles in relation

to the motivation of the claimsmakers and the immediate and socio-historical contexts within which the claimsmaking takes place. Indeed, Gubrium notes that if constructionists confine themselves to analyses of public texts as Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) appear to do, “[w]e cannot know how a public social problem affects the everyday lives of those who suffer its objectionable conditions until their lives are broadcast” (1993:59). By drawing from the rhetorical tools put forth by strict constructionists *as well as* the behavioural, interpersonal and situational components of claimsmaking, the present analysis directs inquiry toward motivation, merit, and the material consequences of various competing constructions of non-mainstream body modification.

Furthermore, though the social construction of social problems has tended to focus on claimsmaking about conditions, Loseke notes that the process of category construction “often simultaneously construct[s] the types of *people* who inhabit these categories” (1993:207). This aspect of social construction is given particular emphasis in this analysis; specifically, this study probes the process whereby non-mainstream body modification practitioners reconstruct the nature of their deviance by discursively and symbolically creating an image of themselves as certain *types* of people residing within a particular moral universe (Loseke 1993, 2003). Secondly, this analysis considers how the knowledge that passes between these individuals reaffirms a common understanding of bodily reality and how these constructions alter members’ evaluation of themselves and others.

The construction of types of people is another move in the language game of social problems. Specifically, language is manipulated by claimsmakers to locate *types of people* within *types of categories*. These designations identify and interpret “types as

residing within particular moral universes”; subsequently, this process of typification directs the appropriate emotional response of audience members (Loseke 1993:209). To illustrate, Loseke explains:

If the drug dealer type of person is constructed as a victimizer who chooses and intends to do harm, then “drug dealers” is a logical condition-category. But if this type of person is rather constructed as a victim of poverty then “poverty” commonsensically becomes the associated condition-category (1993:209).

The discursive manoeuvring of claimsmakers constructs types of people as belonging or not belonging to certain categories; consequently, the location of types of people within types of categories typifies persons as either morally blameworthy or praiseworthy. Furthermore, individual instances of person-types operate as symbolic representatives for entire categories; hence, these moral constructs are examinable elements of claimsmaking activity (Loseke 1993).

Claimsmaking activity appealing to emotion and morality is founded on commonsense understandings of a dichotomy between victim/villain and blameworthy/praiseworthy. Capitalizing on the “feeling rules” of a culture, claimsmakers construct motivational, diagnostic, and prognostic frames for audience members to evaluate types of people as morally depraved or admirable as well as the appropriate corresponding response or course of action (Loseke 2003). An example of a claimsmaking activity that appeals to the emotional and moral inclinations of audiences is “horror stories” (Johnson 1995). Typically extreme examples, these stories are socially produced within certain frames in an attempt by claimsmakers to implement solutions and accomplish social change (Loseke 2003). Consequently, negative constructions and definitions of situations successfully accomplished via claimsmaking activity result in

material consequences in terms of stigmatization, marginalization and discrimination against the individual or group in question.

Underdog Claimsmaking as De-politicized Resistance

Strict constructionist analyses typically utilize publicly accessible texts as a plateau for social problems work; however, analysis of the “unheard” claims of marginalized groups can also offer valuable insight into the processes of reality construction. Gubrium (1993) problematizes the strict constructionist’s emphasis on this form of claimsmaking “publicity” by arguing that Ibarra and Kitsuse construct the claimsmaker as a “complete rhetorician”. Consequently, Gubrium suggests that because strict constructionists bind the existence of social problems construction to public texts “the agent is analytically nonexistent” (1993:59). The danger in this is that without textual public data the strict social constructionist must conclude that no social problem is under construction (Gubrium 1993). Noting this, Gubrium argues that non-public activity is a crucial component of problem construction as “agents constructive activity is embedded in a context of interpretation” and what becomes publicly constructed depends on claimsmakers resources (1993:65).

Likewise, because of the emphasis on public claimsmaking, Best explains that some scholars argue social constructionists are apt to subvert sociology’s egalitarian goals by overlooking the claimsmaking of invisible, marginalized people who “are too inarticulate, alienated, or powerless to voice claims” (1995:339).³² This study treats social

³² Critics who adopt this position “call for a return to objective definitions” (Best 1995:339). To suggest that constructionists inevitably overlook marginalized claimsmaking is to misinterpret the social constructionist position; as Best points out, “it is not clear why we should expect that sociologists operating

constructionism as a practical theory of knowledge applicable to endless forms of claimsmaking; social constructionism is certainly amenable to marginalized claimsmaking and analyses of “unheard” claims. Indeed, in addition to emphasizing the significance of non-public claimsmaking this analysis embraces the post-structural vision that “all talk makes a claim” (Miller 1993:156). However, it does not contend that claims are “just claims” (Best 2008);³³ rather, this study emphasizes that some claims are more consistent with a reality grounded by empirical evidence.

Of particular relevance to the present analysis of meaning making at *Body & Soul* is Leslie Miller’s (1993) discussion of “underdog claimsmaking”.³⁴ Noting that different styles of talking problems and ways of knowing are hierarchized in terms of “what counts”, Miller emphasizes the importance of drawing attention to the “depoliticised ways of raising problems” amongst members of marginalized groups (1993:155,156). Because all talk makes a claim, Miller suggests that we might usefully distinguish between “claims-making styles that are “readable at a glance” and those whose claims-making status is “unrecognized” or discredited” (1993:158). As Miller explains:

...underdogs are always able to depoliticise their talk by playing off the possibility that it is really something else (“only music”). The artfulness of underdog styles, then, cannot be fully appreciated until this strategy is recognized as a feature of their marginalized position (or history); and the artful manipulation of talk’s ambiguity—now you see a claim, now you don’t— is part of the appearance-work that marginalized speakers are skilled in (1993:171).

from objectivist assumptions to be any more likely than constructionists to identify these hidden concerns as subjects for research” (1995:340).

³³ This implies that claims are not or cannot be rooted in empirical reality.

³⁴ Again, the subsequent analysis draws from Miller’s (1993) discussion of underdog claimsmaking by treating the contribution as a tool for contextual analysis. In addition to considering how underdog claimsmaking strategies are used by members of *Body & Soul* the analysis will situate the particular styles within the wider socio-historical context.

Unrecognized claimsmaking strategies mask the readability of claims by utilizing covert methods such as kidding, rapping, or damning with faint praise to raise a concern about a problematic issue without the overt appearance of contestation; thus, underdog claimsmaking is systematically connected to issues of power and hierarchy (Miller 1993). Analysis of “publicity” or claimsmaking activity in publicly available text offer insight into more successful social problems work and definitional accomplishments; however, analysis of underdog claimsmaking strategies can provide insight into forms of counter-rhetoric employed by stigmatized individuals to resist negative labels or covertly draw attention to the problems of marginalized groups.

This chapter outlined the major theoretical assumptions that inform the analysis. I have argued that the contextual social constructionist perspective which embraces a degree of ontological gerrymandering is a more fertile and practical approach than the strict contextual constructionist path toward a futile and fruitless adherence to theoretical purity. Secondly, I have outlined some of the ways in which reality and meaning are definitionally accomplished via claimsmaking activity and I have argued for a constructionist elucidation of the *how* aspect of meaning-making by proposing claims, claimsmaking and claimsmakers as investigatable topics. In the next chapter I elucidate how the methodological strategies employed are informed theoretically by social constructionism, and describe methodological and ethical challenges to the research.

Chapter Four

Methodological Choices & Ethical Dilemmas

Doing Constructionist Research: The Context of Inquiry

The present inquiry into the construction of meaning amongst participants at the *Body & Soul* body modification ritual builds on the contributions and of scholars working within the contextual social constructionist camp (Best 1990, 1995, 2008; Best & Loseke 2003; Loseke 2003, 2009; Sacco 2003, 2005; Searle 1995); thus, the analysis is predicated on the theoretical assumption that reality is a social construct actively produced, sustained and manipulated by people (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Furthermore, as it is not possible to understand the social world apart from our subjective interpretations, a methodological assumption of this study is that researchers inescapably actively participate in the construction of meaning in the field. Because participant and researcher engage in a co-constructed, co-articulated authorization of meaning throughout the course of the research, the dialectic between researcher and participant(s) is scrutinized in this chapter to illuminate the reciprocal constitution of meaning and knowledge production.

Though a strict partition between qualitative and quantitative methodology has been contested (Mason 2006; Brannen 2005; Hammersley 1992) the tools employed in this analysis generally fall under the rubric of “qualitative methods”.³⁵ Specifically, this

³⁵Individuals who practice non-mainstream modifications comprise to a large extent a “hidden” population as unfamiliar to mainstream society as it was to me at the outset of the study; thus, a qualitative approach that allows for flexible inquiry is most fruitful. Furthermore, in terms of coding and analysis of data induction was the principle approach; however, as qualitative research is an iterative process involving constant conceptual shifting from theory to data and vice versa deduction was involved in a general sense (Hammersley 1992). Part of my coding process involved writing speculations and thoughts about

study utilizes a mixed-methodological approach that includes analysis of texts such as poetry and journal entries from participants, as well as analysis of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation and doing nothing, such as “hanging around” with participants at restaurants, social gatherings and body modification related workshops (Shaffir & Stebbins 1991:85). A qualitative approach is considered most appropriate to this study given the exploratory nature of the project as well as my interest in developing detailed descriptions, understanding how extreme body modification is interpreted, integrating multiple perspectives and describing the processes that shape accounts of body modification practice (Weiss 1994). Noting this, in this section I describe my research methodology as building on a methodological tradition in constructionist analyses and locate myself within the research as an active participant in meaning-making.

Methods in Social Constructionism

Constructionism is premised on the assumption that meaning is not inherent; thus, constructionist scholars are concerned with basic philosophical questions regarding the nature of reality, ourselves, and how we operate in time and space (Harris 2008). Methodologically, constructionism can be understood as rooted in part in phenomenology, ethnomethodology and Durkheimian sociology (Loseke 2003). At the abstract phenomenological level, constructionism shares an assumption that meaning characterizes all social life and that humans use “schemes of interpretation” as resources

potential themes in the margins of my transcribed notes for later comparison with more fully formed categories. I kept one “archive” of transcribed notes (Weiss 1994) as well as a second set of transcribed notes which I used to break apart and pull out sections of data (electronically) and sort into topical units which were further divided into sub-themes.

for constructing meaning around everyday experience (Loseke 2003:189). At a practical level, constructionism shares with ethnomethodology an interest in how and what people do to create and sustain reality (Loseke 2003); likewise, Durkheim's "collective representations" offer a way to think about typification as socially shared ideas or conceptual resources that practical actors use to make sense of experience (Loseke 2003).

Constructionist scholars utilize a range of methodological strategies such as interactional analysis, interview analysis and analysis of texts to probe the relationship between meaning-making, resources and interpretation (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). Other constructionist methodologies include both qualitative and quantitative analysis of newspapers (Johnson 1995); press reports (Sacco 2003); journal articles, books, organizational positional statements (Nelson-Rowe 1995); magazines, law reviews, scholarly journals, Congressional proceedings (Lowney & Best 1995); ethnographies (Holstein & Gubrium 2008); and case study analysis (Best 2008), though the specific methodological application that a constructionist researcher employs is in part contingent on the scholar's epistemological orientation. For instance, strict constructionists such as Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) emphasize the "vernacular constituents" of discourse as analytical points of interest. While this is a useful methodological tool, Marvasti (2008) argues that Ibarra and Kistuse's methodology glosses over both the interactional work involved in meaning-making and how actors interpret the same setting in different ways. Indeed, Snow (2001) notes that human existence and meaning-making is "emergent"; hence, by locating meaning-making in text alone researchers ignore that "texts ultimately are realized in everyday practice" (Marvasti 2008:315).

Consequently, to offer a useful explanation of meaning-making, the processes of reality construction must be located within its context. As outlined in the previous chapter, while the present analysis to some extent draws on the tools of strict constructionism it assumes that analyses of textual snapshots alone fail to recognize the interactive and fluid processes that characterize the way humans create, sustain, and alter meaning (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Spector & Kitsuse 1977). Accordingly, this research incorporates the concept of constructionist bricolage as one covering “both the activities claims-makers pursue and the contexts they live in and, through their actions, elaborate” (Bogard 2003:212). By adopting a flexible mixed methodological approach to the study of claimsmaking, it is hoped that the analysis better locates the “interactional work” of members of *Body & Soul* by identifying how members use elements of the immediate context as resources in claimsmaking (Bogard 2003) and how body modification is differentially interpreted by participants (Marvasti 2008).

Co-Construction & Active Interviewing

The interview is conceptualized here as an “encounter” involving “social performance” in terms of the verbal and non-verbal claimsmaking activity with which researcher and researched negotiate the reality and definition of the interview situation (Goffman 1967, 1959). Specifically, drawing on themes of symbolic interactionism this study approaches interviewing as an active (Holstein & Gubrium 1995) and dramaturgical (Berg 2001) meeting between researcher and participant. While both approaches emphasize the contribution of researcher and subject to the construction of meaning during the research encounter, the dramaturgical interview differs in “its emphasis on the

interviewer *using* the constructed relationship of the interviewer and subject to draw out information” (Berg 2001:68; Emphasis in Original). Noting this, the following explores the relationship between active interviewing and social performance and highlights the connection between the theoretical and methodological approaches in this study.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that interviewing is an epistemological activity that can be conceptualized in terms of continuum. At one extreme, the interview participant is regarded as a “vessel of answers”; passive and uninvolved in the production of knowledge, they are merely receptacles containing uncontaminated information of which it is the researcher’s job to systematically extract (Holstein & Gubrium 2008). At the opposite end of the continuum interviewees are interpreted as active participants in the social production of knowledge and reality; indeed, from the constructionist’s point of view interviews are not merely exchanges, but “conversations where meaning is not only conveyed but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted, and recorded by the interviewer” (Holstein & Gubrium 1995:11). This epistemological orientation toward interviewing constructs interviews as an “event” or occasion for meaning-making; thus, the validity of the present analysis is derived not from ascertaining undistorted information from the vessel of answers but from the “ability to convey situated experiential realities in terms that are locally comprehensible” (Holstein & Gubrium 1995:9).

As a linear approach, the “vessel of answers” data collection strategy is closely aligned with the epistemological stance of objectivist researchers who assume data are uniformly self-evident. Conversely, constructionists understand knowledge produced within an interview situation as continuously reality in the making; thus, transmission or

construction of meaning between researcher and researched follows a more complex path. Unlike objectivist approaches to interviewing, constructionists assume that data are created from a process of negotiation amongst all parties; consequently, the interview involves multiple realities and interpretations of meaning rather than a direct transactional exchange of question and response as in the “vessel of answers” approach (Charmaz 2008). The constructionist research process then can be understood as “active” in that it is continually emerging and constantly (re)made by both participant and researcher (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Because researchers are active participants in category construction and meaning-making, constructionist scholars must scrutinize research decisions in terms of how actions, conditions, and contingencies contribute to reality construction (Charmaz 2008).

In terms of co-constructed interviewing, specific methodological choices such as the use of mutual disclosure, background knowledge and narrative resources contributed to the meaning-making process and “built up” interviews with participants subsequent to their participation in *Body & Soul* (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). A methodological challenge to the process of building up interviews was moving beyond the mere exchange of words and sentences by encouraging participants to articulate deep feelings and thoughts about their experiences and what they mean (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). In combination with my position as an outsider to *Body & Soul*, the discredited and discreditable stigma associated with the practices at this event made fostering an environment of trust during the research process of paramount concern. To address this anticipated methodological challenge one of the interview strategies employed was establishing an atmosphere of mutual disclosure that would put participants at ease with

my presence and thus more likely to share sensitive information and thoughts (Holstein & Gubrium 1995; Weiss 1994). I believe that the construction of a “safe” interview space was enhanced by the methodological choice to “remain flexible” by avoiding the “rigid scripting of interviews” and its inherent detached formality (Hathaway & Atkinson 2003:180).³⁶

Because interviews were conducted in the weeks following *Body & Soul*, I was able to draw on my own experience at the event and share my thoughts and feelings about it with the participants; thus, my willingness to share my personal experience was a form of claimsmaking activity instituted with the purpose of constructing the interview event as an occasion for deep disclosure.³⁷ As deep disclosure is accompanied by vulnerability, especially in the presence of an “outsider”, my own disclosure may have contributed to the construction of the interview situation as a “safe” place to discuss the intimate details of the participant’s experience with ritual body modification. As a methodological tool, disclosure “occasions and legitimizes the respondent’s reciprocal revelations” (Holstein & Gubrium 1995:12) and subsequently creates new conduits of articulation and opportunities for meaning-making regarding other deviant aspects of the participant’s lives; in turn, this contributes to the co-constructed building up of meaning within the interview interaction. Furthermore, as a concrete referent, my background knowledge of the event proved to be an invaluable resource for narrative recall in terms of focussing the

³⁶ I also contend that by remaining flexible I encouraged participants to assume a degree of control over the process of the discussion in terms of exploring avenues of inquiry and perspectives that I may not have been initially aware. Erika Gubrium and Mirka Koro-Ljungberg (2005) argue that this strategy of contending with “border making” strengthens qualitative research.

³⁷ As an aside, some researchers have suggested that “women do better as interviewers with both men and women...women are more often chosen as confidants by men as well as by other women” (Weiss 1994:140). Noting this, it is possible though I feel that within the context of this particular study, unlikely, that the success of the interview in terms of deep disclosure is in part attributable to my status as a woman.

participant's attention on specific instances or aspects of *Body & Soul* that may have otherwise been forgotten or omitted from their story (Holstein & Gubrium 1995).

The interviewee's narrative of experience is continually unfolding and collaboratively constructed; consequently, Holstein and Gubrium suggest that the participant's "fund of knowledge is a diverse, multifaceted, and emerging resource and that access to it is actively selective and constructive" (1995:30). Thus, a second strategy for inciting narrative production and building up interviews was to "systematically activate applicable ways of knowing" by offering a variety of conceptual resources for participants to access different facets of their knowledge and experience (Holstein & Gubrium 1995:37). For instance, positional shifting proved fruitful in assisting participants to "activate" their stocks of knowledge (Holstein & Gubrium 2008). Respondents were encouraged to think about their experience with ritual body modification in terms of their perspective as a prospective and actual participant in the event versus their feeling about their practices from the position of employee or family member. By engaging positional shifting during interviews, participants built up meaning by considering their experience with ritual body practice in relation to their varying social roles.³⁸

³⁸ A final point on interviewing and the co-authorization of meaning pertains to the use of audio recording devices. Though some have suggested that the tape or audio recorder is an "intruder" in the interview situation (Weiss 1994), I decided that its use is appropriate to this study for practical reasons relating to my inexperience in recalling and documenting field notes as well as my desire for a verbatim transcript from which I could quote participants and retain "control of the editing" (Weiss 1994:54). Secondly, as I entered the interview encounter with the purpose of probing the participant's deep feelings and thoughts about their participation in a "deviant" form of body modification, I wanted to be free to focus my attention on the conversation and be attentive to the visual and behavioural cues of participants that might offer additional insight useful for the analysis. I took notes and used an audio recorder so that I could incorporate non-verbal modes of claimsmaking into my field notes for subsequent use as an "index" to the recording when transcribing the interviews (Weiss 1994). To overcome the limitation of audio recorder as "intruder" I asked participants beforehand if they were comfortable speaking in its presence, and secondly, if the discussion turned to a particularly sensitive topic I turned off the recorder out of respect to the participants. While the

Methodological Applications & Ethical Queries

The Sample

Data were compiled from in-depth interview accounts with participants at *Body & Soul*, field notes from participant observation work at the event, participant's journal entries and from "hanging around" with participants at social gatherings (Shaffir & Stebbins 1991:85). In addition to informal interviewing at the event I conducted thirteen in-depth interviews ranging from one to over two hours in length.³⁹ The sample of interviewees was drawn from a larger number of people present at the most recent *Body & Soul* event. All of the interviews were conducted in person in a location of the participant's choosing except for two interviews which were conducted via telephone with participants who had travelled a significant distance to attend the event and were subsequently unavailable for face to face interviewing due to geographic dislocation. Three of the thirteen interviewees had participated in the event for the first time. The remaining ten participants had experience with flesh hook pulling at *Body & Soul* ranging between one and having "lost count how many times"⁴⁰ they had performed the "ritual". Participants ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-one years. All but one participant identified as "white". Interviews were conducted with four men and nine women; this is

use of the audio recorder could be interpreted as contributing to the construction of the interview situation in terms of its tendency to make participants feel constrained, by being reflexive as well as addressing similar questions or more sensitive issues of during less formal conversations at the event I have to some extent addressed this limitation.

³⁹ A note on acknowledging the contribution of participants: While participants were not paid for the interviews or for speaking with me at social gatherings or at *Body & Soul*, I did exercise reciprocity in the form of paying for meals or coffee during an interview situation or offering small tokens or gestures of appreciation such as small gifts, rides to social gatherings or home from work, and of course, verbal thanks. Likewise, some participants expressed their interpretation of my own participation in the event as form of reciprocity.

⁴⁰ Comment from a respondent experienced in flesh hook pulling.

approximately proportionate to the gender identification of individuals present at *Body & Soul*.

Of the thirteen participants in the in-depth interview portion of the study one person is a professional body modification artist. One person is an apprentice piercer working with the key informant but has a secondary stable means of employment unrelated to body modification. One is a part time piercer who is also employed full time as an outreach worker. Two participants work as piercers at *Body & Soul* but are not employed in the body modification industry in a professional capacity outside of the event. Some of the participants have engaged in play piercing⁴¹ and some of them have never pierced another person. Of the participants who currently worked as piercers or who had pierced at *Body & Soul*, all were trained by my key informant or Fakir Musafar. Participants in the in depth interview portion of the study as well as those present at the event were on average well educated and can be loosely categorized as middle class.⁴² Occupations held by participants in the event included PhD student, art student, plant manager, corporate project manager, businessmen and women, office worker, 911 operator, government mental health worker, florist, piercing apprentice, welder, bus driver, psychic medium, professional body modification artist, and flight attendant.

The interview participants roughly approximate the demographic of the thirty-six attendees at the *Body & Soul* ritual weekend as the large majority are white (except one) and middle class. Roughly half to two-thirds of individuals present at the event identified

⁴¹ Play piercing is the temporary insertion of sterile needles under the surface of the skin; a practise that is utilized by some people who identify as “kinky”. See Deborah Addington’s (2006) book *Play Piercing*.

⁴² Following Barbara Ehrenreich’s (1989) conceptualization of this term in *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*.

as female; ages ranged from eighteen⁴³ to fifty-one, and the majority had previously participated in a “hook pull” event. The vast majority of participants identified as members of the kink community and/or had some involvement with BDSM (bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, sadism, and masochism). A small minority of participants in *Body & Soul* identified as “straight” or heterosexual while many identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or simply “kinky”.⁴⁴

Gaining Access

Unlike certain forms of tattooing and piercing that have to some extent gained a degree of social acceptance (Sanders & Vail 2008), the deviant behaviours exhibited at *Body & Soul* constitute an extreme expression of body modification that includes ritualistic flesh hook pulling, cheek skewering and the sewing of fruit or other objects to one’s body. For many of these individuals, participation in these practices is clandestine, and while an intensity of meaning is openly and profusely articulated at the event, in many contexts outside *Body & Soul* participation is a discreditable form of stigma and thus kept secret (Goffman 1963). In addition to the ethical and practical challenges in gaining access to this population I became acutely aware of my responsibility to maintain a personal and professional standard of ethics by respecting the integrity of the event and

⁴³ Eighteen is the minimum legal age to attend *Body & Soul*. Likewise, in most piercing studios eighteen is the age of consent to body modifications without parental permission.

⁴⁴ The sample of body modifiers in this study is for the most part consistent with Victoria Pitts assertion that the contemporary body modification movement is comprised of “...white, gay-friendly, middle-class, new-age, pro-sex, educated, and politically articulate set of people that tend to find scarifications, brandings, implants, earlobe stretchings and other nonmainstream practices as appealing as tattoos and body piercings” (2003:14)

confidentiality of participants who trusted and openly shared with me the intimate details of their lives.

Typically a day-long event held at an undisclosed location, *Body & Soul* is constructed as a ritualistic celebration that involves elements of body modification, spirituality, and community. At this event, participants temporarily have limes sewn to their bodies, are pierced in the chest and/or back with flesh hooks, receive cheek spears or “third-eye” piercings⁴⁵ or any combination of these. After participants have been pierced they gather in a circle to “open the ritual” and then disperse for a day of dancing and pulling from ropes attached to the flesh hooks. Many of the participants at *Body & Soul* learned about the event through the kink, BDSM, queer or body modification communities in Western Canada or from networking with these communities from other geographic locations. As I personally do not identify with any of these communities or identities I initially anticipated my status as an “outsider” (Becker 1963) a challenge in gaining access to the lives of participants in *Body & Soul* and into the space wherein these extreme body modification practices occur.

I consider attendees who habitually engage in this variety of extreme body modification as comprising a group that is “socially invisible or “hidden” in the sense that their activities are clandestine and therefore concealed from the view of mainstream society and agencies of social control” (Watters & Biernacki 1989:417). Because of the deviant nature of these practices, the event is typically an underground phenomena organized nearly entirely by one individual through word of mouth. Subsequent to the

⁴⁵ A cheek skewer piercing involves piercing a surgical steel skewer through the flesh of the cheek. The skewer enters through the cheek, into the mouth and exits through the opposite cheek. A “third eye” piercing is a temporary surface piercing placed in the space between the eyebrows.

event the location and identities of participants is kept a secret from non-members and bruises or puncture marks are concealed with clothing. To ensure the safety of participants and preserve what they interpret as the sanctity of the event, attendance is typically by invitation and reserved for participants, piercing staff, or those present in the role of “ka-see-ka”.⁴⁶ Furthermore, photography at *Body & Soul* is tightly regulated and upon the dissemination of photographs to participants there is a strict rule against Internet posting. Consequently, as the event is covertly organized and attendance prohibited to “onlookers” knowledge of its existence is highly inaccessible to mainstream society.

Through prior research into more conventional body modification phenomena, I learned of the non-mainstream body rituals practiced at the annual *Body & Soul* festival. Utilizing a snowball sampling technique I eventually met Jake, a body modification artist trained under the tutelage of Fakir Musafar, the ‘father’ of the Modern Primitive movement.⁴⁷ Over the next few years I maintained a rapport with Fakir Musafar’s protégé, Jake; an individual who was an initial gatekeeper in terms of his retention of control over my physical access to *Body & Soul*, position to choose whether to make available or refuse crucial information, and whose friendship I was dependent on in terms of its influence over the extent to which I would be permitted access (Burgess 1991).⁴⁸

Certainly, after learning of the fascinating and deviant activities of Fakir’s Modern

⁴⁶ In the context of *Body & Soul*, a ka-see-ka is a person who has previously participated in the ritual and is present to offer support, information, and guidance to other participants.

⁴⁷ Modern Primitive is a label affixed to a group of people who “search and experiment with the previously forbidden ‘body side’ of life” through body modification and ritual (Musafar 2002:327). The Modern Primitive or “neo primitive” movement has been constructed by its adherents as a “rediscovery” of extreme body modification and ritual (Musafar 2002). Musafar claims that though the spiritual and ritual component of contemporary Modern Primitive body modification is central to the movement, there are highly diverse reasons for engaging in “body play” (Musafar 2002).

⁴⁸ However, Burgess notes that friendships pose a problem in qualitative and ethnographic research in terms “how to account for the influence of the relationship on the data collected” (1991:52). To account for this, I attempt here to retain a sense of reflexivity about my position at *Body & Soul* as well as in interview settings.

Primitives and participants at *Body & Soul* my interest in this subject grew and I set the goal of gaining their trust by becoming “wise” to the group (Goffman 1963:28).⁴⁹ In early 2009 I contacted Jake with the suggestion that I research *Body & Soul* for my Master of Arts thesis; not only did he enthusiastically offer to put me in contact with several other people who had participated in the event, he invited me to experience the ritual firsthand.

Negotiating Participation

In addition to in-depth interviews, informal participant observation field work at *Body & Soul* allowed me to observe the physical setting, develop relationships with members, eavesdrop, and locate individuals who would act as guides by introducing me to other members of the group and attest to my credibility and trustworthiness. While these strategies produced fruitful data for analysis, I did not depart from the field without having negotiated unanticipated methodological and ethical challenges as they materialized during the research process. Aptly, Maurice Punch describes the field as a “swamp” inextricably intertwined with research politics and emergent ethical dilemmas:

...the generality of codes often does not help us to make the fine distinctions that arise at the interactional level in participant observation studies, where the reality of the field setting may feel far removed from the refinements of scholarly debate and ethical niceties (1994:78).

While I have attempted to absorb the operational rules pertaining to field research (Shaffir 1991) my experience is consistent with Shaffir’s observation that “the uniqueness of each setting, as well as the researcher’s personal circumstances, shape the specific negotiating tactics” (1991:73). One of the major ethical challenges and process of negotiation in this

⁴⁹ Goffman argues that a people who becomes “wise” to the deviant activities of others are “persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who finds themselves accorded with a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan” (1963:28).

research was intertwined with the methodological issue of determining the scope and extent of the “participation” component of participant observation methodology.

Upon my arrival in western Canada to pursue the data collection portion of my research I met with Jake; body modification artist, organizer of *Body & Soul*, and my key informant. Jake arrived wearing a black hooded sweatshirt with a band logo, a black hat and shorts. He has “sleeve” tattoos on both of his arms as well as visible tattoos on his hands, legs, feet, and in the areas behind his stretched earlobes. He wears a septum ring but had removed the dermal implant in his cheek since I last met with him. We reviewed the details of the upcoming *Body & Soul* weekend. He informed me that I would travel via ferry to a populated island off of Canada’s western coast at which point a private chartered sailboat would arrive to transport myself and the participants to “the island” which I later learned is one of the many secluded islets off of this particular coast without amenities, housing, or human inhabitants.

I was initially invited to this island for the first of the two days of the *Body & Soul* event to observe and take notes as well as to assist with transportation of supplies and assemblage of food and water stations. In addition to observation my participation at the event would be limited to general assistance; however, upon my arrival Jake proposed an alternate scenario:

If you really want to truly understand what the hook pull is about you could come up the first day, take your notes and then the second day you could actually participate in the ritual: get pierced, have limes sewn on for the ball dance and experience the hook pull. What if this is your one chance? What if this is your *one chance* to get the best possible research that you can get? This *could be* your one chance to get the very best research! The only way to really know what this is, is to experience it for yourself. So you could come up the first day, take notes, stay over and then the next day you can actually participate in the ritual and experience it for yourself. Even if you are worried about your school’s ethics you will have had the personal experience of having participated in the ritual. I’ve known people who have been researching things and at

some point you have to ask yourself what you are willing to do to get the research- at one point you have to just say “fuck it, I am doing whatever it takes to get the information and to get the best research possible.” [Excerpt from fieldnotes Aug 15 2009].

This excerpt from my fieldnotes is reminiscent of Burgess’s argument that access is “negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research process”, it is “based on sets of relationships between the researcher and the researched, established throughout a project” (1991:43). Jake’s construction of the event as my “one chance” at the collection of truly rich data posed an ethical and personal dilemma. My options were twofold: I could observe the ritual on the first day, collect field notes and return to the mainland, or get “the best research” by experiencing the hook pull ritual myself which would undoubtedly bring me closer to the participants, foster a deeper level of trust, and quite likely generate richer, fuller data. This dilemma forced me to reconsider Punch’s argument that “the actual or pretended full commitment to the role may be essential to gaining legitimacy and acceptance from the researched” (1994:82).

In terms of the inevitable degree of reactivity introduced to the field by a participant observer, Denzin notes that “reactive effects of observation are the most perplexing feature of participant observation, since the presence of an observer in any setting is often a ‘foreign object’” (1970:203-204). The invitation posed a methodological challenge as it was unclear the extent to which my participation would affect participant reactivity. Having been invited by Jake to witness a hook pull ritual three years prior, I understood the significance of the invitation in terms of the meaning that the event holds for participants and the risk associated with the inclusion of an “outsider”. This ethical dilemma primarily concerned whether some members would be offended or made to feel uncomfortable by my full participation in what most perceive to be a sacred ritual.

Negotiating participation, regard for the members' welfare, sustaining access and credibility- and, most certainly, the political and practical implications of exposing my partially nude body, receiving relatively large flesh hook piercings and making myself vulnerable to the experience of becoming "high" that accompanies a lengthy session of flesh pulling were the most significant components of the emotional work involved in this research.

I decided that my full participation was necessary to enhance the validity of the research as well as strengthen my credibility amongst the members of the group. By participating in full (flesh hook pulling, partial nudity, having limes sewn to my back), I was able to use my own experience as a source of data for analysis, gain a deeper level of trust and credibility from the members of the group thus possibly gaining further access to their feelings about the event, and in Jake's words begin to "really know" what the event is about. In addition, I believe that my full participation was received by members as a sign of respect as well as evidence of my "true" intent to understand what they feel and experience throughout the day of the event.⁵⁰ While this decision could be criticized for bringing me too close to the research subject, I contend that refusing the invitation would have done greater damage to the study in terms of limiting my access to information and

⁵⁰ Many participants noted that the experience of flesh hook pulling is "impossible" or "hard" to put into words and because for the most part, participants expressed a strong desire for me to understand what the event is many thanked me for participating and were happy that I was able to have the experience. In terms of data collection, the first day of the event I was present as an observer; this enabled me to take account of the surroundings, speak with participants, and collect data with a clear state of mind as an observer. The second day, I fully immersed myself in the role of participant by being pierced with flesh hooks, having limes sewn to my back, engaging in flesh hook pulling and experiencing the event without the restriction of immediate note taking. This allowed me to get a sense of the experience of "high" that participants described as accompanying the "hook pull", the anticipation and challenge of being pierced, and the experience of performing this activity with others. Likewise, I was able to document my experience subsequent to my participation and use my feelings, experiences, and thoughts as a source of data for an additional layer of analysis.

compromising research relationships with the possibility of appearing dismissive of this invitation.

The Event

The first day of the event began with members meeting at a ferryboat en route to the pick up location of the chartered sailboat that would transport us to the private island for a day of fun, spiritual expression, sharing, and new experiences. During this time participants ate and talked about body modification, their jobs, their excitement for the “hook pull”, and past modification events they had attended. The mood was joyous and celebratory and the anticipation of the upcoming flesh hook pull seemed to build throughout the trip to the island. Waiting for the sailboat, the participants appeared happy and excited with many hugging and laughing. When the sailboat arrived we helped to load the supplies and then found a comfortable spot in the sun before setting sail for a two hour ride across the Pacific Ocean. During the trip to the island, participants shared snacks, talked about their past experiences with flesh hook pulling and teased each other to lighten their nervousness before being pierced. Other participants sat silently and reflected or meditated. At the island we formed a chain from the boat to the shore to transport supplies. After setting up food and water stations, piercing stations, an altar, and identifying a “bathroom” area, we gathered in a meeting to discuss the details of the day.

The hook pull ritual performed at *Body & Soul* involves being pierced in the chest with two twelve gauge needles followed immediately by eleven gauge flesh hooks. Each of the hooks is then attached to a synthetic rope and a clip which can subsequently be clipped onto other participant’s clips or to ropes affixed to trees for pulling. In addition to

the flesh hooks, the majority of participants have a number of limes (typically two to eight) or other objects sewn into the flesh of their backs in preparation for the “ball dance”; as well, a few participants receive skewers pierced through their cheeks and “third eye” piercings in the space between the eyebrows. The duration of the ritual in terms of pulling from the flesh hooks is several hours and is usually performed by participants bare-chested but otherwise clothed by either a sarong, Utilikilt⁵¹ or shorts, and some form of footwear.

During the piercing part of the event, many participants helped each other by holding each other’s shoulders or heads while they were being pierced. Some participants screamed out or sat silently while being pierced while others joked around to ease the tension. People casually disrobed to reveal pierced, tattooed, branded, and cut skin and most people appeared comfortable with nudity, much like sunbathers at a nude beach. Throughout the day the mood shifted, at times during “the pull” people laughed and pulled together from a circular device called a “mandalla” at other times participants sat alone staring out at the ocean, meditating, or crying. Periodically participants stopped to have snacks. Some participants pulled from ropes attached to trees or from another person’s rope. Soft music and drumming could be heard and the space smelled of a mix of fresh air and burning sage.

Similar to the atmosphere of a nude beach, partial nudity is taken for granted by members at *Body & Soul*; consequently, a second methodological and ethical challenge to the research was negotiating participant observation at the event in such a way that I did

⁵¹ Utilikilt is a brand of kilt for everyday wear that is very popular amongst members of *Body & Soul*; so much so that it was referred to on more than one occasion as “the hook pull uniform”. The Utilikilt is also referred to by some participants as “sexy SM gear”. See www.utilikilt.com

not present myself as voyeuristic. This issue is similar to that articulated by Obrador-Pons in his ethnography of Menorca nude beaches:

The menace of sex highlights the importance of self-presentation in research. The way the researcher dresses, acts, performs and behaves on the nudist beach has a great deal of influence on the respondents. From the beginning the need to negotiate the way I present myself on the beach was clear, so that I could repudiate any uncomfortable association with sex (2007:128).

While body modification practises are often constructed in sexual terms, spirituality and individuality rather than sexuality are claimed by participants as the primary foci of *Body & Soul*. In addition to the practicality of being naked in terms of facilitating piercing and pulling unobstructed by clothing, members appear to practice nudity for the purposes of enhancing the interlacing of body with nature; consequently, much like Obrador-Pons study of nude beaches there is an implicit code of behaviour that discourages “explicit sexual urge...and objectifying visual practices” (2007:129). By fully participating in the events of *Body & Soul*, I was able to negotiate any uncomfortable associations of my presence with voyeurism and on another level experience what appears and feels like an atmosphere of complete body acceptance.

As the event comes to a close, participants gradually make their way toward the piercing stations to have the limes removed from their backs and hooks removed from their chests. Many participants appear calm, contented and happy at the end of the ritual and some described their mental/emotional state as “blissed out”. Participants help to pack up supplies and form a chain to transport supplies back to the sailboat. In this chapter, I have attempted to give a sense of what it is like to be at a *Body & Soul* event. This chapter has also detailed the way in which the methodological strategies employed in this research are informed theoretically by social constructionism and outlined how I

gained access to this population, conducted interviews, and negotiated research relationships in the field. In the next chapter I discuss how the meaning of *Body & Soul* is constructed at the event via discursive, symbolic and corporal claimsmaking as well as the conceptual processes through which participants subsequently make sense of their experience.

Chapter Five

Practitioners Construct Extreme Body Modification

Constructs of a Deviant Practise

This chapter illustrates how member claimsmaking strategies construct the reality of *Body & Soul* and implicitly or explicitly challenge norms pertaining to culturally sanctioned uses of the body. Specifically, through symbolic, rhetorical and corporal claimsmaking participants construct “the pull” as a positive and rational response to and implicit critique of mainstream cultural norms. Likewise, this process of articulating and rearticulating meaning at and subsequent to *Body & Soul* assists members in the management of discredited and discreditable stigma by creating a resource with which to counteract the negative claims of outsiders who aim to stigmatize, pathologize, deviantize, and/or medicalize their behaviour. By reaffirming a common understanding of bodily reality at *Body & Soul*, members account for their behaviour by transforming these deviant practices into a positive means of self-affirmation.

Several intertwining themes emerged from the data to suggest that participants construct the meaning of their aesthetic and behavioural deviance in such a way that group solidarity is enhanced and positive definitions are internalized by new members. Specifically, patterns in thematic claimsmaking activity emerging from in-depth interviews and observation suggest that members engage in an indirect three-stage process of re-definition that warrants ritual body modification as a legitimate form of individual or spiritual expression. The (re)construction of bodily deviance is conceptualized here as a legitimating process involving the identification of a problem

(Western cultural norms), sensible albeit deviant means of addressing it (body modification ritual), and the positive reinforcement of deviance via supporting evidence (participant narratives/testimony). These ideas spread amongst members and encourage social cohesion and group solidarity in turn providing a network of support and resources for members to better combat stigmatizing labels and negotiate interactions with non-members.

Making Meaning at Body & Soul

At the *Body & Soul* ritual weekend piercing staff and participants negotiate the definition of the event through verbal and non-verbal claimsmaking. In the months leading up to “the hook pull” as it is commonly referred to, the meaning of the forthcoming flesh hook ritual is constructed by organizational staff in terms of decision making processes pertaining to the location of the event, potential participants, cost and other preparatory considerations. Likewise, at the event the meaning of the situation and practices are negotiated among participants via symbolic, behavioural and discursive claimsmaking activity in such a way that the bodily deviance practiced is normalized. Drawing on available cultural and rhetorical resources, more experienced members both subtly and overtly engage in these forms of claimsmaking to frame the event as primarily a forum for spiritual and/or individual expression. Similarly, as new members are typically like-minded individuals that share an interest in spirituality and/or body modification and experimentation this interpretation resonates with their sense of what constitutes a reasonable explanation of this behaviour; hence, they learn to construct the practices at *Body & Soul* in terms established by more experienced members.

Constructing the Event: Symbolic, Verbal & Behavioural Claimsmaking

The most overt form of non-verbal claimsmaking at *Body & Soul* is the symbolic construction of the event as sacred and spiritual. Although more experienced participants claim that *Body & Soul* is “whatever you want it to be”, it is evident that unlike other events such as *Pain & Pleasure* where hook pulls, coal walking, and other body practices are performed in a more light-hearted, fun and sexual manner, *Body & Soul* is implicitly constructed via symbolic means as a different kind of event. At *Body & Soul*, Andy explained to me how these two events are interpreted: “For some people, it’s a spiritual thing, for some people it’s for shits and giggles. *Pain & Pleasure* is often sexual [and] it’s great to come [orgasm] with the hooks in, but this pull [*Body & Soul*] is very mellow and spiritual...it all depends on the participants”.

Nudity is a primary form of symbolic claimsmaking at *Body & Soul*. Similar to that of nudist beaches, the emphasis at *Body & Soul* is not on sexuality and voyeurism but experiencing “an expressive body that feels and senses; a body with the capacity to make connections and open out experience that inhabit [*sic*] the tactile world” (Obrador-Pons 2007:124). Indeed, the nakedness exhibited at *Body & Soul* is not illustrative of a sexual body on display but rather an organic body engaging symbolically and physically with naturalistic environment in which the event takes place. Partial nudity at the event is a symbolic rejection of mainstream Western ideals about physical aesthetic and nakedness. Because participants perform the ritual bare-chested,⁵² they unapologetically expose pierced, tattooed, branded and cut skin that symbolically contribute to the (re)construction

⁵² With the exception of one person.

of the archetypal “beautiful” body amongst members of the group. The rejection of mainstream aesthetic, lack of overt sexuality, and spiritual construction of a naked body interacting with a natural environment contributed to the feeling of complete body acceptance that participants appeared to share and symbolically enhanced the discursive construction and rhetorical appeal of *Body & Soul* as ritual “for everyone”.⁵³

Body & Soul was held in a geographic location nearly entirely isolated from the “outside world” with the exception of the distant sound of ferries that periodically passed by. The “ritual space” wherein the hook pull was performed overlooked the Pacific Ocean and was surrounded by trees and nature, and as the event was scheduled for mid-summer, the sun was warm on the partially nude bodies of the participants. The air was fresh as the island was far removed from the steady stream of carbon dioxide emissions that clog the air in most cities and with each passing ferry the ripple of the ocean waves eventually crashed upon the small cliff near the “ritual space”. Noting all of this, Ava, a Pagan woman described as the leader of the ritual and responsible for the spiritual preparation of the hook pull space, mentioned to me how lucky we were to have such a “beautiful location” for *Body & Soul*. Indeed, Ava concluded that “we don’t need much ritual [preparation] because it is so natural and beautiful here already”.

The geographic location itself as symbolic of a spiritually cleansed space facilitated the mental and physical dislocation of participants from mainstream convention and acted as a catalyst for what was claimed to be a spiritual experience. Likewise, the physical distance that participants must travel to get to the island is discursively folded into the narrative of the hook pull experience as a “journey”. The

⁵³ During the “opening of the ritual” circle, Ava reassures that the hook pull is “for everyone” to experience as they wish regardless of whether participants believe in spirituality, paganism or ritual.

physical setting was constructed as heightening the overall experience; as one member exclaimed: “This is an amazing place, the energy is just amazing!” Here Emma describes her process of journeying to the location of a ritual:

Travelling in general seems like a classic time for me to reflect and really think about things and so the experience itself...going to and coming from [a hook pull] I was thinking about the things I had done and experienced. It really integrates at that point. It is a little journey, it is not that far but it is a journey of self as well.

The “journey” to the island as akin to a sort of pilgrimage also enhanced the sacredness associated with *Body & Soul* and facilitated the dissociation of participants from what is subsequently constructed as the oppressive features of Western culture.

Prior to the commencement of piercing and flesh hook pulling, a “ritual space” is identified and Ava fashions an altar on which participants place items that symbolically signify their intent at the ritual or otherwise assist them in their “journey”. The altar is smudged with burning sage as are participants who are more deeply invested in the ritual aspect of *Body & Soul*. For Nathan, the altar is a significant symbolic reminder of his purpose in participating in the event. The item he chooses to place on the altar is a small ceremonial pouch; below he explains its significance:

...it is my fire pouch. In it is flint, steel, tinder, and ash. The ashes come from the first camp fire I did way back when I was small. Every ceremonial fire the ashes are put into the fire and when they cool I remove those ashes and place them back in my pouch. So in some ways my ash has a family tree of sorts as people add their ashes to the next fire the ash’s heritage grows. There are ashes of my dad, a friend's mother, assorted pets, a scout leader and numerous other items that have been added through the years at ceremonial or sacred fires. Those fires have been used for firewalks, sweat lodges, and other large gatherings. I place it on the altar to remind me where I've been and who has been there to support me.

Significant emphasis is placed on the participants’ “intent” in terms of the effect it is claimed to have on the outcome of their experience at *Body & Soul*. This too enhances the rhetorical appeal of the “open” ritual and reinforces the framing of the event as a forum

for spirituality and individual expression. As Jake explains, the experience of *Body & Soul* “is whatever it is that day...it is whatever it needs to be for that person at that time”.⁵⁴

Verbally, meaning is built up at *Body & Soul* primarily through the instruction of members more experienced in flesh hook pulling. Among new members there is a sense of anticipation with respect to not knowing exactly what would transpire. To ease fear and anxiety, there is a short meeting prior to the piercing portion of the event where more experienced members describe what new members can expect and where to turn to for support. The pre-pull meeting is lead by Jake who informs members of a brief history of the ritual; Nathan, who discusses the meaning of sewing limes and how to correctly prepare a lime for piercing; and Ava, who leads an energy transferring circle that “offers thanks” and “opens” the ritual.

Jake begins with a brief discussion of his rendition of the roots of the practices the participants were about to perform:

Today we will be doing a ritual that was created by Fakir Musafar and Cleo DuBois. In the 80s they had a lot of friends who were dying or had died from AIDS and they wanted to do something to honour them. They decided that the best way to do this was through ritual; to break skin, to bleed and to sweat.

The construction of the hook pull as a spiritual, quasi-sacred practise is reinforced through this instruction because it is delivered by Jake, an individual who has worked closely with Fakir Musafar and is generally respected as an expert in body modification; the “master himself”, as one participant described him. Due to his unique position as the organizer of the event and noted body modification artist, Jake is in a significant position

⁵⁴ One participant, Steve, described the hook pull as “very personal” though he did not ascribe a spiritual meaning to the event. For Steve, “certainly people mean a great deal...just breathing together is much more meaningful to me than the goddesses of the earth, or Ganesha or whatever else was up on the altar”.

of influence in this context and is apt to have his claims “heard” (Best 2008). Still, though the hook pull is constructed as a means of spiritual expression, it is also made apparent that *Body & Soul* is an event open to everyone to express their individuality and experience their own “journey” in “whatever way they need”.

Noting this, it is made explicit that the hook pull is “not a [sexual] scene”; making this clear, Jake states “there are no tops and bottoms. The person attached to the rope is the person pulling...you can pass your rope and if someone passes their rope just hang onto it- you aren’t going for a walk!” This is illustrative of another way in which *Body & Soul* is framed in terms of ritual and individual spirituality rather than sexual expression. While some participants claimed to have reached orgasm during a hook pull ritual, gratuitous, overt sexuality is not a common feature of *Body & Soul*. Secondly, in addition to placing primary emphasis on safety in terms of encouraging participants to keep hydrated and nourished with the snacks, water and juices provided, Jake reassures members that the hook pull is comprised of participants who are all present to support one another in their individual and collective journeys.

Specifically, Jake describes the role of “ka-see-ka”; a person or persons who have “performed the ritual before and will help you to get wherever you are going on your journey”. With this, Jake constructs the participants as comprising two groups, those who have and those who have not experienced flesh hook pulling. He asks the participants to identify themselves, making it clear who new members can look to for guidance and who experienced members ought to take note of in terms of supervision. Categorizing participants in this way encourages a sense of mentorship, solidarity and cohesion; in turn, this fosters positivity about the practices that facilitates the adoption of constructed

meanings by new members. Likewise, the preparation and sewing of limes onto flesh is claimed to be a “ritual” performed by people native to the land on which we stood and were to be placed “whatever feels good on you”. Following this instruction, Nathan claimed: “this is not a grin and bare it kind of thing... the point is to have a piercing on your body that you like...a piercing is supposed to be a ritual...the point of this is not to cause pain”. Jake confirms this notion: “It’s not about the piercing; it’s about what we do after the piercing”.

The construction of the event as ritual and spiritual is most readily apparent in the context of the circle that participants form after being pierced and before the flesh pulling commences. The circle is formed within the ritual space and is in close proximity to the altar, piercing stations, and a cloth flag of Ganesha. Lead by Ava, the circle activity is a form of claimsmaking that encourages spirituality and individuality. Ava asks everyone to hold hands with their thumbs pointing to the left and leads the group deep breathing. This is claimed to be part of an energy transferring and grounding activity that “brings the group together” when “energy can be a bit scattered and nervous” prior to the following flesh hook pull. Ava thanks spirits, the earth and the participants for being a part of the event and she proceeds to “call the corners”, North, East, South and West. Though Ava claims that “it’s your ritual...if you don’t believe in it [Paganism] that’s fine, if you do that’s cool too... the ritual is for everyone”, the repeated interpretation of *Body & Soul* as “spiritual ritual” is reinforced through various forms of claimsmaking.

Body & Soul, as framed in terms of spirituality/individuality, is subtly introduced via symbolic claims (casual nudity, geographic location and the setting up of an altar) and subsequently formally articulated during the introduction to the event (the explanation of

the event's history, introduction to ka-see-kas, and the rhetoric of openness/acceptance). Consequently, this construction is behaviourally manifest during the piercing and flesh hook pulling portion of the event and likewise re-emerged during in-depth interviews in the weeks following the event. In terms of behavioural claimsmaking, during the piercing portion of the event, Ava often assisted in "grounding" participants by touching their arms, neck, shoulders and foreheads while the flesh hooks were pierced into the participants' chests. Likewise, the deep breathing pattern encouraged by the piercers was similar to that conducted during the "opening of the ritual" circle. During and subsequent to piercing, screaming and crying as a means of emotional release were common. Some participants claimed that blindfolding themselves facilitated journey. Several participants pulled from the ropes attached to the flesh hooks while in a downward head position. Some participants interpreted this position as "spiritual, inward and reflective".

Other participants dropped to their knees and cried while pulling on their flesh hooks and many stood swaying from side to side or leaned back to allow the flesh hooks to support the weight of their bodies. Some individuals in a ka-see-ka role wandered from participant to participant and began tapping rhythmically and with increasing intensity with a cane on the ropes against which participants were pulling from their flesh hooks. Other ka-see-kas played hand drums near the bodies of participants who were pulling and others tapped on participants' ropes with their fingertips. Screaming, moaning, crying and laughing were common sounds emanating from participants during the pulling portion of the event; these sounds were not constructed as cause for concern, rather in this context they are interpreted as part of a person's journey. Some participants attached their clips to a circular instrument called a "mandalla". With this device several members are able to

pull at once against each other's weight. Other participants attached their clips to each other and engaged in what will later be described as an intimate and connective experience.

Through symbolic, discursive and behavioural claimsmaking at *Body & Soul* the meaning of the practices and context of the event is constituted primarily in terms of ritual. More experienced members draw on available resources such as expertise and leadership in order to have their claims heard (Best 2008). Furthermore, as these key claimsmakers are in the company of like-minded individuals, their claims that the hook pull is a ritual expression and spiritual journey are likely to be persuasive; indeed, the meanings constructed around the event resonated with members as such claims are consistent with the stock of ideas, images, concepts and words that most participants understand to be reasonable (Best 2008). Thus, the construction of *Body & Soul* as a space of spiritual, ritual and individual expression is rhetorically appealing to the specific individuals drawn to the event and as illustrated in the subsequent section the experience of becoming vulnerable and open to deviant ways of learning about oneself and others holds similar appeal for individuals dissatisfied with mainstream opportunities for spiritual and individual expression. The next section of this chapter outlines member claimsmaking activity with respect to the reconstruction of these deviant practices as an appealing and rational response to cultural deficits in contemporary mainstream Western society.

Problematizing Mainstream Constructions

Body Rites & The Meaning of Pain

For most participants the perceived lack of ritual in mainstream Western culture strengthened the spiritual and overall significance or sacredness of *Body & Soul* as a unique space for ritual expression. The sense of fulfillment and self-expression that members claim to experience at *Body & Soul* is perceived as repressed, dismissed, or simply lost in Western culture; particularly, the relationship between the spirituality, the body and pain. Maureen, age forty, argues that conventional rituals that mark events in Western culture largely exclude the body, which to her is an important element of ritual exercise. To address this cultural deficit, she uses body ritual to mark significant aspects or accomplishments in her life. In addition, she feels that through her work as a part time body modification artist she is able to introduce some elements of ritual into mainstream channels:

In the society that we live in we do not mark our rights of passage with bodily experiences. We have all these things like baptism and first communion and weddings and funerals... those are all outside the body. They are more in our head when that stuff happens, whereas other cultures are known to mark rites of passage with body functions or marking special events with body rituals. We are a society that doesn't do that. For me it makes way more sense for me to remember important days or things in my life by marking my body than just going "oh ok, this happened". I have marked my body for getting clean and sober, I have marked my body to commemorate part of my heritage, I have marked my body to honour my mother. When my father passed away a little after that I tattooed my body. You don't really see in it this day and age and in this culture that people mark their bodies as a rite of passage of homage or anything like that. We [modification artists] give people a chance to do that, if they want it we can do that or we can just beautify it by poking a hole in it.

Maureen contrasts the norms of ritual expression and rites of passage in contemporary Western culture with those of "other" cultures that are more heavily oriented toward body marking practices and perceived as adopting worldviews that are more spiritual (Pitts

2003). For her, mainstream cultural passages are backward and do not properly acknowledge significant events in one's life. Through body modification, she finds a means of marking important events in her life and honouring people that "makes sense" and finds additional solace in being able to offer this to other people through her work.

Body marking, as a method of identifying meaningful events in one's life or symbolizing a rite of passage, is something that several participants felt members of contemporary Western society were unconsciously or consciously searching for. As David, fifty-one, explains "we are all looking for something we are all questing, whether we are questing for new experience, wisdom, the scene, [we] are looking for something". For others, the "something" that is sought after in Western culture is a sense of belonging more concretely linked to body ritual. As Jake, a thirty-nine year old body modification artist explains:

Western white culture is looking for that rite of passage. Western white culture doesn't have that. European descent, we don't have that rite of passage and that's what we're looking for... spiritual rituals that mark a rite of passage that give meaning to you are one of us, you are now part of a tribe, you are an adult.

For Jake the lack of body ritual in contemporary society is indicative of the erosion of community, sense of belonging, and personal identification with groups that contributes to a general feeling of longing amongst members of mainstream Western society.

Likewise, other participants claim that the lack of body ritual in Western culture in combination with the lack of "open" spirituality made membership in Western society a repressive, empty, frustrating and isolating experience. Chloé explicates this feeling in the following way:

In your day to day life most people in our Western culture either don't have much of a spiritual life-we don't have structure or place for a spiritual life- or, it's in religious circumstances where it's really kind of dictated how you feel and what you should

feel...there doesn't seem to be a lot of openness and spontaneity, what you experience there [at church]. So, in our day to day lives we go around and we feel feelings all the time but we don't really have a place to experience or express them...you're at work and you're really frustrated, you can't just scream at someone or break something necessarily you've got to keep it inside, you know, we're busy doing all these things that we need to do to make sure we have a place to live make sure we have a place to eat, maintaining this lifestyle and going through the motions of all these things that society says we need to do or that our families taught us that we need to do- what we need to do to just keep continuing like we are, so I think we don't have a lot of time for spiritual maintenance and spiritual experience.

Participants problematized this deficit by claiming that people are subsequently left “questing” for fulfillment, self-realization, self-expression and belonging. The absence of body ritual in mainstream culture is claimed to be a detriment to spiritual life and the proper marking of rites of passage; subsequently, to fill this cultural void members appropriate practices from the body modification industry and “make it into a ritual” with other like-minded individuals.

A second theme emerging from participants' critique of Western culture is the underestimated significance of physical pain. Participants claim that “pain” has a negative connotation in mainstream society; indeed, Star feels that “people assume all pain is bad pain” and that pain is constructed entirely as cause for concern rather than an opportunity for personal growth and spirituality. Conversely, for most participants the physical pain experienced at *Body & Soul* is interpreted as an opportunity to reach an “altered state” or to experiment with body chemistry in terms of the “high” that accompanies a lengthy session of flesh hook pulling. Likewise, participants claim that because pain is multifaceted it can be used to accomplish physical and mental challenge, achieve transcendence, or (re)claim ownership of one's body; thus, most members conceptualize pain, specifically invited pain, as carrying a positive and transformative potential.

Pain plays a significant role in participants' accounts of their experiences at *Body & Soul*. For many participants, part of the allure of the hook pull ritual is the feeling of accomplishment that immediately follows the piercing portion of the ritual. Emma, a twenty six year old industrial worker, describes her first experience with being pierced at a hook pull ritual:

...the whole preparation of putting on the iodine and wiping you down all that stuff- you really know- it's like "Ok! Well, I am doing this! I'm doing it!" Putting it [the needle and hook] through and the anticipation is almost worse, *almost*. I mean it does hurt like a mother fucker for just a moment and then it still hurts but a lot less. You look down and you've got these huge hooks in your chest [laughs]! I was like...ya! [laughs] There is a bit of machismo and masochism because you are proud and you think "look what I can take, I can take all of this!"

The feeling of "machismo" or accomplishment is mirrored in Ava's interpretation of ritual piercing as mental challenge. Ava, a thirty-eight year old corporate project manager, described her experience with the anticipation and sensation of being pierced:

I think one thing is proving to yourself that you can do things that you never thought you could do. That is sort of one like one level of your mind. It [the hook pull] sounds so torturous, people would think that you would just be traumatized but you see the people during and after and as petrified as they were beforehand they are just glowing afterwards. It always fascinates me that you start off with this nervous thing, it doesn't matter how many times you have done it before everybody is still nervous to go through this process again. I personally hate piercings...because I just think too much and it's quite difficult. And the thing is that I've done it- I don't even know, I have lost count how many times I've done it, and every time is different. Absolutely every single time is different and it never gets boring.

Within the context of *Body & Soul*, pain is constructed as an opportunity for self-challenge, accomplishment, and triumph over normative associations of pain with "torture". The individual experience of being pierced is interpreted as rewarding and likewise the collective positivity and sense of accomplishment fosters solidarity and cohesion with other members of the group.

In contrast to mainstream interpretations, pain at *Body & Soul* is constructed as a way to overcome fear and experience physical and mental challenge. As Ava explains, this challenge often seems impossible, so much so that it nearly prevents some participants from performing the ritual. Here, Steve and Maureen recall their experiences with the challenge of being pierced:

The biggest thing for me was actually getting those fucking things [hooks] into my chest [laughs]... I went last [to be pierced] and I almost didn't do it, I was not real comfortable with the thought of Jake putting these hooks in my chest [laughs].

I was not that eager to get pierced, I was the last person to be pierced. I got pierced- and it fucking hurt! But that was probably also because I was so tense, I was so afraid. They told me breath in [breathes] breath out [breathes] breathe in then I felt the needles going through me and I didn't breathe anymore. I tensed up and it's going to freaking hurt when you tense up.

This challenge is intensified for Nathan, a bus driver and body modification practitioner who uses the hook pull ritual as an opportunity to overcome a childhood phobia of needles.

The positive themes of challenge and accomplishment via invited physical pain are embodied in the repeatedly articulated claim that “there is no pain, there is only intense physical sensation”. Likewise, although most participants experienced nervous anticipation prior to being pierced, many claimed that the pain immediately subsided and was replaced with a rush of endorphins and overall feeling of euphoria. Indeed most participants suggested that the interpretation of an experience as negative or positive pain as contingent on the individual's state of mind; Nathan explains:

That's the whole pain thing- if it's welcome and wanted then it's not pain, it's intense physical sensation... If you felt that you were going to be brutalized by the hooks and felt that you were brutalized by the hooks then you will feel that after. It's different for different people.

Much like the isolated geographic location, within the immediate context of *Body & Soul* the construction of the experience of pain as contingent on individual interpretation facilitates members' disassociation with normative assumptions about various elements of their practices. Likewise, the positive (re)definition of pain was adopted amongst first time participants; as Megan explains "I didn't know what to expect but I knew it wasn't going to hurt and that to me is like pure transcendence of pain".

Similarly, many participants at *Body & Soul* who have extensive experience with pain experimentation in the contexts of BDSM and kink incorporate this perspective into their spiritual journey of flesh hook pulling. For some participants, working with pain in the context of a body modification ritual is an opportunity for personal transformation, learning, and empowerment:

The first time I did the hook pull it was... a gift to myself. I felt like I really needed to do this and I wanted to do this extreme ritual thing involving my body because I do BDSM and a while ago I realized that pain takes me to certain psychological and emotional places that I wouldn't normally go. I use pain as a way to ground myself and reconnect with myself and explore myself. The places I go can be fun or be very interesting or very scary and I think it's worthwhile to explore your dark places or your scary places because you get to know yourself more and you get to be more empowered that way. As a masochist and someone who does embodied rituals and spiritual stuff I think a lot about pain. I think that pain strips you down and shows you a lot about yourself. It pushes you to an extreme. You get pain and you can go through stages of like resisting it, accepting it, struggling with it, your process teaches you about yourself and who you are...so I think it kind of strips you away to some essential aspects of yourself to parts that you don't normally have access to or the time or place to experience.

Pain is reconstructed in this context as a positive experience that carries the potential for self exploration and growth. Contrary to popular wisdom that suggests "all pain is bad", practitioners of flesh hook pulling construct pain as a transcendent, personal, and spiritual experience that when embraced can offer possibilities for enlightenment, journey and self transformation. Furthermore, Star and Jake respectively reinforce the collective critique

of mainstream interpretations of pain in claiming that the transformative elements of pain ritual embodied within body modification more generally can extend beyond personal enlightenment:

I have a lot of teachings about the body being our only true possession, going through that kind of pain, it's a good pain. It is not a bad pain. The position of the hooks is significant, there are a lot of physiological reasons why those things work but the pain is a vehicle to travel with I think that's why there're are so many rituals that involve some physical suffering. I am a firm believer that it helps to bring more balance to the world.

The more common ground we all have with body modification the less we look at race and class and status because if you modify your body in a way that is painful like a tattoo and that leaves a mark like a tattoo- everyone no matter how rich you are, no matter what you have in the world you have to pay for it in pain and that is the great equalizer. We are one of the few cultures left in the world that does not have a rite of passage that involves pain and leaves a mark and puts a change in your life.

The above claims are part of a conceptual and interpretive process of reality construction that builds up an image of Western society as one that is culturally and spiritually bankrupt. In this context, claimsmakers challenge the taken for granted construction of all pain as negative by introducing and interpreting it as a conduit to personal growth, transcendence and accomplishment; likewise, participants claim that because Western culture lacks body ritual people are left searching for a means of fulfillment. Hence members implicitly construct themselves as types of people seeking a means to enlightenment which they find at *Body & Soul*; subsequently, their practises are interpreted as facilitating a journey of spirituality, emotional release, and offering an opportunity for personal and communal validation that is simply lost to mainstream convention.

Negotiating Cultural Deficits at Body & Soul

Finding Spirituality

Whether it was consciously sought or introduced for the first time, spirituality is a recurring theme in the participants' accounts of their experience with *Body & Soul*. For some, the hook pull prompted interest in learning about ritual and spirituality; still, the majority of participants who felt drawn to the hook pull as a spiritual exercise expressed frustration with the lack of mainstream opportunities for spirituality and body ritual. Chloé finds a spiritual outlet in body modification and ritual events such as *Body & Soul*. For her, body ritual practices and events offer a “space and time” to disengage from the behavioural requirements of her day to day life and connect with her inner feelings and spirituality. She explains:

By going away to ritual and by setting a day or two aside and saying I'm going to a ritual, I'm going to go and do a ritual and it's a special place and time to do something right and just freeing yourself from the rest of the world and just going to this place and just separating yourself from your job and all these other aspects of yourself- you kind of have a chance to go ok, when I am not being certain way around my family, when I am not behaving a certain way around my friends, when I am not behaving a certain way even around my lover when I am not behaving a certain way at work when I am not behaving a certain way as I'm walking down the street and I believe that it is important for me to behave certain ways even as I'm walking down the street. Who am I and what's going on inside me, you know? What are the feelings I carry around inside me and what are the experiences that I am having. So I think this ritual provides a space and a time for that.

She explains further that “the ritual aspect depends on the intention and the mindset of the person being modified and the modifier”. In contrast to body modifications performed at tattoo and piercing studios, she finds that the hook pull practise at *Body & Soul* is specifically constructed in terms of spirituality:

I think that the hook pull is definitely a ritual. It's structured as a ritual, it's named as a ritual, we do a bunch of things like setting up the altar, like calling the corners, getting in a circle and talking about what the purpose of this is, *makes it into a ritual*.

The ritual and spiritual aspect of more conventional modes of body modification and body modification in general is not continuously present; rather, it is specifically at body modification gatherings such as *Body & Soul* where ritual is actively constructed.

Likewise Jake describes his discontent with mainstream spiritual resources and the confinement he felt in seeking conventional religion versus the fulfillment he experiences with body modification after having met Fakir Musafar:

I grew up with absolutely no religion or spirituality in my life because that was just weird and my family didn't get into all of that kind of stuff. So it meant that I grew up very jaded but in other ways very free of pre-set notions of religion. So, I was kind of free to delve into all aspects of it and what I saw out of organized religion as a business, big business...I discovered my spirituality after I met Fakir and differentiating between religion and spirituality was a moment in my life where you don't have to have religion to be spiritual so that was very refreshing and I think that growing up without a religion helped me become myself.

Similarly, below Danielle describes her first experience at the most recent *Body & Soul* as an introduction to modification ritual and alternate spirituality and Nathan expresses a similar sentiment to Jake in terms of his experience with flesh hook pulling and how spirituality within the context of extreme body modification differs from that in mainstream culture and established religions:

...after having that experience, I definitely want to know more about it [ritual]. I have never been a religious person or a spiritual person. I kind of always rejected that, I didn't want to be confined to any sort of frame of faith. But this isn't about religion, it is about spirituality and those connections that can't really be explained but they are there. That is something that I have to look forward to.

I consider myself a spiritual person. I do not consider myself in any way, shape or form a religious person. Religion is a very organized entity...I am a spiritual person, I am very in tune with the things around me, very centred, very sure of my place in the universe. It [his spirituality] is unstructured but I can seek out rituals and I get things from the hook pull. I have this loving and open environment. We aren't trying to convert anybody we're not keeping our numbers up, there's no pressure or manipulation.

Mainstream religious resources are interpreted as rigid and confining whereas spirituality within the context of *Body & Soul* is interpreted as open and flexible. This too, enhances the appeal of *Body & Soul* as a unique and special experience and place for acceptance and spiritual growth.

The spirituality that participants find at *Body & Soul* is conceptualized in terms of “journey”. Like the above construction of pain, “journey” is interpreted as contingent on the individual’s intent but typically characterized by feelings of transcendence, elation, and emotional release. Below Maureen and Ava respectively describe their experiences of “journey” with flesh hook pulling:

I have all sorts of journeys. At the last pull that we did on the island, what I did was I just found my tree; I felt like ok that’s the place I want to go it is a very intuitive thing. I don’t know why or how it’s just the place I want to go now, I hooked myself up to it and I started to pull and I closed my eyes... all of the sudden all I could see this bright white light in front of my eyes, sometimes I see yellow, sometimes I see orange, this time I saw white. I didn’t keep my eyes open, later I pulled again and I had blindfolded myself with my bandana and the same thing bright white light. I don’t necessarily know what it is but it was a good feeling. The white light was a really good feeling.

Once you are doing the hook pull it’s this slow transition throughout the day or sometimes quite quick depending on the group that you are with, you just hit a state of bliss usually. They’ll [participants] purge [emotionally], you’ll watch one person usually and they will go through a state where they’ll be calm and then they’ll cry and then I’ve seen people that will orgasm, people that you can tell that they leave their bodies, they’ll say after “I don’t know where I was but I wasn’t here”. It’s amazing, sometimes they just don’t know where they were you know, couldn’t explain it. And other people have told about how they felt like they transformed into animals, they felt like they went to different places, they saw people that have died and they were able to communicate with them and other people have just said, it was an amazing way to relax.

The claim that hook pulling produces visions, and their subsequent interpretation as personal components of the “journey” experience, implies a passage into another state of awareness which is consistent with the framing of *Body & Soul* as a spiritual ritual.

Likewise, the geographic and physical context of *Body & Soul* served to heighten the spiritual experience of some participants. Surrounded by trees, ocean, dirt and sticks,

many participants felt increasingly connected to nature and their own spirituality.

Respectively Chloé and David explain:

Getting that far away from the rest of the world is really valuable... my spirituality is really connected to nature so being around nature makes it more for me, more connected, more direct.

I am used to these kinds of things where you are taken inward- this one [hook pull] didn't happen that way...at one point I felt connected to everything and at one time. I think the easiest way to describe it is I felt completely connected to everything in the planet. I looked at where I was: bare foot in the earth with the sunshine on my face and the wind over body, my eyes full of the ocean and surrounded by trees over 500 years old, and all of the sudden I felt connected to all of that and more.

The experience of performing a flesh hook ritual in the naturalistic context of *Body & Soul* was emotionally and spiritually overwhelming for some participants. For David, the experience of being “completely in the moment” was so intense that it drew the attention of nearby ka-see-kas who subsequently offered support.

In contrast to opportunities for spirituality and religion in mainstream culture, spirituality at *Body & Soul* is claimed to be a more loving, open, flexible, and positive experience. Members interpret the experience of flesh hook pulling as situated in opposition to conventional approaches to personal and spiritual fulfillment in mainstream culture that are confining or judgemental. Nonetheless, whether participants were drawn to the hook pull as an outlet for ritual and spiritual practice or learned of the ritual and spiritual constructions at the event, each person claimed to be profoundly affected by the experience both mentally and emotionally. Thus by creating, adopting and sustaining a positive definition of *Body & Soul* as spiritual ritual, participants were able to find spirituality and better negotiate what they claim to be spiritual deficits in mainstream culture.

Cathartic Release

A second theme in negotiating the perceived spiritual bankruptcy of Western culture is the cathartic release that accompanies flesh hook pulling and the acceptance of the practice as spiritual expression. For some participants, the hook pull offers a safe space to “release”, “purge”, “let go of”, or “get rid of” emotional “baggage” and to free oneself from “the stuff you don’t need”. The emotion that accompanies being pierced and subsequently pulling from flesh hooks is constructed as cathartic; a cleansing ritual experience that heightens and is heightened by the environment of support created at the event. Several participants cried and screamed out during the ritual as a means of release and became emotional when recalling the experience:

I wanted to feel that spirit was recognized... what I was offering, I had a lot of pain holding me back emotionally, spiritually mentally, I was enticing physical pain to find a way to get past and release, at one point I was pulling back and I was feeling a lot of joy from everything, that’s when they brought the drum in, it happened to be my drum, they were vibrating the drum on the strings that I was attached to. At that point the energy reached a peak and I literally saw and felt beams of light coming into me and I felt that I was receiving a lot more light that I had been in a long time. [she begins to cry] Right at that point when I was feeling my heaven and earth coming together and I could hear an eagle calling. You have a pretty special place in there we are all there to be together. That was the highlight of my pull when that eagle started to sing.

I had desperately looked for a spiritual avenue... I had lost so many friends; I was certainly feeling that way... I knew if I pursued it [the hook pull] this would be what I was looking for, I knew this was the path where I was going to be able to purge and let go of all those demons I had been hanging on to. So I think on some level people who gravitate towards this are looking for something, it may seem very extreme for some, as far as looking for a spiritual path. It’s...a little bit more intense than having communion and holy water... this certainly is something that I needed and is something that might seem very intense. I went through all the drugs and I went through all the booze and I went through all of the other bullshit to sort of find your solace or to make the demons go away so to speak and trying to learn to live with yourself despite whatever drama or bullshit that you’re dealing with.

Here, Star and Madison respectively interpret the hook pull as a spiritual opportunity to come to terms with painful emotions or exorcize “demons”. Madison has participated in

hook pull rituals several times and like other experienced participants she felt that she was looking for something that she could only find at *Body & Soul*.

For many participants, the combination of purging negative emotions, experiencing a spiritual ritual, having visions and being in the presence of nature and friends was interpreted as having a therapeutic effect. While some members participate in *Body & Soul* with the intention of “purging”, others retrospectively interpreted their experience as drawing out and releasing emotions they were unaware of:

I saw two beams of energy light came right into my chest right into my heart centre. It enabled me to feel a sense of being loved that I had been missing, I had some baggage from my past that I was trying to leave behind that had to do with heart connections. It was an accumulation of everything, it was sharing the connection that I had with my friend [a participant], the people supporting us, the drum, just everything, I was just really present in the moment.

I pulled a really long time, it was really intense and all of the sudden I started crying. I think I had not cried in years when that happened so I am crying and I am bawling my eyes out and people are a little bit freaked out because I am crying and I don't do that and I was like ‘Ow! Ow! Ow! It hurts!’ My girlfriend she's like what's going on! What's going on! I'm like crying hurts! My eyes hurt because I am crying! I didn't feel pain in the rest of my body but it felt like there was sand and salt in my eyes and it was grainy. I just bawled, but I wasn't sad, I had no reason to really cry I wasn't sad or depressed or had a major loss or whatever, but I think I just had years of not crying and all these things stored up and it just kind of broke when I was pulling and I just cried. It wasn't a bad cry; I was actually pretty relieved to get that out. It had probably been there for years I just never felt sad and got it out. So I bawled my eyes out and then I was good and then I started all over again. My first hook pull was the first time I cried in years, years!

Most participants claimed that the emotional release common during flesh hook pulling is attributable to the ritual practices at the event. Specifically, many participants claimed that the specific positioning of the hooks under the flesh activated or “opened” one's heart chakra which subsequently enabled emotional release and transcendence. Succinctly, Star describes this connection: “you are pierced to the heart chakra. That's where peace is and that's where peace lives.”

Personal Validation & Group Solidarity: Legitimizing Ritual Body Modification

Expressing discontent with mainstream culture largely in terms of the lack of “open” spirituality, body ritual and opportunities for self-exploration via pain, participants learn to embrace and recognize the experience of the hook pull as a way to fill this cultural void. Thus participants in *Body & Soul* interpret the hook pull as a reasonable alternative or response to what is perceived as a spiritually deprived and repressive society. If not specifically drawn to the ritual for spiritual fulfillment and emotional release, participants interpret the hook pull as a way to feel connected with other people and experiment with body chemistry. Regardless of the spiritual approach, all participants claim that their participation in *Body & Soul* is positive and personally significant; in turn, the claims of others in the group validated new and recurring member’s experiences, heightened group cohesion and legitimated ritual body modification as a positive and self-affirming rather than deviant, self-mutilative means of expression.

Transformation and Transcendence

Having negotiated cultural deficits and experienced spirituality and fulfillment at *Body & Soul*, most participants subsequently report feelings of empowerment, transformation, growth and boundary transcendence when prompted about their experience with this form of extreme body modification. For Madison, the cathartic aspects of the hook pull allowed her to not only “let go” of people she had lost, but to transcend negative feelings and more fully live her own life. Similarly, Chloé interprets her participation in the hook pull as a “reward” for getting through a rough time in her

life. Like Madison, she experiences her participation in flesh hook rituals helps her to learn about herself and grow as a person:

I thought I was being weak and fucked up all the time and so I've really come into myself. It kind of seems like this [the hook pull] is part of becoming the human I'm being and fully actualizing myself, fully realizing myself, fully connecting with myself but also as kind of a reward for the past few years. [Chloé]

I have a very powerful connection to it [the hook pull]. Very powerful. I can't explain it, I don't know why. My first hook pull was four years ago and I was initially very curious and very excited to explore the possibilities because I didn't know of any of it prior to meeting Jake and he certainly encouraged me to explore my curiosity... I am grateful to him to this very day for encouraging me to do something like that. The hook pull was absolutely extraordinary and very very very powerful, very cathartic, very emotional, and very exhausting! [laughs] I had very very powerful visions, I had seen people in my visions who had passed on years ago and the experience allowed me to let go of a lot of baggage or garbage or whatever you want to call it, that I had been hanging on to. I was living a life of martyrdom and I didn't seem to think that I was worthy of living my own life or exploring my own experiences, but seeing as I was still going to live on I thought I should be doing something positive for other people which is what I was doing... After the hook pull I realized that I *did* want to live, I *did* want to thrive, I *did* want to have these incredible life experiences, I *did* want to explore my own universe and not feel like I had to be this martyr for everybody else and that's why my first hook pull experience was extraordinary. And I haven't looked back since I don't think! [Madison]

As a result of interpreting their experiences with hook pulling as transcendence, members at *Body & Soul* claim that they experience self-improvement and growth. Even amongst first time participants this interpretation was common and in some instances more intense. Here, Megan discusses the invincibility and heightened sense of respect that she felt after participating in *Body & Soul* for the first time and Star describes her subsequent feelings of personal growth and transformation:

I feel more dominant in my life because of this. I had someone put hooks in my chest and that is strength. Anything anyone could try to do to me will fail. It just doesn't make any sense to worry about anything any more. I have more respect for my parents.... So my level of respect for my elders, because of the spiritual and ceremonial aspect of this I learned that I need to respect and honour respect between me and my mom... I am not engaging in any banter or negativity but I would have before the ceremony...My respect for everything has heightened.

I have been a lot happier person since that hook pull... there have been a lot more doors opening up and it is because I was able to break an unhealthy connection with

the past, [and] being able to share it with a close friend, it brought me closer to the spirit world.

The implicit claim being made in participant narratives is that because of the specific method of body rituals, one can transcend negative emotions and experience self-affirmation. Many participants describe their journeys as spiritually “transcendent” and “transformative”; still even amongst participants who do not use these specific terms to describe their spiritual experience there is a common interpretation that “something” is felt or changed. As one participant suggested: “...it changes you somehow ...it affects you”.

Individual Empowerment & Community Building

To reinforce the rejection of mainstream Western culture and subsequent adoption of deviant body ritual as a means of addressing this perceived cultural deficit, members retrospectively construct and reaffirm the normalcy of their practices via the rhetoric of personal empowerment and community building. Reflecting on their experience, many members claim that the flesh hook practices performed at *Body & Soul* have transformed their self-image and increased their self-esteem and many report feelings of empowerment which they attribute to the ritual. Likewise, to establish the normality of their deviance, members emphasize the benefit of flesh hook pulling in terms of the sense of community that is fostered during and after the event. The personal and communal benefits of flesh hook pulling are claimed to be typical of the practise; in turn, this reinforces the framing of *Body & Soul* as a positive and normalized means of healing, expressing individuality and spirituality, and connecting with others having the same experience.

Members typically interpreted their participation in *Body & Soul* as part of both an individual and collective journey toward self fulfillment. In terms of individual experience, the rhetoric of “empowerment” and “transformation” is repeatedly employed. For Megan, in the weeks subsequent to *Body & Soul*, the meaning of her participation began to be reconstructed in terms of empowerment. While Megan claimed that *Body & Soul* allowed her the confidence to take control of her life, Chloé constructed the experience in broader terms suggesting that via the hook pull ritual one can become the person they want to be:

...my level of confidence went up and because it is such an extreme ceremonial passage it was such a transformational experience for me to get out of the victim mentality and into self empowerment and it just happened all of the sudden I felt stronger and more able to take control over my own life and it wasn't painful...it is empowering. [Megan]

...it [hook pull rituals] made me re-think that the form of body modification isn't important it's the reasons you're doing it and what you get out of it- I think it should empower you it should make you more the person you want to be it should make you more comfortable in your body instead of doing it for external pressures...the difference between doing something for yourself as a person versus doing something to yourself to like make yourself *acceptable*. [Chloé]

By interpreting the experience of hook pulling as contingent on the individual's intent, members construct the hook pull as an individual exercise in self improvement while distancing and contrasting it with oppressive, mainstream “external pressures”. This enhances the claim the hook pull is transforming and empowering. Similarly, the rhetoric of therapy and self-help enhances the readability of these claims (Best 2008). For instance, some participants claim that their participation in flesh hook rituals is therapeutic in the sense that they are able to transcend negative emotions and feelings and engage in a process of self-discovery:

...whenever I get hooked or suspend or things like that I'm always really happy which surprises me because I tend to be kind of tense and anxious and I've had a lot of

problems with depression ...[with] something like this I'll pass through some frustration or, loneliness, or rage and then I just get to this place of incredible joy. That's what I got from the first pull that I ever did which I went to at a really sad point in my life when I was having a lot of difficulty. Just the ability to discover that when I go through something intense what there is at the core of me is like this intense amount of joy and happiness and that's kind of really who I am and really what's inside of me like that was really powerful and really empowering... what a beautiful thing to discover about myself and go back to by doing these things.

Here, hook pull rituals are claimed to have the power to assist people in transcending negative feelings and discovering their "true" self. In this sense, the hook pull is constructed as "empowering" and "transcendent" which further contributes to the framing of *Body & Soul* as a practice of spiritual and individual expression and healing.

While some participants offered lengthy narratives that construct the hook pull as transformative, the significance of this experience is also mystified by repeated assertions that it is "almost impossible to describe". Here David attempts to explain the hook pull in more abstract terms:

I was both exhausted and exhilarated. A lot of what we do is a series of paradoxes, we gain insight through restriction, we gain freedom by being bound, it all sounds very trite until you go through the experience yourself.

This illustrates both a willingness to construct the hook pull ritual as deeply powerful, transformative, and enlightening but also an acute awareness that outsiders might not be receptive to such claims. For this reason, members are able to dismiss criticisms of their practices by claiming that the experience of participation in *Body & Soul* is "difficult" or "impossible" to explain to non-members; outsiders cannot possibly understand their position and therefore their negative interpretation of the practice is dismissed.

While the experience of flesh hook pulling is constructed as an intensely personal and individual journey, the process of community building and the connections made with others at *Body & Soul* is claimed to be an equally important component of one's

experience. Similarly, the rhetoric of community building compliments claims that construct the hook pull as an open and inclusive ritual and this construction is situated in opposition to that of mainstream Western culture. When asked what *Body & Soul* is about, Emma responded:

Community. Especially thinking about my work, there is this culture of isolation, burning through your money, drinking and going home and watching TV instead of building ties with people. Where is the interaction and community?

Here, Emma normalizes the bodily deviance carried out at *Body & Soul* by reconstructing the practices as a form of community building. In addition, this claim is supported by the subsequent situation of *Body & Soul* in opposition to the “culture of isolation” that characterizes Western society. Below Emma elaborates on the significance of community within the context of hook pulling:

... I like the gathering standing in a circle looking around at everyone and seeing everyone's faces and we are all gathered in the same spot it is really nice... You really feel part of a community, It doesn't matter if you didn't see a person for the entire time they are part of the community... I felt a lot more at home and community becoming a part of the kink community but it wasn't until I started hanging out with the big freaks, the leatherdykes, and the kinky folk, and the body mod people that I really felt at home. ... You can be as different as you want to be and that is ok. Once I found this whole kinky body modification crowd, I was like I am at home here; this is what I was hoping for... The hook pull offers this to people, community and very intense interaction.

Emma constructs *Body & Soul* as a space within a larger community where she finds acceptance and where she feels at “home”. Unlike her experience in mainstream culture, she interprets *Body & Soul* as an open, welcoming and accepting event that encourages a number of communities to converge in the celebration of ritual and of each other. Star corroborates this claim: “I really felt a sense of spiritual presence involved, everyone had a respect. I could feel their intention even though I didn't interact with everyone I felt connected.”

The sense of community building, openness and acceptance characterized participation at *Body & Soul* is an important part of the overall experience for members. For Nathan, the presence of accepting others heightens his experience and allows him to contribute to other members' experiences:

Where else can you bawl your eyes out and people say "cool"? You get very in tune with it...[you] go with it because usually in our lives we are so guarded about everything and anything its nice to let that peel away and let it go... There definitely is an energy...You get all of these emotions and feelings around you and you are accepted into that and it is very easy to feed off of that energy and contribute to it.

Sharing the experience and energy of *Body & Soul* with a group of like minded people is what several participants described as "building a tribe". Interpreting other members in *Body & Soul* as part of a tribe enhances group solidarity, and subsequently members' resources to combat negative constructions by outsiders. Like Emma and Nathan, Ava finds a "home" in the body modification community:

I was fortunate enough to meet someone like Fakir and I just happened to meet all of these amazing people in the body mod industry- so for me it wasn't like one of those ah-ha moments it was more of like learning that there were others like me out there.

For Ava and others, finding people with whom to share the experience of flesh hook pulling offers a sense of belonging and connection.

Whether the feeling is constructed as "community", a "tribe" or "finding others", the claim that *Body & Soul* is a powerful, transformative, connective, individual and collective "journey" is a sentiment that resonates with all members. Below Danielle describes the empowerment to combat negative stereotyping that she derives from the sense of community fostered at *Body & Soul* and David describes participation in *Body & Soul* as something that "goes beyond" or transcends individual differences:

I can honestly say that I have never been more comfortable in my own skin than I am now having been around all these people and doing what I am doing. I grew up in a small town with a very conservative family and after so many years of being that black

sheep to be able to be comfortable in a group of people, a community of people that are just like me; we don't give a fuck and will just willingly be vulnerable on a secluded island the way we were that day. Emotions are all out on the table, and it's just remarkable, you meet some remarkable people. It just feels so good. Regardless of the stigmas or stereotypes that are attached to it, that's all external that doesn't matter- if you know where you are at and you surround yourself with the right people in this industry then all of those things don't matter or shouldn't matter to you.

...part of my journey was when [a participant] and I were hooked together, [a participant] is a boy I am mentoring in the lifestyle I am living, the leatherman lifestyle. He is a heterosexual man and I am a gay man, but it goes beyond that – for us to be hooked together and to dance was an amazingly intense and connecting experience; to have another body move you and to have an effect on another body. The first part was outward finding myself in this huge complicated world- a macroscopic view, to a microscopic view an intense experience with another person.

The general sentiment at *Body & Soul* is that “there is that bond that happens so quickly over such a small period of time during something so intense”. This bond is interpreted as part of a process of building a tribe or a community with like minded people who are open and accepting and with whom it is “safe” to experience “intense physical sensation”, emotional vulnerability, and spiritual expression. The community that is fostered at *Body & Soul* informs what members construct as the subsequent sense of empowerment that follows the ritual.

Taken together, these processes work to (re)construct the deviant nature of flesh hook pulling and other body manipulations carried out at the event. This provides members with the resources to resist stigmatizing labels from non-members and negotiate what they perceive to be the oppressive features of Western society. While a definition of flesh hook pulling as a positive mode of spiritual and individual expression is successfully accomplished within the context of *Body & Soul*, for the most part these claims go unheard in mainstream culture. Consequently, participants continue to carry a doubly discrediting stigma by actively embracing a violation of body norms. To

counteract anticipated negative reactions, participants employ the language of rights⁵⁵ alongside claimsmaking strategies that reconstruct the nature of their deviance and create a coherent and rational account of their practices.

⁵⁵ For instance, statements such as “I believe that you have a right to do what you want with your body” and “your body is yours to do with it what you want” employ the rhetoric of right by claiming ownership of the body.

Chapter Six

Accounting for Extreme Deviance

Making Sense of Radical Flesh Practices

The belief that individual and/or spiritual transcendence and personal fulfillment- or even recreational leisure- can be achieved through flesh hook pulling, sewing limes to one's skin, cheek skewering and other activities associated with *Body & Soul* is beyond the realm of normative violation. It is an example of *extreme* deviance so far removed from what is generally accepted as conforming behaviour that it elicits tremendously negative reactions (Goode & Vail 2008). Consequently, practitioners of this form of deviance are subject to stigmatization and thus required to construct an account of their experience that is intelligible to outsiders whose claims work to deviantize, problematize, stigmatize and undermine the cultural and social legitimacy of radical flesh practices. This research represents an attempt to answer what participants at *Body & Soul* do to manage stigma associated with radical body modification, make sense of their experience, and account for their behaviour to themselves and others. This chapter reviews the arguments advanced, discusses the significance of participant's account-making processes and identifies theoretical implications of the study as well as opportunities for future research emerging from the analysis.

Deviance (Re)Constructed

Because unusual or “deviant” body modification practices are interpreted as voluntary they constitute an invited or “achieved” form of stigma (Goode & Vail 2008; Falk 2001). Consequently, practitioners are subject to charges of double deviance for harbouring the stigma itself and for wilfully violating cultural and social norms. Assumptions about body modification are produced socially in part through the claims of members of the medical and psychological communities, the historical association between flawed moral character and body deviance in criminological literature, and the perpetuation of negative constructions of body modification in contemporary popular culture. As outlined in Chapter Two, the differential interpretation of body modification over time must be understood as inextricably intertwined with the socio-historical and political contexts in which it occurs.

Claimsmaking in medical discourse constructs practitioners of various body modifications as thoughtlessly putting themselves at risk of bacterial infections and blood borne diseases (King & Vidourek 2007; Armstrong et al. 2007; Tweetan, 1998). Psychological discourse frames body modification practice in terms of disturbances associated with drug use (Nathanson et. al 2006), eating disorders (Preti et. al 2006), and psychosocial risks (Aizenman & Jensen 2007) and less common practices such as cutting and branding have been interpreted as indicative of a number of self-injurious syndromes (Pitts 2003; Favazza 2002). These claims are embroiled in stereotypical imagery in popular culture which consistently pairs body deviance with moral bankruptcy. Popular film deviantizes body modification by reinforcing stereotypes of the “freak” and “tattooed criminal” reminiscent of carnival midways and early theories of criminality and by using

shocking images of body deviance as symbolic resources for audiences to identify, categorize and evaluate characters as deviant/conforming and morally praiseworthy/blameworthy (Loseke 2003).

Indeed, the meaning of body modification practice is contested in Western culture and has been variously popularized, stigmatized, pathologized and medicalized. Tattoos for example, have been diversely interpreted as marks of disenfranchised groups, subcultural affiliation, political resistance, criminal deviance, individual expression, performance art, self-help, spirituality, ritual and “savagery”. Noting the complex relationship between deviance, stigmatization and shifting interpretations of body modification over time, I have argued that the question as to how contemporary practitioners make sense of their experience and justify their actions to others can usefully be analyzed via the theoretical lens of contextual social constructionism. I have also argued that Goffman’s (1963, 1959) discussion of stigma and self presentation offer fruitful resources for interpreting how participants in *Body & Soul* engage in identity management and negotiate the stigmatizing construction of physical deviance in academic, media and folk accounts of modified bodies.

As a theory of knowledge and primary approach to the study of deviance and social problems (Berger & Luckmann 1966), social constructionism redirects theoretical inquiry away from the inherent problematic nature of conditions and toward the way in which reality is socially created and actively produced. Thus, this research is informed by the theoretical assumption that knowledge and meaning are matters of social definition and what comes to be taken for granted as “fact” is the product of successful definitional accomplishment (Miller & Holstein 1993). I argued that despite charges of ontological

gerrymandering (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985), a contextual social constructionist approach that considers the consistency of claims with material reality as well as the significance of the claimsmaking context is the most productive and practical approach to the study of meaning-making at *Body & Soul*. Building on the contributions of scholars working under the umbrella of contextual social constructionism (Best 1990, 1005, 2008; Best & Loseke 2003; Loseke 2003, 2009; Sacco 2003, 2005), this research has sought to illuminate the conceptual and interpretive processes that formulate, change, sustain and abandon meaning and the discursive strategies that social actors employ in the production of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann 1966).

Adopting a qualitative, ethnographic approach, this study has attempted to explicate the processes by which practitioners of radical body modification account for their experience and interpret their subjective experiences; however, it acknowledges that meaning is continually (re)negotiated between researcher and subject. In Chapter Four I attempt to account for the co-authorization and co-articulation of knowledge by exercising reflexivity regarding how meaning was actively constructed or built up in the field and during interview encounters. In Chapter Five, I detailed how participants employ discursive, symbolic, and behavioural claimsmaking strategies to construct a coherent account of their experiences. I interpreted members' (counter)claimsmaking activity and stories about their experiences as part of a strategy for establishing a positive, normative construction of flesh hook pulling, engaging in identity politics and problematizing cultural body myths. I argued that different forms of claimsmaking activity paradoxically work to (re)construct the deviant nature of flesh hook pulling by

aligning it with conventional cultural goals while simultaneously putting forth a critique of cultural norms.

Account-Making

The sum of the participants' claimsmaking activity comprises a coherent "account" of their experience that functions to bridge the conceptual gap between their behaviour and what is culturally accepted or expected (Scott & Lyman 1968: 46). Because that which constitutes normative or "expected" behaviour has been successfully definitionally accomplished in Western society, cultural norms and behavioural codes are taken for granted or "sedimented" and continually folded into new constructions (Schutz 1970). Culturally sedimented ideas shape questions that are "settled in advance in our culture" and hence require no explanation (Scott & Lyman 1968:47). For example, conventional practices that modify the body such as shaving or dying one's hair require little justification because motivations are culturally settled and rarely questioned; however, because the meaning of modifications such as flesh hook pulling are more highly contested it constitutes "untoward" behaviour subject to valuative inquiry and demands for explanation (Scott & Lyman 1968).

Deviant individuals must offer an account of their unexpected behaviour that is consistent with culturally sedimented knowledge regarding what is a reasonable and situationally appropriate explanation (Scott & Lyman 1968). I have argued that the participants' (counter)claimsmaking activity functions to outwardly justify or rationalize radical flesh practices, critique social norms, and create collective resources to combat stigmatization. Drawing on available discursive, cultural and contextual resources,

participants (re)construct flesh hook pulling as a form of positive, self-affirming deviance. Justifications typically take the form of vague identifications of problematic features of Western culture such as the perceived lack of body rites, negative construction of physical pain, the stifling character of organized religions that are variously interpreted as fostering a culture of oppression, confinement, rigidity, intolerance, isolation or spiritual bankruptcy. By “condemning the condemners” participants neutralize their deviance and offer a challenge to older interpretations of the normative body aesthetic (a body unmarked by physical alterations, achieved or otherwise) and conventional modes of religious or spiritual expression that in turn makes their behaviour seem reasonable and justified (Sykes & Matza 1957; Wolf 1990).

Furthermore, prior to “finding” spirituality, participants claimed to be “lost”, “searching for something”, “searching for a spiritual avenue”, a home or community, a means of expression, healing, or connecting to others and to nature. They claimed that their introduction to the body modification community and/or alternative spirituality afforded an opportunity for community, acceptance and a sense of belonging they found wanting in conventional culture. Participants rationalize their behaviour by claiming they experienced transcendence, personal growth, emotional release and healing. By framing *Body & Soul* in terms of bodily, individual, and/or spiritual expression, members enhanced the readability of their claims by making it difficult to agree that a practice that offers empowerment, transcendence, healing and/or spiritual fulfillment in a spiritually depraved and isolating culture is “wrong” (Ibarra & Kitsuse 1993).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ However, because the values that claims invoke are variously interpreted amongst members, claims can embody multiple warrants or reasons justifying the same behaviour (Best 2008). While the majority of participants are receptive to claims that the event is part of a spiritual ritual, a minority who do not practice

In this sense, the accounts of participants constitute “a crucial element in the social order since they prevent conflicts from arising by...bridging the gap between action and expectation” (Scott & Lyman 1968:46). In other words, their accounts work to de-deviantize their behaviour by offering justifications or rationalizations for their practices. As detailed in Chapter Five, these accounts appear to be “heard” or successfully definitionally accomplished among members of their group; likewise, new members are typically receptive to the claims of participants more experienced in flesh hook pulling. While the accounts of participants are situationally appropriate in the context of *Body & Soul*, some of the participant’s stories also suggest that they engage in account avoidance in other contexts such as work or family gatherings by hiding evidence of body modification or by mystifying their behaviour with claims that suggest flesh hook pulling is “almost impossible to explain”.

In addition to external justifications, the account-making process is also reflective of the “underlying negotiation” of identity that facilitates the processes by which members individually learn to interpret radical flesh hook practices as acceptable (Scott & Lyman 1968:59). Baumeister and Newman (1994) suggest the process of telling stories, or account-making, helps people to make sense of their personal experience. Motivations for storytelling can include passing information, fulfilling a need for others to validate identity claims, or a strategy to attract other people (Baumeister & Newman 1994). Needs

flesh hook pulling for spiritual fulfillment claim that the hook pull is a means of individual expression, experimentation with body chemistry, finding community with other “open-minded” people, or simply fun. These claims appeal to slightly different values or reasons justifying participation (expression, excitement, leisure, community building). Nonetheless, though to some extent there is dissent within the *Body & Soul* group with regard to the specific warrants of claims, the overarching argument that the hook pull “is what you want/need it to be” apparently encompasses any and all justification for practicing extreme body modification. These claims are consistent with the common contrast between Western culture and the “open”, “accepting”, “empowering” and otherwise positive features of *Body & Soul*.

fulfilled by storytelling can include the need to interpret events as meaningful or having purpose, the need to make sense of experience in such a way that one is constructed as a good and moral person, or the need to bolster a sense of efficacy or self worth (Baumeister & Newman 1994). Stories then are a form of claimsmaking activity used to convince others as well as oneself of certain interpretations of reality.

For instance, the participant's accounts of *Body & Soul* can be interpreted as type of "fulfillment narrative" that describes the sequence of events (frustration with lack of spiritual outlets in Western culture, feelings of alienation, finding an "alternative" community) leading up to a moment of fulfillment (flesh hook pulling). Rather than merely describing flesh hook pulling itself as fulfilling, members' narrative accounts operate much like other accounts of spiritual enlightenment wherein the storyteller focuses on struggles that precede the fulfillment in such a way that the fulfillment itself is idealized (Baumeister & Newman 1994). In this sense, Baumeister and Newman (1994) argue, the storyteller is able to retain a sense of purpose about negative events that happen by transforming them into progressive steps toward a positive experience.

Theoretical & Methodological Implications for Future Research

As this study assumes that comprehension of the social world is inextricably intertwined with subjective interpretation, a methodological implication is that I unavoidably contributed to the meaning-making of extreme body modification during interactions with participants and throughout the research process. My contribution to meaning-making was treated as an additional layer of analysis that hopefully further illuminated the interactive and reciprocal character of knowledge production. I can not

claim that the results reflect singularly the participants' interpretations of their behaviour and practices or my isolated rendition; rather, they are illuminations of claimsmaking activity that have been collaboratively built-up between the participants and me. Future research might explore the role of the researcher's presence in the (counter)claimsmaking activity of deviant groups.

While this study drew on ethnographic strategies, I was constrained in terms of the amount of time I could spend in the field. Time spent in the field during the data collection phase of the research was primarily concentrated at *Body & Soul*. While this method enabled me to offer a first hand account of the event, the analysis subsequently reflected the claimsmaking activity of extreme deviants in a particular context. Future researchers might conduct a longer period of field research in order to illuminate how claims are made and accounts constructed in the various social contexts that modified people occupy. This study demonstrated the significance of understanding claimsmaking activity in the socio-historical, political and immediate context in which it occurs; hence, future research might consider how extreme body deviants account for their experience in their day to day lives, at work, family gatherings, grocery shopping and other social contexts where they would routinely find themselves.

The results of this study suggest several new paths of inquiry for future research on body modification and deviance. One fertile area is the study of storytelling, narratives and accounts (Orbuch 1997). This study focussed on how social actors make claims about reality and attempt to establish definitions of deviant behaviour that approximate conventional cultural goals and values such as community building, spiritual fulfillment and individual expression and hence justify or rationalize their behaviour.

Future research might consider why claimsmakers include or omit content from their accounts and what this demonstrates about the internal needs fulfilled by account-making and story telling (Baumeister & Newman 1994). Constructionist scholar Donileen Loseke has recently argued that because “it is not possible to understand how people think or make moral evaluations without understanding how people feel” the role of emotional discourse in claimsmaking activity is a relevant area of inquiry (Loseke 2009:199). Future research might consider how “emotional discourse” in (counter)claimsmaking activity is employed to reconstruct deviant behaviour and the implications of different emotional claimsmaking strategies for the successful accomplishment of definition.

One venue for the study of emotional discourse is in claimsmaking “publicity” (Gubrium 1993). To a large extent this study considered the “unheard” underdog claimsmaking strategies of a group of extreme body modification practitioners; while a positive definition of flesh hook pulling was locally accomplished among members of their group, this activity remains largely clandestine and apt to draw negative reactions. Future research might consider public discourse on radical body modification and the extent to which extreme flesh practices are constructed as a social problem. For example, in the American context, some extreme body modification artists such as Eric “the Lizard Man” Sprague have expressed concern with attempts of claimsmakers who oppose radical body modification to legally prohibit practices such as tongue splitting (Sprague 2009).

Another area in need of further research is the extent to which claimsmaking activity about extreme body deviance is shaped by cultural assumptions about gender. Some scholars have suggested that women engage in body modification as a means of “reclaiming” a body that has been victimized by abuse (Pitts 2003) or otherwise invaded

by ailments such as breast cancer (Mifflin 1997). Still other scholars have argued that modifications such as tattooing are used by women to signify their conformity or deviance from normative gender constructs (Atkinson 2002). Future research might consider women's engagement with radical forms of body modification such as flesh hook pulling and the extent to which women might be triply stigmatized for harbouring body stigma and violating both cultural and gender norms. Other opportunities for future research flowing from the results from this study include extreme body deviance as leisure activity (Williams 2009); the process of "becoming" and learning to identify as "modified" (Matza 1969; Becker 1963); and the shifting constructions of body modification practice in popular culture.

Concluding Comments

This thesis has attempted to identify interesting features of the accounts of members of *Body & Soul* and offer a useful explanation of this phenomenon by considering the relationship of member's claimsmaking activity to the wider social and cultural context (Best 1993). Maintaining a contextual social constructionist position, I have argued and attempted to demonstrate that the way in which reality is constructed can be understood by considering the available rhetorical, discursive, symbolic, contextual and cultural resources that social actors draw on to make claims about their experience. Approaching the study of deviant phenomena from the perspective of contextual social constructionism offers insight into the relationship between the social construction of deviant behaviour, rationalizations for stigmatization, and the way in which stigmatized groups resist negative labelling, account for their deviance and advance social critique.

This research represents a unique contribution to sociological literature as it puts forth the first account of how flesh hook pulling is constructed by its practitioners and why their claims are significant in terms of the relationship between their accounts and the wider social context.

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Appendix A- Letter of Information & Consent Form (pertaining to observation)

Project Title: “[Name of Event]: A Study of Nonmainstream Body Modification”

Researcher: Alicia Horton, Department of Sociology, Queen’s University

Study Goals: The aim of this study is to illuminate the experience of participants in the [Name of Event] Festival in August 2009 through observational fieldwork and subsequent in-depth interviews. I will be present at the [Name of Event] festival to record notes regarding the day’s activities. I intend to do nothing to disturb the integrity and comfort of the day. At the end of the festival I might approach you to request an interview at any time that is convenient for you- if you would like to participate in a subsequent interview there is a **second consent form**. Your signature below in no way obligates you to consent to an interview; that is entirely to your discretion. The signature below is meant to confirm that you understand I will be present at the festival and during this time you could be observed. There will be minimal intrusion into your time at the [Name of Event] festival. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your signature below confirms that you understand that your participation is voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions. Recording devices to be used on the day of the [Name of Event] festival are limited strictly to a pen and paper, your signature on this consent form confirms your permission that a pen and paper be used on the day of the festival. You are free at any time to withdraw from observation at the [Name of Event] festival. If you decline participation prior to the day of the festival I will not be recording any observations related to your presence at the festival. Declining participation in no way prevents you from attending the festival. If you withdraw during the Festival it is not guaranteed that observational field notes pertaining to your presence taken prior to withdrawal can be identified and destroyed.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality is of the utmost importance to this study. Confidentiality will be protected in publication of this study via the use of pseudonyms. Any identifying information will be altered to the extent that it ensures anonymity to the participants. If we engage in an informal conversation on the day of the festival it is possible that other festival participants could overhear and could identify you despite the use of pseudonyms in subsequent publications; of course, your signature below places you under no obligation to speak to me at the festival. Your signature below is meant to confirm that you understand these provisions around confidentiality and anonymity. The only identifying information is your signature on this consent form. It will be accessible only to me and my supervisor Dr. Vincent Sacco of Queen’s University, strictly as evidence that my presence at this event is ethical in terms of being permitted by the participants. Data will be collected via observational fieldwork recordings via the use of

pen and paper. Subsequently these notes will be transcribed with pseudonyms into electronic format and stored on a memory stick. When not in use, this memory stick will be stored in a locked filing cabinet along with the hard copy field notes. My supervisor, Dr. V.F. Sacco, will have access to this memory stick and consent forms. If he requests them, I will print out the data (contents of this memory stick will not be transmitted electronically by way of email or any other means utilizing an internet connection) and hand deliver it to him. He will keep data/consent forms in a locked filing cabinet. The data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet until the completion of this study at which time it will be destroyed. Hard copy notes will be shredded and electronically stored notes will be deleted.

Publication: The data collected at the festival will be used for future publication in an academic arena. When and if the results of this study are published it will they will be subject to peer review prior to publication, upon which the results of this study will be publically available. A secondary use of this data (in other studies, data-bases, or publications) is possible.

Questions: Your signature below indicates that you are aware that if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research procedures you may contact:

· Alicia Horton, Researcher. Department of Sociology, Queen's University
Email: 7adh1@queensu.ca
Phone: 613-483-0909

· Dr. V.F. Sacco, Research Supervisor. Department of Sociology, Queen's University
Email: saccov@queensu.ca
Phone: (613) 533-6000 x 74492

· Dr. S. Baron, Research Ethics Board, Chair. Department of Sociology, Queen's University
Email: barons@queensu.ca
Phone: (613) 533-2170

· Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Chair. Queen's University
Email: chair@GREB.queensu.ca
Phone: 613-533-6081

A signature below indicates that you have read and understood this letter of information and have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix B- Letter of Information & Consent Form (pertaining to in-depth interviews)

Project Title: “[Name of Event]: A Study of Nonmainstream Body Modification”

Researcher: Alicia Horton, Department of Sociology, Queen’s University

Study Goals: The aim of this study is to illuminate the experience of participants in the [Name of Event] Festival in August 2009 and other body modification practitioners through observational fieldwork and subsequent in-depth interviews. Your signature below indicates that you consent to an in-depth interview (of approximately 30 minutes to two hours or more, time permitting) pertaining to your experiences at the festival and/or with body modification more generally. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your signature below confirms that you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time. You are not obliged to answer any questions. Space is provided below to indicate your consent to the use of an audio recorder. Your signature on this consent form confirms your permission that a pen and paper be used during the interview. You are free at any time to withdraw from the interview. If you withdraw during the interview all recorded notes will be destroyed- if recorded via pen and paper the notes will be shredded and any audio recorded data will be erased.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality is of the utmost importance to this study. Confidentiality will be protected in publication of this study via the use of pseudonyms. Any identifying information will be altered to the extent that it ensures anonymity to the participants. Your signature below is meant to confirm that you understand these provisions around confidentiality and anonymity. The only identifying information is your signature on this consent form. It will be accessible only to me, my supervisor Dr. Vincent Sacco of Queen’s University, and to Queen’s University Research Ethics Board strictly as evidence that conducting the interview is ethical in terms of being permitted by the participants. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded, and the recording later transcribed. Should you decline to be audio recorded, data will be collected via pen and paper only. When not in use, the memory stick containing transcribed data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet along with the hard copy notes. My supervisor, Dr. V.F. Sacco, will have access to this memory stick and consent forms. If he requests them, I will print out the data (contents of this memory stick will not be transmitted electronically by way of email or any other means utilizing an internet connection) and hand deliver it to him. He will keep data/consent forms in a locked filing cabinet. The data will be stored until the completion of this study at which time it will be destroyed. Paper notes will be shredded and notes stored electronically will be deleted.

Publication: The data collected during the interview will be used for future publication in an academic arena. When and if the results of this study are published it will be subject to peer review prior to publication, upon which the results of this study will be publically available. A secondary use of this data (in other studies, data-bases, or publications) is possible.

Questions: Your signature below indicates that you are aware that if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research procedures you may contact the following individuals in the Department of Sociology at Queen's University:

· Alicia Horton, Researcher. Department of Sociology, Queen's University
Email: 7adh1@queensu.ca
Phone: 613-483-0909

· Dr. V.F. Sacco, Research Supervisor. Department of Sociology, Queen's University
Email: saccov@queensu.ca
Phone: (613) 533-6000 x 74492

· Dr. S. Baron, Research Ethics Board, Chair. Department of Sociology, Queen's University
Email: barons@queensu.ca
Phone: (613) 533-2170

· Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Chair. Queen's University
Email: chair@GREB.queensu.ca
Phone: 613-533-6081

A signature below indicates that you have read and understood this letter of information and have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

A signature below indicates you consent to being audio recorded.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

