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TATTOO ADVERSITY, REGRET, AND REMOVAL:

CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

A

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

St. Mary's University in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Counseling Education and Supervision

By

Luis R. Esparza, MA., LPC

San Antonio, TX.

April 2020

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**TATTOO ADVERSITY, REGRET, AND REMOVAL:  
CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Tattoo Adversity, Regret, and Removal: Constructivist Grounded Theory

Luis R. Esparza, MA., LPC

St. Mary's University, April 2020

Dissertation Adviser: Dana L. Comstock-Benzick, Ph.D.

To date, unique tattoo designs and inks have become a trend (Mao & De Joseph, 2012). Regrettably, trendy tattoos have brought many forms of tattoo adversity. Tattoo adversity can include tattoo regret, tattoo-related health complications, and tattoo artist - tattooed relational betrayal (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). The purpose of this study was to explore the events, circumstances, and experiences that comprise tattoo adversity to such a degree that an individual would seek tattoo removal. The researcher utilized constructivist grounded theory to understand participants' experiences of tattoo adversity leading to tattoo removal. Interview data illuminated participants' tattoo regret, pain, and aspirations while undergoing tattoo removal. The findings underlined themes that were used to generate grounded theory on the phenomenon of tattoo adversity resulting in tattoo removal. The grounded theory generated by this study was: Participants in this study experienced a range of tattoo regret that was predominantly related to tattoos attained in their youth. Laser tattoo removal was sought to reduce distress such that participants' bodies were congruent with their current life experiences. Future studies utilizing larger, diverse samples offering participants multiple ways to share their experiences were recommended.

## CHAPTER I

### The Complexity of Tattoos

Tattoos have been a part of human society for 100s of years (Burgess & Clark, 2010; Irwin, 2001). According to Fisher (2002), the “history of tattooing is somewhat difficult to trace. Although the word *tattoo* did not emerge until James Cook’s voyage to Polynesia in the eighteenth century, the practice of indelibly inking the body has a much longer history” (p. 92). Historically, the process of obtaining a tattoo, the ways in which tattoos were applied, and the number of tattoos an individual obtained, has varied from culture to culture across time (Caplan, 2000; Carney, 2008; Johnson, Tseng, & Her, 2009; Marczak, 2007; Mohanta & Chadhar, 2002; Porcella, 2009; Reed, 2000; Thakur & Verma, 2016).

Around the globe, tattoos have been used in cultural and religious contexts (Persad, 2017). In India and the Middle East, woman obtain henna mehndi tattoos on their hands and feet to mark special occasions like weddings or birthdays (Persad, 2017). While the henna mehndi tattoo designs are used in contemporary times in India and the Middle East, historically, other cultures and religions have prohibited such practices (Torgovnick, 2008). Kastan (2008) documented a reference to tattoos in the New Testament reflecting the beliefs of early Christians: “While the New Testament does not mention tattooing specifically, passages from 1 Corinthians have been used as further justification for the prohibition of tattoos. Paul’s epistle declares that the body is a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’” (p. 8).

Across time and cultures, tattoos have been attained and applied for a variety of reasons (Angel, 2013; Han & Jain, 2013; Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005; Madfis &

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Arford, 2013; Martin, 2013). For some, tattoos are a form of self-expression and a way to exhibit beliefs and values. For others, tattoos reflect one's personality or an affiliation with a tribe, religion, sport, prison, or gang (Coe, Harmon, Verner, & Tonn, 1993; Post, 1968; Watson, 1998). Tattoos are also obtained to commemorate important occasions or experiences, and some are intended to memorialize a loved one, either living or passed (Gentry & Alderman, 2007). Overall, contemporary tattoos mark a sense of independence and are attained by choice (Angel, 2013; Han & Jain, 2013; Madfis & Arford, 2013; Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005; Martin, 2013). In the context of this study, the researcher focused only on *recreational tattoos*.

According to Zelyck (2005), "recreational tattoos started to gain prevalence in the United States when Samuel O'Reilly patented the first electric tattoo machine in 1891, which was based on an embroidering machine invented by Thomas Edison" (p. 2). About the contents used in the first tattoo machines, Kastan (2008) stated, "the only two colors in common use were black, made from soot or India ink, and a dull red, made from brick dust," with the remaining ingredients being "water, saliva, or even urine was used as solvents for the dry pigment" (p. 6). Recreational tattoos include those obtained as an individual's personal choice (Laumann & Derick, 2006). As new tattoo designs and colors emerge, tattoo popularity grows, as do tattoo removal procedures (Mao & De Joseph, 2012).

In contemporary tattoo parlors, there are a plethora of patterns and colorful designs from which clients can choose (Martin, 2013). Individuals can also commission tattoo artists to design and render custom tattoos prior to application (Martin, 2013). In spite of the choices, customers are not guaranteed that their tattoo will meet their

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expectations (Barbour, 2013). There are many reasons people decide to obtain a tattoo.

For many acquiring their first tattoo, the process is an expression of creative individualism (Irwin, 2001; Tsang, 2014). Most often, an individual's first tattoo is attained in a small parlor with a relatively inexperienced tattoo artist (Watson, 1998).

Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler (2007) suggested individuals' motivations to obtain a tattoo include the wish to "create and maintain self-identity" and to feel "special" (p. 88). One way tattoos foster individuals' feelings of being special is through the unique meaning of one's tattoo. The online dictionary, *Dream Moods* suggested that to dream about tattoos means you have a desire to stand out in a crowd ("Tattoo Meaning," n.d.). Obtaining a tattoo as a means of expressive individualism, has, in fact, become so popular that various tattoo artists have gained mainstream media attention via reality shows (Moore, Warren, & Borders, 2012).

Moore, Warren, and Borders (2012) explained how on the reality television show *Ink Master*, tattoo artists glamorized the process, and referred to individual clients as being a human canvas. Reality shows that feature specific tattoo parlors and tattoo artists have created a unique platform for how the public views tattoos and tattoo artists (Moore, Warren, & Borders, 2012). Celebrities, such as Angeline Jolie, contribute to a view of tattoos as glamorous. Jolie's tattoos portray her personal beliefs and views as documented on *Style Craze* (Natarajan, 2019). Some celebrities feel such a sense of ownership over their tattoos that they have engaged in lawsuits intended to copyright the "artwork," in the form of a tattoo, displayed on their body (Harkins, 2006, p. 315). Other researchers have found similar findings regarding tattoos among TV celebrities (Kosut, 2006).

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Tattoos have been documented to designate group membership, such as that of a gang. For example, Wilson (2015) illustrated that in San Antonio, Texas, a tattoo of the Spurs' emblem, the word "Alamo," or the numbers 210 normally indicates membership in the Tango Orejon gang. Other researchers have found similar trends in tattoos related to gang membership (Bazan, Harris, & Lorentzen, 2002; Fisher, 2002; Limon, 2017, Resenhoef, Villa, & Wiseman, 2008). Jain, Lee, Jin, and Gregg (2009) documented that law enforcement classified tattoos into a database to identify criminals. More recently, tattoos have become the focus of political discourse on immigration under the Trump administration. Limon (2017), described how some illegal immigrants currently in the United States are seeking tattoo removal for fear that their tattoo(s) will result in deportation should they have any interaction with immigration authorities.

Limon (2017) reported in reported in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* that individuals with tattoos who are being considered for legal status in the United States would likely experience a negative outcome. wrote that a tattoo on a "would-be" immigrant could "signify the end of the American dream" as tattoos have become associated with individuals who are potential threats to national security (p. 1). Indeed, tattoos are associated with everything from legitimate and illegitimate subversive activities to simple forms of artistic expression (Velliquette, Murray, & Creyer, 1998).

While some tattoos signify group membership, others represent one's participation in a social movement. One such movement is suicide awareness. Singer (2015), author of a blog entry on the website *Acutoronto*, documented how the rise in semicolon tattoos are indicative of an effort to prevent suicide, in part, by reducing the stigma of talking about depression and other mental health issues. A visible semicolon

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tattoo on an individual is intended to be viewed by others as an invitation to talk about suicidal thoughts should a person be experiencing a difficult time. Thus, the idea is that the stigma of depression and suicidal is reduced through dialoged (Grisham, 2015).

When an individual attains a tattoo with a significant meaning, the tattoo becomes an embodied form of self-expression (Madfis & Arford, 2013). An individual with a tattoo that expresses their values or beliefs may find that their feelings change over time (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005). An embodied symbol of a held belief, to which a person no longer holds, can cause the tattooed person to experience tattoo regret in the form of an identity crisis (Madfis & Arford, 2013). A tattoo-related identity crisis is one of many unfortunate outcomes that may occur after an individual acquires one or more tattoos. Negative tattoo outcomes have emerged in the literature and are collectively referred to as *tattoo adversity*. Tattoo adversity has increased with the rising popularity of tattoos (Cross, 2008; Drazewski, 2013).

Tattoo adversity is a term that encompasses a host of difficulties that an individual can experience after getting a tattoo. Graham, Elliott, and Gallagher (2007) claimed that the motivation or the circumstances that compelled one to obtain a tattoo could significantly diminish over time. Graham et al. noted that a tattoo that was appropriate or desirable at one stage of someone's life, might be less appropriate or less desirable at a later stage.

Tattoo adversity can be experienced in any number of ways. However, the scope and intensity of tattoo adversity is not well documented or understood (Armstrong, Stuppy, Gabriel, & Anderson, 1996; Crane & Searle, 2016; Swami, 2011). Tattoo adversity can involve psychological and physical complications (Neluis et al., 2014). One



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of the more common forms of tattoo adversity is *tattoo regret* (Swami, 2011). Tattoo regret occurs when an individual experiences unmet expectation after attained a tattoo (Swami).

### **Psychological Complications**

Psychological complications that unfold after one obtains a tattoo can have a variety of emotional characteristics. Öosterzee (2009) described how emotional tattoo regret manifests as a result of one experiencing negative judgments from others. These negative judgments have resulted in the pervasive stereotyping of individuals with tattoos. For example, Varma and Lanigan (1999) documented that men rated tattooed women as less physically attractive than their non-tattooed counterparts.

Tattoo regret is emerging as a new challenge for mental health professionals in that little research has been done on how to best treat clients seeking therapeutic support. Clients seeking treatment for tattoo regret could experience both psychological *and* physical adversity. Gorsic, Bacak, Ahcan, and Topcic (2013) identified several facets of psychological tattoo regret, which include feelings of “embarrassment, low self-esteem, and stigmatization” associated with their tattoos (Gorsic, et al., 2013, p. 21).

Changes that take place in one’s life may be one of the causes of tattoo regret. Such changes include shifts in personally held values and beliefs that take place over the course of one’s personal and professional life. About tattooing, Patterson and Schroeder (2010) stated that it “testifies to the interconnection between self and other in the negotiation of identity” (p. 258).

### **Physical Complications**

Another way tattoo regret can manifest is through resultant infections. Brown, Perlmutter, and McDermott (2000) wrote, “Tattooing is not without risks. The two most significant risks include exposure to blood borne pathogens and allergic responses to the pigments” (p. 1). Understanding tattoo-related health risks such as infections, transmission of blood-borne diseases, and allergic reactions is vital to the education of individuals wanting to have a tattoo; reporting the significance of public tattoo health risk prevention has proved to be a struggle (Bassi et al., 2014; Calogiuri et al., 2010; Shinohara, Nguyen, Gardner, Rosenbach, & Elenitsas, 2012).

Khunger, Molpariya, and Khunger (2015) described tattoo complications and infections as “dermatologic disorders” (p. 31). Dermatological disorders include a wide range of infections, about which most individuals seeking tattoos are unaware. The practice of tattooing requires infringement to the surface skin barrier, which has the potential to introduce potentially contagious agents like bacteria, fungi, and viruses to one’s body (Atluri, Iduru, Veluru, & Mullen, 2010; Ayoola, Mansour, & Gujral, 2015; De Cuyper, 2009; Leung, 2002; Kotzen et al., 2015; Mayers, Judelson, Moriarty, & Rundell, 2002; Mercier & Bonnet, 2009; Mercer & Davies, 1991). Other contagious diseases associated with attaining a tattoo are hepatitis B and C, or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Ghorpade, 2014; Islam et al., 2016; Kluger, Jolly, & Guillot, 2008; Lucinda, Hazel, Joyce, & Hon, 2013; Wanat, Tying, Rady, & Kovarik, 2014).

Other skin disorders include mycoses, allergic disorders, skin diseases, and tumors (Bassi et al., 2014). Kay, Perti, and Duchin (2011) indicated that medical

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professionals face complex tattoo challenges in regards to skin infection diagnoses, particularly in those cases associated with chronic infections that are unresponsive to treatment, regardless of the patient's immune status.

Physical infections are transmitted via unsterile equipment and through contaminated tattoo inks (LeBlanc, Hollinger, & Klontz, 2012; Nishioka & Gyorkos, 2001). Tattoo inks in the United States are largely unregulated (Shinohara, 2016; Shinohara et al., 2012; Vasold, Engel, König, Landthaler, & Bäumlner, 2008). Shinohara (2016) stated there is “no existing law requirement for composition labeling” for tattoo inks in the United States (p. 287). Shinohara suggested that the most common inks used in the United States contain variants of azo dyes; synthetic pigments generally used for industrial purposes (e.g., automotive paint). Such inks are valued for their brilliant colors. The exact compositions of tattoo inks are nearly impossible to determine (Regensburger et al., 2010; Timko, Miller, Johnson, & Ross, 2001).

Simunovic and Shinohara (2014) found that the manufacturing of tattoo ink dyes is similar to industrial procedures used to produce dyes. The manufacturing procedures produce impurities such as carcinogenic aromatic amines. The carcinogenic aromatic amines include hazardous polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons resulting in cytotoxic outcomes (Fircanis, Shields, Castillo, Mega, & Schiffman, 2012; Lehner et al., 2011; Simunovic & Shinohara, 2014; Tang et al., 2014). The complexities of tattoo adversity, such as physical and mental difficulties have led individuals to seek tattoo removal (Bernstein, 2007).

### **Laser Tattoo Removal**

Tattoo regret, characterized by psychological stressors and physical complications, can lead individuals to feel unhappy, or even traumatized to such a degree, that they consider removing the tattoo from their body (Sierra, Jillapalli, & Badrinarayanan, 2013). In previous decades, those wishing to remove their tattoos had to resort to painful means (Kent & Graber, 2012; Wheeler & Miller, 1976). Ho and Goh (2015) wrote that until recently, “the removal of undesired tattoos included destructive techniques such as dermabrasion, salabrasion, chemical destruction, cryosurgery, electro surgery, and surgical excision” (p. 9). Other options would have been to hide the tattoo under one’s apparel (Swanger, 2006).

Currently, the most effective means to remove a tattoo is via laser removal (Kuperman-Beade, Levine, & Ashinoff, 2001). However, laser removal has adverse effects (Kent & Graber, 2012). One such adverse effect is extreme physical pain (Marini, Kozarev, Grad, Jezersek, & Cencic, 2012). Other adverse effects include textural changes to the skin, scarring, and pigmentation alteration (Khunger et al., 2015). For most individuals, the process of tattoo laser removal requires numerous visits to a dermatologist or a professional laser tattoo removal specialist (Bernstein, 2007). To date, the Q-Switched is the most reliable, FDA-approved laser technology (Buchness, 2006; Gorsic et al., 2013).

The Q-Switched laser is composed of three high intensity short pulse types of lasers. The three types of lasers include the Nd:YAG (532 nm-1064 nm), Alexandrite (755 nm), and the Ruby (694 nm). Leuenberger et al. (1999) illustrated that the Nd:YAG laser provides a deep penetrating pulse and is used for the removal of uncomplicated

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tattoos, such as those of single color of ink. For multi-colored tattoos, the Alexandrite laser is used. For blue and black tattoo inks, the Ruby laser is the most effective (Alster, 1995; Taylor, Anderson, Gange, Michaud, & Flotte, 1991). Additionally, Narurkar (2005) noted that the Alexandrite laser is commonly used to remove tattoos from individuals with darker complexions, while the Ruby laser is mostly used on individuals with lighter complexions. In lighter skinned individuals, tattoo ink typically appears brighter and is more difficult to fully remove (Narurkar, 2005).

Compared to other laser technologies, the Q-switched laser has a longer wavelength, higher influence, and shorter pulses that are nanoseconds in length (Kossida, Rigopoulos, Katsambas, & Anderson, 2012). The effectiveness of the Q-switched laser device depends on the type of tattoo ink and design. A pulsed laser, which can vary in watts or kilowatts, delivers a significantly short, but intense light emission followed by a period of no light (Goel, 2008). The laser beam delivered to the tattoo breaks down the tattoo ink. Subsequently, the body absorbs the ink and flushes it out of the body through the immune system (Goel, 2008; Wenzel, 2010).

### **Tattoo Removal Challenges**

The laser removal process varies in relation to each individual, and the size and depth of the tattoo being removed (Grevelink et al., 1996). Individuals seeking tattoo removal typically receive a consultation prior to beginning treatment. During this consultation, patients are briefed on expenses and the potential to experience pain (Bernstein, 2007). The initial consultation also includes a process by which an individual's tattoo is measured. The exact measurements are used to create an estimate of time and costs. On average, the removal of a tattoo that is one square inch in size would

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require several treatments ranging in cost from \$50 to \$100 each (Guzman, 2012).

Individuals removing tattoos have varying levels of training, and may, or may not, be physicians specializing in dermatology. Individuals who remove tattoos are most likely to be “specialists” rather than physicians (Karsai, Krieger, & Raulin, 2010).

The professional laser tattoo removal process begins with the specialist or dermatologist, sterilizing the area to be treated. As a standard of practice, the treated areas are sterilized before and after treatment to reduce the risk for infection (Karsai et al., 2010). The specialist, or individual removing the tattoo, wears protective glasses (WebMD, 2019). The procedure begins with the specialist initiating the actual laser. Upon penetrating the skin, the laser makes a popping noise, which is accompanied by intense pain as it breaks up the tattoo ink. After the laser penetrates the skin, an immediate blister arises, for which the client must take special care (Catton, 2014). The pain, subsequent blisters, and attention to the healing process pose challenges to clients seeking laser tattoo removal.

During the laser tattoo removal process, clients experience such intense burning and piercing sensations that the procedure is only tolerable for very short periods of time (Raulin, Schönermark, Greve, & Werner, 1998). On average, individuals can tolerate the laser tattoo removal process for less than 60 seconds (Raulin et al., 1998). Pain control for clients seeking laser tattoo removal is challenging. In most cases, an ice compress is applied to minimize physical pain before and after treatment. However, an ice compress is not effective in mediating the pain, which is sometimes unbearable (WebMD, 2019). Laser tattoo removal can cause damage to both pigmented and non-pigmented skin cells. In essence, the lasers cannot distinguish which skin cells contain tattoo ink from those

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that do not, as it penetrates the skin (Tan, 1994). Making a commitment to completing a laser tattoo removal process is wrought with distressing feelings of dread and avoidance due to a painful burning sensation as the laser penetrates the skin (Gómez, Martin, Sastre, Costela, & García-Moreno, 2010).

Overall, the laser tattoo removal process poses a host of challenges to clients (Lapidoth & Akerman, 2007; Reid, Miller, Murphy, Paul, & Evans, 1990). Simply anticipating multiple painful treatments is distressing (Gómez, et al., 2010). Additionally, the process can pose financial challenges. Payment is due at each session and the tattoo removal potentially costs \$1000s of dollars (Bernstein, 2007; Graham et al., 2007; Hudson & Lechtape-Gruter, 1990; Shelton & Peters, 2008; Tan, 2011). The laser tattoo removal process is completed when the last laser removal session has taken place, and the resultant wound has fully healed (Adatto, 2004; Kossida et al., 2012). The challenges and rewards of laser tattoo removal ultimately result in the negotiation of a new, or different kind of expressive individualism, ideally one void of regret (Cegolon, Baldo, Xodo, Mazzoleni, & Mastrangelo, 2011; Shelton & Peters, 2008).

### **Relational Betrayal**

Given the mass media has created tattoo artists into cultural icons, there is a unique power differential between the client and the tattoo artist. In the context of this power differential is a high degree of trust that clients place on the tattoo artist they have chosen to apply their tattoo. Clients report that they feel their relationship with their tattoo artist is very intimate and personal (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2004). The personal nature of the relationship between the client and the tattoo artist, combined with

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clients' vulnerabilities, creates the potential for the client to feel disappointed and even betrayed in the face of a decision to seek tattoo removal (Comstock et al., 2008).

Given the nature of tattoo adversity, the events experienced leading up to the decision of tattoo removal are likely dramatic, stressful, and potentially traumatizing to the client (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). Fruh and Thomas (2012) suggested that at the moment a client makes the decision to remove a tattoo, their relationship with the tattoo artist effectively ruptures. This experience can foster a sense of disconnection that will be repeatedly exacerbated by intense physical pain and financial stress during each tattoo removal procedure (Fruh & Thomas, 2012).

In the context of relationships, tattoo regret engenders a sentiment of *relational betrayal* on the part of the tattooed towards the tattoo artist (Atkinson, 2003; Barbour, 2013; Birrell & Freyd, 2006). According to Birrell and Freyd (2006), relational betrayal results from "traumas that occur in the context of interpersonal relationships" (p. 50). Birrell and Freyd add that relational betrayal "can be particularly detrimental because of the betrayal involved in the violation of basic assumptions of interpersonal and social relationships" (p. 50). Individuals experiencing tattoo regret, and the byproduct of relational betrayal, might initially go through a stage of denial before accepting their tattoo expectations were not met (Fruh & Thomas, 2012; Öosterzee, 2009).

Kaehler and Freyd (2012) suggested that the tattooed who experienced relational betrayal might remain unaware of their feelings in order to maintain a necessary attachment, or to continue a relationship or association with their tattoo artist and the tattoo. Irwin (2001) suggested that the relationship between the tattoo artist and tattooed is a crucial component as one goes about trying to make the right choice of tattoo artist.



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The establishment of a good relationship provides the foundation through which prospective clients can ask questions about the tattooing process in an effort to alleviate their fears or concerns. For those seeking a tattoo, making the right choice to do so, and at right time, can foster a level of *resilience* should the individual come to experience any form of tattoo adversity. Van Breda (2001) stated, “resilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (p. 1).

Prince-Embury and Saklofske (2012) highlighted how psychological resilience has been categorized by the “ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences” and by adaptation to the changing stressful experiences (p. 10). Resilience is related to a broad phenomenon of successful adaptation, i.e., the relatively good outcome despite a context or an environment that is a substantial threat for healthy development (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2012; Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004; Zimmerman, 2013).

The construct of resilience encompasses a variety of psychological skills, abilities, and coping inventories (Walker & Salt, 2012). Resilience scales have been used to detect significant interactions between variables of vulnerability, protection, and stressors (Brown & Kulig, 1996; Friborg, 2005). Fostering resilience in those who have experienced a significant psychological stressor to heal mentally and psychically could ease suffering and facilitate recovery (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Ledesma, 2014).

In summary, tattoos have been a part of human society for 100s of years (Burgess & Clark, 2010; Irwin, 2001). The increase in tattoo popularity has caused a rise in the potential for the tattooed to experience tattoo adversity. Tattoo adversity can take the

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form of emotional tattoo regret and can be complicated by adverse health consequences. Tattoo regret is the psychological state of tattoo disappointment and dissatisfaction, whereas tattoo health complications are related to infections. Relational betrayal, in the context of the relationship between the tattooed and the tattoo artist, is the feeling that the tattooed body has been violated (Jones, Dacin, & Taylor, 2011).

In an effort to reverse tattoo regret, many individuals turn to laser tattoo removal. However, the process of laser tattoo removal comes with its own set of potential risks that have been related to feelings of shame, body image problems, and financial hardship (Armstrong et al., 2008; Rumsey, Clarke, White, Wyn-Williams, & Garlick, 2004).

Utilizing grounded theory methodology, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of tattoo adversity in individuals who have sought laser tattoo removal and to explore sources of resilience available to individuals undergoing this lengthy, painful, and expensive process. The researcher was interested in the events, circumstances, and experiences that comprised participants' tattoo adversity to such a degree that life with a tattoo was no longer bearable.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As the tattoo industry has grown, so have the risks of tattoo adversity. Tattoo adversity involves tattoo regret, which is comprised of “psychological and health complications” (Kilmer, 2000, p. 69; Sanders, 1985). Additionally, some individuals who experience tattoo adversity are vulnerable to a sense of relational trauma and betrayal perpetrated by their tattoo artist. The mechanisms of the psychological aspects of tattoo adversity are not fully understood nor are they easily remediated (Kosut, 2006; Wohlrab et al., 2007).

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While physical problems related to tattoo application can be treated, the psychological components of tattoo adversity catch most tattooed individuals off guard. In a worst-case scenario, tattoo regret coupled with physical complications can lead some individuals to experience a deep sense of relational betrayal by their tattoo artist. These feelings can be so intense that the only remedy is tattoo removal (Bernstein, 2010).

Tattoo removal options are limited and range from dermabrasion, salabrasion, to surgical excision. However, the most severe, but reliable means for removing a tattoo, is via the laser removal (Bernstein, 2007; Luebberding & Alexiades-Armenakas, 2014; Manchester, 1973). Laser tattoo removal is costly, lengthy, painful, and cannot be pursued by all individuals wishing to remove a tattoo. Additionally, a satisfactory tattoo removal cannot be guaranteed. Ashinoff, Levine, and Soter (1995) suggested laser tattoo removal has its own risks attached to the process itself and could be potentially traumatic.

As little is known about tattoo adversity, mental health professionals are unprepared to assist individuals who are considering obtaining a tattoo. For those in counseling for tattoo regret, weighing the options, solutions, and risks associated with the tattoo is an important component in the therapeutic process. Without knowledge of the tattoo removal or associated risks and costs, mental health professionals are not fully prepared to support and assist those who are facing tattoo regret (Fitzpatrick & Goldman, 1993; Urdang, Mallek, & Mallon, 2011).

Tattoo adversity and tattoo regret must be better understood so that mental health professionals can provide effective services to those in distress and to those who are considering painful tattoo removal. Mental health professionals must also understand the

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process of laser tattoo removal, which can potentially be experienced as a secondary source of trauma.

### **Research Questions**

Constructivist grounded theory methodology was utilized to understand the experiences of participants' tattoo adversity, and how it led to their seeking tattoo removal (Creswell, 2009). In order to glean an understanding of the tattoo adversity, which resulted in the individual seeking removal, the researcher utilized the following questions and prompts:

1. How did you decide to seek tattoo removal?
  - a. What types of difficulties contributed to your decision to seek tattoo removal?
  - b. What kinds of things, if any, led you to make the decision to seek tattoo removal?
2. Please tell me about your experience of the tattoo removal process.
3. What kinds of support or information would have helped you before making the decision to seek tattoo removal?

### **Rational for the Study**

The rational for the study was based on the idea that no current research had been found regarding the events, circumstances, and experiences that comprise tattoo regret. Aslam and Owen (2013) noted that a number of people who acquire a significant tattoo end up lamenting about their choice at later time. Health and safety concerns arise out of the ease of accessibility of tattoos, and the lack of educational information regarding tattoo risks (Anderson, 1992; LeBlanc et al., 2012). Presently, there is limited formal information to guide those considering obtaining a tattoo, or to inform mental health professionals of the potential aftermath of tattoo adversity. Even as tattoos have become

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more socially accepted, Öosterzee (2009) suggested that a high percentage of tattooed persons are unsatisfied with their choice.

As tattoos become more socially acceptable, more individuals have sought tattoos. As such, the risks for complications has risen (Anderson, 2004). Individuals deciding to obtain a tattoo could encounter psychological and medical risks. While tattoo associated health risks are understood, the psychological aspects of tattoo adversity are not. Tattoo reality shows and online tattoo blogs such as tattoo *Talk Tuesdays* on YouTube present the process of getting a tattoo as unique and glamorous; thus, feeding into individuals' expectations that inevitably impact their choice to obtain a tattoo (Amanda, 2011). Such blogs portray tattoo regret as an opportunity to attain another tattoo in order to cover up the regret tattoo. Moreover, the mass media fails to address tattoo adversity and the plethora of tattoo-related health risks (Martin & Cairns, 2015; Woodstock, 2014).

Tattoo laser removal has its own risks. While laser tattoo removal could remediate most forms of tattoo regret, the process is lengthy, painful, and poses financial and physical distress (Kirby, Chen, Desai, & Desai, 2013). Laser tattoo removal can be such a rigorous process that some individuals never finish the process (Jow, Brown, & Goldberg, 2010; Kirby, Chen, Desai, & Desai, 2013; Kuperman-Beade et al., 2001; Ozturk, Sahin, Cesur, Eren, & Karagoz, 2016; Sanders, 1985; Sardana, Ranjan, & Ghunawat, 2015; Shah & Aurangabadkar, 2015). Those who do not complete the full laser tattoo removal may endure psychological and body image concerns (Swami, 2011).

Unwanted tattoos could pose body image issues, and counseling may be beneficial in these cases. However, some individuals may not seek counseling due to the stigma associated with having made an irreversible decision. In an anecdote, Sanders

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(1985) described tattoo adversity as a situation in which an individual has “made a purchase decision that is practically irreversible,” and, as a result, one “experiences a high level of cognitive dissonance” (p. 21).

Finally, the relationship between the tattoo artist and the client has generated some professional and anecdotal scholarship and publications (Atkinson, 2003; Barbour, 2013; Birrel & Freyd, 2006; Goulding, Follett, Saren, & MacLaren, 2004). Along this vein, there has been an increasing body of knowledge on relational betrayal trauma (Birrel & Freyd, 2006). The purpose of this study was to understand the problems and complexities related to tattoo adversity and tattoo regret in individuals who have opted for laser tattoo removal. Understanding these complex dynamics will enable mental health and health professionals to better prepare those considering tattoos and to provide effective treatment to those who may suffer from tattoo adversity and regret, potentially complicated with the experience of betrayal trauma (Freyd, Klest, & Allard, 2005; White, McCormick, & Kelly, 2003).

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study only included adult participants who had experienced tattoo regret and had at least one laser tattoo removal treatment. Participation was voluntary and the results generated grounded theory only from those who were willing and able to speak of their experiences with tattoo adversity and laser tattoo removal. Participation included only participants that reside within the San Antonio area.

### **Definition of Significant Terms**

**American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS).** Skin experts comprised by dermatologic surgeons that have a specific training and experience to treat the health

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and beauty of skin. Members are recognized as leaders in the field of cosmetic and skin surgery. Pioneers in the field, members are involved in crucial clinical research studies to minimize the life-threatening effects of certain cosmetic products (Skin Experts, 2020).

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).** A governmental entity responsible to protect United States from any health and security threats, whether infectious diseases originate at home land or abroad. Center for disease control and prevention combats disease and educates communities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

**Dermatological disorders.** Tattoo skin reactions, which include burns, blisters, infections, irregular pigmentation, rash, and scarring. Bassi et al. (2014) suggested that tattoo reactions can be divided into three main categories: “inflammatory, infectious, and neoplastic” (p. 5).

**Identity crisis.** A personal psychological conflict that involves confusion in roles in society including career, values, expectations, and gender role (Madfis & Arford, 2013).

**Infrared coagulator.** Tattoo removal technology that helps obliterate the tattoo ink by burning the skin superficially (WebMD, 2019).

**Qualtrics.** A software platform tool design to help researchers conduct research surveys in a more efficient way (Qualtrics.com).

**Reflexivity.** A circular bidirectional relation with both cause and the effect impacting one another relationship (Charmaz, 2014).

**Relational-cultural theory (RCT).** A counseling theory that focuses on how individual(s) grow through and toward relationships throughout their lifespan, and how

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culture and sociopolitical factors impact relational connections and disconnection (Miller, 1976).

**Resilience.** Ballenger-Browning and Johnson (2010) suggested that resilience is occasionally defined as a psychological process developed in response to intense life stressors that facilitates healthy functioning in order to cope with such stressors.

**Selective photothermolysis.** A laser wavelength of light that is used for skin treatment (Anderson & Parrish, 1983).

**Skin lesions.** An abnormal skin growth differing in appearance from the skin surrounding it (Bassi et al., 2014).

**Snowball sampling.** A word-of-mouth sampling method used when to encourage research participants to share information about a study with others who might qualify for inclusion in a research study (Shi, 2015). This is a non-probability sampling method typically used when participants are not easy to locate.

**Survey.** A questionnaire that encompasses the prequalification for participants' participation (Creswell, 2009).

**Tattoo.** An ink mark (located between the dermis and epidermis) with an indelible design achieved by inserting pigment into punctures in the top layer of the skin (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005).

**Tattoo Adversity.** The experience of tattoo regret and tattoo related health complications. Yates, Tyrell, and Masten (2015) wrote, "Adversity refers to negative contexts and experiences that have the potential to disrupt or challenge adaptive functioning and development" (p. 774).



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**Tattoo-related health complications.** Bacterial or viral tattoo infections resulting in burns, blisters, irregular pigmentation, rash, and scarring (Bassi et al., 2014).

**Tattoo regret.** The experience of depression and anxiety related to one's having chosen to get a tattoo (Öosterzee, 2009).

**Tattoo-related relational betrayal.** An unmet service expectation causing a feeling of betrayal, violation, and disappointment with the tattoo artist.

**Tattoo removal.** The removal procedure of an unwanted tattoo.

**CHAPTER II**  
**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The history of tattoos is abundant and dates back to prehistoric times. Scallan (2015) noted that the oldest conclusive physical evidence of tattoos is noted on Ötzi, the iceman. Ötzi is believed to have lived around 3,250 BC. His body was found buried below an Alpine glacier in the mountains along the Austro-Italian border (Scallan, 2015). Ötzi's body evidenced 61 tattoos across his chest, legs, and arms (Deter-Wolf, Robitaille, Krutak, & Galliot, 2016; Scallan, 2015).

Bolton (2016) documented an ornately tattooed female Egyptian mummy dating back 3000 years, which was found in the ancient village of Deir el-Medina. The feral mummy's body included tattoos of a lotus blossoms on her hips, cows on her arm, and baboons on her neck. Evidence of her tattoos suggested that tattoo designs had been an important aspect of self-identity and expression in ancient cultures (Bolton, 2016; Watson, 2016).

Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (1992) documented how a prehistoric mural is depicted in the *Smithsonian National Museum* of natural history in Washington, D.C. The oversized tattoo mural is called "soft-tissue modification" (Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992, p. 2). Such an oversized mural testifies to Western culture's fascination of what is considered an exotic body modification (Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992).

Attaining a contemporary tattoo is a complex process. The process includes choosing the right tattoo design, tattoo artist, and evaluating how satisfied one is with the tattoo on the skin (Atik & Yildirim, 2014; Bradley, 2011; Bugg Holloway, Wang, &

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Beatty, 2009; Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005; Hatic, 2012; Martin & Cairns, 2015; Montgomery & Parks, 2001; Shinohara, 2016; Swami, 2011).

### **Tattoos and Culture**

Sauter (2019) noted a biblical passage from Leviticus 19:28, which states “You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD” (p. 1). However, Sauter noted that the Bible provides no clear evidence as to why tattoos were prohibited.

Phanon (2015) documented that tattoos have been considered an art in Thai cultures for centuries. Thai tattoo art that reflects religious beliefs and traditions is referred to as *Sak-Yant*. Sak-Yant was applied by spiritual leaders (Phanon, 2015). Sak-Yant tattoos are believed to confer blessings and spiritual protection. Tattoos, associated with religious and spiritual beliefs vary from culture to culture.

Göran (2011) documented that while most Muslim theologians have argued that tattooing is forbidden in the Islam culture, it is nonetheless possible to encounter both historical and contemporary examples indicating otherwise. Contemporary theologians have concluded that tattooing is problematic in Islam as evidenced by an increasing number of Muslims seeking advice, as well as clarification about Islam’s stand in body tattoos (Göran, 2011). Cultures continue to influence the symbolic styles of tattoos chosen by people as to how they want to present themselves within their respective society (Cesare, 2011; Doss, 2005; Wymann, 2010).

### **Tattoos in United States**

Decades ago, tattoos were less visible than they are to date (DeMello, 1995). Many people did not pursue tattoos because of the stigma and negative perceptions of the

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tattoo in the United States. DeMello (1995) noted that in previous decades, tattoos were stereotypically associated with bikers or gang members. To date, these tattoo stereotypes have shifted, and more professionals and lay people are choosing to obtain a tattoo (DeMello, 1995).

Today in the United States, tattoos can be observed on many people. A survey conducted by the *Harris Poll Press* indicated at least one in five adults in the United States have a tattoo. These results presented an increase in the number of adults with tattoos from surveys conducted in 2008 and 2003 (Harris Interactive, 2012).

Yates (2010) indicated that between seven and 20 million people in the United States, including adolescents as young as 12 years old, are estimated to have at least one tattoo and that half of those individuals would later regret their decision. Such regret emanates from complex reasons ranging from an acute inflammatory reaction to the perception that such tattoos will interfere with professional advancement. However, Yates observed that the increasing numbers of tattooed individuals is related to an increase the number of people seeking tattoo removal.

In an article posted in *The Odyssey Online*, Simpson (2016) suggested tattoos are a common part of American culture with a continued increase in popularity. In spite of tattoos increased popularity, Simpson suggested visible tattoos in the workplace are often viewed as unprofessional. Simpson pointed out that a society's concern with tattoos represents a historical association between tattoos, are gangs, prisons, and violence. Such stigma is often so intense that people with visible tattoos tend to be viewed as unprofessional (Simpson, 2016).

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Hyde (2010) noted a California case between Johnny Anderson, a co-owner of *Yer-Cheat'n Heart Tattoo* parlor, and the City of Hermosa Beach. The City of Hermosa banned Anderson's tattoo parlor business from conducting business on the municipality's coastal community grounds. The City objected to Anderson's parlor being in the community because of the potential for the tattooing process to result in infection. Hyde wrote that tattoo designs and parlors were protected by the Constitution's First Amendment addressing freedom of speech (Hyde, 2010; Nickow, 2013; Porter, 2012).

### **Tattoo Complexities Among Gender**

In the United States, men have historically attained more tattoos than women. Colbert, Larsen, Patterson, and Markham (2014) suggested that women with tattoos are viewed more negatively than women without tattoos even if they were physically attractive. Colbert, et al. concluded that women with tattoos are seen as less physically attractive, sexually promiscuous, and as heavy drinkers (Colbert et al., 2014).

Swami and Furnham (2007) studied women's physical attractiveness, sexual fidelity, and consumption of alcohol according to men's perception. The study included 84 females and 76 male participants. Swami and Furnham examined men's perceptions of blonde and brunette women with and without tattoos by using a series of picture drawings. Swami and Furnham concluded that men perceived women with tattoos as less attractive and more promiscuous than those without tattoos. Other researchers have found similar findings regarding tattoos in men and women (Juhas & English, 2013; Vanston, 2008). Social media has played a major role in how tattoos are portrayed (Walzer & Sanjurjo, 2016).

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Walzer and Sanjurjo (2016) found that social media platforms have a major impact on how individuals choose to attain a tattoo. Walzer and Sanjurjo interviewed 39 tattooed clients and 32 tattoo artists between the ages of 21 and 61 from varied backgrounds and income levels. The interviews were designed to illuminate the different roles played by social media, websites, blogs, and social networks in the decision-making process. Walzer and Sanjurjo concluded that media visibility had prompted many people to attain tattoos more impulsively, and without taking the proper time to understand the complexity of such a decision (Walzer & Sanjurjo, 2016).

An increasing number of women are now getting tattoos. Celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Rihanna exhibit their tattoo designs as tattooing increases in popularity among women (Natarajan, 2019).

Angolini (2017) described how tattoo television personalities, such as Kat Von D, have glamorized tattoos. Being a tattoo artist provided an opportunity for Kat Von D to become a business CEO, when she launched her own line of cosmetics in April 2017. Even as Kat Von D described the challenges and complexities of being tattooed, her career has given her the opportunity to become a celebrity tattoo artist. During an interview, Kat Von D was passionate about tattoos and emphasized the importance of not making an impulsive decision. In the interview, Kat Von D stated, “We can experiment on anything with makeup, which is what makes it that much cooler, and we just have to wash it off if we hate it. Also, style evolves and changes, but tattoos are forever” (Angoli, 2017, p. 1). Others noted similar attitudes towards tattoos among celebrities (Angolini, 2017; Cesareo, 2013; Lopez, 2007).

### **Tattoo Types**

Tattoos have also been considered a form of a conversation piece. Harlow (2016) cited a *StarTribune* blog that described how Angi Stevens, a bus driver from Minneapolis, used her tattoos on her forearm as a way to start conversations with her passengers. Specifically, Stevens chose a bus design tattoo to commemorate her winning her agency's driving skills contest in 2012. Stevens shared that tattoos are a way to begin a conversation with others, and stated, "Many people talk about it" (Harlow, 2016, p. 1).

Other types of tattoos are described as memorial tattoos (Brice, 2016). Brice (2016) documented anecdotes, stigma, and the meanings of memorial tattoos from military war veterans. Brice introduced the war project ink foundation. The war project ink foundation was created to illustrate the stories behind memorial tattoos attained by combat veterans. The memorial tattoo display is located at Berkeley's Brown Gallery Doe Library. Brice stated "the project aims to undermine the usual stereotypes that a veteran is either a hero or a ticking time bomb of PTSD and create real recognition, from one human being to another" (p. 1).

Religious tattoos have also caused legal action related to religious discrimination. Osland and Clinch (2014) described the case of Edward Rangel vs. Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, Inc. The case involved Edward Rangel, getting fired by Red Robin because the tattoos on his wrist were exposed during his work shift. According to the lawsuit, Rangel claimed his wrist tattoos symbolized an Egyptian religion. Red Robin argued that visible tattoos violated company dress code policy. As a result, Red Robin's failure to accommodate Rangel's religious beliefs resulted in a settlement (Osland & Clinch, 2014).

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Given mixed social and legal results, the growing popularity of tattoos has been associated with both positive and negative responses in the United States.

Lande, Bahroo, and Soumoff (2013) described how many people are motivated to get a tattoo as a form of self-expression. Lande et al., surveyed members of the United States military about their tattoos. Lande et al's., goal was to explore the motivations, meanings, and behaviors associated with military members' tattoos. Active duty participants were recruited at four military clinics. Data was collected from July 2010 through June 2011. Of the 126 completed questionnaires, 122 were eligible for data analysis.

Lande et al., (2013) asked participants' about how and why they chose to attain a tattoo, and if they subsequently regretted their choice. To explore the meaning of tattoos, Lande et al. used a list of 39 tattoo descriptions. Such descriptions included but were not limited to symbols, weapons, religious images, names, numbers, quotes, and abstract designs. Lande et al., concluded that most military members acquired their first tattoo as a means of self-expression. Less than 10% reported regretting their tattoo decision. Most members reported to have not been on any kind of mind-altering substance while getting their tattoos, and Lande et al., concluded there was not a link between tattoos, and drugs or alcohol use.

### **Tattoo Regret**

Tattoo regret has not been well documented in the literature. Wax (2011) referenced a research survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, that reported more than 40% of Americans between the ages of 26 and 40 confirmed having at least one tattoo. Wax explained that the number of tattoo removal businesses are increasing at a



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rate consistent with the growing number of tattoo training schools across the country. Tattoos had been considered permanent and satisfaction was not guaranteed, which led many to experience unmet tattoo expectations. Unmet expectations can lead to tattoo regret (Larsen, Patterson, & Markham, 2014).

Hall-Smith and Bennett (1991) interviewed 29 men and 66 women between the ages of 15 and 34 (N=95), to ask what had prompted their desire to seek outpatient tattoo removal treatments. Of the 95 participants, 68 stated the reason for their removal was cosmetic, 16 stated that it was job related, and 11 attributed their choice was for their partner (Hall-Smith & Bennett, 1991).

Aslam and Owen (2013) documented that individuals are most likely to regret tattoos that had been applied in places visible to the public, for example, on the upper body, hand, arms and shoulders. Aslam and Owen concluded that the most common motivation for the removal of a tattoo was for “enhancement of self-esteem” (p. 1365). Aslam and Owen illustrated that tattoo regret resulted after an individual received negative criticism about his or her tattoos. Such criticism resulted in a feeling that such tattoos were not distinctive. Similar findings were noted by Hall-Smith and Bennett (1991).

Swami (2011) surveyed 82 British residents who agree to complete a questionnaire before and after attaining a tattoo. Participants were recruited at a tattoo parlor in an inner-city district in London, England. Swami utilized two instruments designed to examine participants’ body image, appearance anxiety, motivations for obtaining a tattoo, perceptions of uniqueness, and self-esteem. Participants were asked to rate their overall tattoo choice satisfaction prior to having it applied and after it was

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applied. Swami noted that immediately after the tattoo had been applied, some participants reported feeling dissatisfied with its appearance and had anxiety over the appearance of the tattoo. At the time of the second survey, participants reported significant improvements to their feelings about the tattoo appearance (Swami, 2011).

Chan (2012) surveyed 580 tattoo individuals. Of the participants, 53% were men, and 47% were women. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 40 years. Chan reported one-third of the respondents regretted getting a tattoo and none of those individuals had considered tattoo removal. Chan noted that tattoos on the upper part of the body were the most likely regrettable tattoos (Chan, 2012).

Madfis and Arford (2013) interviewed 20 participants ranging in age from 19 to 39 years, to gain an understanding of tattoo regret. Madfis and Arford utilized grounded theory methodology to create a theory about the meaning and significance of participants' tattoo regret experiences. Participants were recruited from tattoo studios in the greater Boston area. Madfis and Arford also conducted in-depth interviews with people who provide services such as covering and removing tattoos. These individuals worked as tattoo artists and tattoo removal professionals.

Madfis and Arford (2013) suggested that some participants were overwhelmed by their tattoo regret experiences. Madfis and Arford concluded that most participants did not provide an accurate tattoo regret narrative. Madfis and Arford recommended a future exploratory study could further investigate tattoo regret and removal experiences.

A 2016 *Harris Poll* (as cited in Hall, 2016) indicated almost half of individuals between 18 and 35 had tattoos, and nearly one in four regretted their decision. This poll was based on an estimate of about 60 million people in that age group. Such results

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suggest that about 7.5 million people have tattoo regret. About the poll, Hall (2016) posited that to date, there are no reliable sources that link tattoo regret with any specific resulting infection, toxicity, scarring, burns, or chronic irritations. Potential links to tattoo regret include physical health complications, such as a physical bacterial or viral infection (Brown et al., 2000).

### **Tattoo Health Risks**

To date, the tattoo industry is one of the most profitable businesses in the country. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has the responsibility for regulating the tattoo industry which is technically considered a cosmetic business by virtue of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938 (FFDCA). However, the FDA has been unable to regulate tattoo ink composition (Dixon, 2006). The responsibility of regulating the tattoo industry has been relegated to state and local officials, leaving the tattoo industry virtually unmonitored. As a result, the tattoo industry has become one of the fastest growing industries in the country that operates with virtually no governmental oversight with no regulatory oversight (Dixon, 2006). Tattoo consumers are prone to many health complication risks resulting from obtaining a tattoo (Wolf & Wolf, 2003).

Tattoo application is not without risk. In a blog posted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) titled “The hiding dangers of getting inked,” explained that there are no specific legal administrative regulatory requirements in the United States regarding tattoo ink composition (2012b). The CDC recommends that manufacturers ensure their products are sterile, and that tattoo artists and parlors avoid contaminating inks by not diluting with unsterile water. These efforts can help to decrease the risk of

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skin infections. The CDC also recommended that consumers be aware of possible health risks associated with attaining a tattoo, even after precautions are taken (2012a).

Tattooing has been considered a consumer service and a socially marginal product (Sanders, 1985). Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson (2005), suggested that reliable information on tattoo artists is almost nonexistent and when it is available, it is sometimes biased.

Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson indicated most individuals do little research into the process and risks associated with attaining a tattoo, thus leading many to feel dissatisfied with the outcome. Lack of information is a trend that leaves people with little or no reliable information about the tattoo artist they may be considering to apply a tattoo (Armstrong et al., 2008; Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005).

A case-control study intended to evaluate patient risk factors and possible modes the transmission of hepatitis C virus transmission (HCV) was conducted by Balasekaran et al. (1999). Balasekaran et al. recruited 58 patients (12%) out of 477 that were positive for chronic HCV infection. Participants were recruited at the university medical center outpatient clinic. The participants reported no history of blood transfusion or drug use injection. The study included participant interviews and a review of their respective medical records. Balasekaran et al. concluded that participants with a history of tattoos had an increased risk of sporadic HCV infection, among other factors (Balasekaran et al., 1999).

Haley and Fischer (2003) interviewed 626 patients at a local clinic in Dallas, Texas. The patients were enrolled in a seroepidemiological study of HCV from 1991-1992. The patients were asked to provide a blood specimen that was used later for HCV testing. At the time of the interview, both physicians and patients were unaware of the

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patients' HCV level status. Haley and Fischer concluded that of the 626 patients, 43 were seropositive for the anti-HCV antiviral. Haley and Fischer found that individuals who had a tattoo were more likely to be positive for HCV, but not for acute hepatitis. Results showed that tattooing might commonly result in HCV seropositivity, but not acute hepatitis (Haley & Fischer, 2013).

Carney, Dhalla, Aytaman, Tenner, and Francois (2013) conducted a study regarding the association between tattooing and the hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection. Patients were recruited from adult care locations and gastroenterology clinics from April 2004 through May 2006. Clinics were located at the Manhattan and Brooklyn campuses of the veterans' affairs harbor healthcare system, and the Bellevue Hospital Center in New York. A total of 1,886 patients were enrolled for the study, including 465 patients with chronic HCV infections and 1,421 HCV controls. Carney et al. established that tattooing was considerably and independently related to HCV infection.

Kennedy et al. (2012) published a study about the outbreak of infected tattoos that included 19 participants in Rochester, NY. The 19 infected tattooed individuals were described as having a bubbly rash on their new tattoo. Kennedy et al. noted that health officials had previously discovered similar skin complication cases in other states. Skin rashes had been linked to a common bacterium named *Mycobacterium chelonae*, found in tattoo ink. Kennedy et al. explained that the bacterial infection involved unpleasant side effects such as skin complications that can take months to heal. Results were linked to tattoo ink and the water used to dilute the ink. Kennedy et al. recommended that those considering a tattoo should ask parlors about the ink being used and the measures taken to prevent an infection (Kennedy, 2012; Stobbe, 2012).

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Brady, Gold, Leger, and Leger (2015) conducted a 17-short answer survey regarding self-reported adverse tattoo reactions. Participants were recruited in New York City's Central Park over a four-day period in June of 2013. Participation eligibility criteria included only adults with at least one tattoo obtained in the United States. A total of 308 qualified individuals responded to the survey. Brady et al. began separating responses between individuals who described a normal tattoo healing process from those who described abnormal tattoo reactions and complicated healing. Brady et al. noted that 31 of the 300 reported adverse tattoo reactions. Of the 31 participants who reported adverse reactions, five reported having chronic adverse reactions which required medical intervention. Additionally, Brady et al. concluded that participants who reported adverse tattoo reactions had significantly more tattoo colors than participants with exclusively black ink tattoos. Brady et al. cautioned that participants' adverse reactions were self-reported, and not clinically evaluated, thus the precise nature of reported adverse tattoo reactions could not be established.

Adverse tattoo reactions motivate individuals to seek tattoo removal. A review of the literature demonstrates that most individuals who seek tattoo removal are motivated by embarrassment, regret, health problems, poor self-esteem, and family and job pressure (Dey, Das, & Mukhopadhyay, 2016; Kirby, Alston, & Chen, 2016; Koljonen & Kluger, 2012).

### **Tattoo Removal**

The most commonly utilized method of tattoo removal is done via laser. Laser tattoo removal works breaking up the tattoo ink, which is subsequently absorbed by the body. The body transports the ink to white blood cells that flush the ink out through the

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lymphatic system. Naga and Alster (2016) noted that laser tattoo removal is grounded on the concept of *selective photothermolysis*, a concept described in the early 1980s.

Selective photothermolysis consists of wavelengths of laser light which destroy specific substances in the skin (such as melanin, pigment, water, and oxyhemoglobin) without damaging much of the surrounding skin tissue.

Bazan, Harris, and Lorentzen (2002) described a 1998 tattoo removal program for gang members based at the San Francisco General Hospital called “CASI.” The acronym CASI was adopted due to a confidentiality agreement that was put into place to conceal the program’s real name. The purpose of CASI was to help San Francisco youth become productive citizens after leaving local gang culture. CASI was also designed to understand the meaning and purpose of the tattoos being removed from participants. CASI served participants between 12 and 23 years of age who lived in San Francisco. To qualify for CASI services, individuals had to document 50 hours of community service. The CASI program goal was to treat 90 participants each month. The CASI program was also designed to include interviews with the former gang member participants. The interviews illuminated the fact that most participants’ symbolic appearing tattoos actually had no associated meaning, but rather identified them with a specific gang (Bazan et al., 2002).

Lapidoth and Akerman (2007) conducted a pilot study to examine the differences in pain levels between the single Q-switched and pneumatic skin flattening (PSF) technology using two clinical sites. The purpose of the study was to explore the levels of pain associated with the use of PSF technology as compared to the more frequently used Q-switched laser method. The participants were seeking laser tattoo removal and

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included 9 females and 2 males ranging in age from 17 to 25 years. Participants received laser removal via Q-switched and PSF alternatively.

Lapidoth and Akerman (2007) documented patients' reported levels of discomfort using the McGill pain scale after each method. Patients reported less pain following the use of the PSF. The researchers concluded that despite the decreased pain reported using the PSF technology, patients still perceived tattoo removal to be painful (Lapidoth & Akerman, 2007).

Jow, Brown, and Golberg (2010) conducted a longitudinal survey to determine the effectiveness of the Q-switched laser in removing tattoos. The 10-year study took place at a single laser tattoo removal location between January 2000 and June 2010. Participants included 95 males and 143 females. Jow et al. concluded that of the 238 patients, only three had a complete pigment clearance of their tattoo. Such results implied that the rest of the participants continued to have pigment residue after their completed treatment. Treatments ranged from one to 17 treatments. Limitations of the study included patient financial and physical compliance, healing, skin type, tattoo color, and its impact on optimal tattoo clearance expectation. The results suggested that laser tattoo removal is not an ideal process as it does not meet most patients' expectations (Jow et al., 2010).

Ho and Goh (2015) conducted a survey of 157 individuals who had begun a laser tattoo removal process. The researchers reported that of those who began the laser tattoo removal process, only 38% achieved complete tattoo removal. Of all survey participants, 97% reported some form of reaction to the laser removal process that included symptoms such as blistering, edema, crusting, erythema, and pain (Ho & Goh, 2015). Among post-



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laser reactions, survey participants reported long-term side effects, which included scarring, hyper- or hypo-pigmentation and pigment color change. The researchers also indicated that patients with darker skin complexions had a higher risk of complications during and after the treatment (Ho & Goh, 2015).

Bernstein, Schomacker, Basilavecchio, Plugis, and Bhawalkar (2015) evaluated the safety and efficacy of the Q-Switched multicolor tattoo removal laser equipment. The study included 21 participants with a total of 31 tattoos being removed. Treatments were administered over six to 10 weeks in an effort to allow participants to heal between each treatment. The total number of treatments needed to complete the tattoo removal varied from participant to participant. Photographs were taken before each treatment to provide credible evidence. Bernstein et al. reported that after the 31 tattoos were deemed removed, six tattoos continued to show pigmentation as evidenced by photographs. Bernstein et al. concluded that the Q-switched laser equipment is the most safe and effective technique for removing tattoos, but that some removal inconsistencies remains.

### **Relational-Cultural Theory**

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is a theoretical model that emerged following the publication of Jean Baker Miller's book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976). In Miller's (1976) groundbreaking book, she documented how women's experiences were absent or misrepresented in traditional developmental theories. She also posited that issues of power and subordination were missing in traditional developmental theories resulting in the experiences of the oppressed being pathologized.

RCT provides an inclusive understanding of human relational development that accounts for gender differences, power differentials, and privilege (Jordan & Hartling,

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2002). Jordan and Hartling (2002) asserted that human development takes place in the context of growth-fostering relationships characterized by mutual empathy. Fletcher and Ragins (2007) wrote that all relationships experience periods of connections and disconnections. Fletcher and Ragins described the “five good things” people experience in a relational connection. Fletcher and Ragins described the feelings people experience in connection as,

A sense of zest from connecting to each other when both parties actively participate. The feeling of a sense of motivation based on such positive connection. An increased feeling of sense of worth. An increased awareness of knowledge of each other. A desire to “connect beyond the particular one and connect with others” (p. 386).

Relationships also cycle through periods of disconnections. In periods of disconnection, individuals experience the opposite of the five good things. Disconnections are experienced as a lack of energy, decreased motivation, lack of self-worth, and confusion. Individuals experiencing relational disconnections also tend to turn away from relationships (Comstock, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 2006). While disconnections are to be expected in healthy relationships, sometimes individuals experience chronic disconnections.

Comstock, Daniels, and D’Andrea (2006) explained that chronic disconnections in relationships with those who have more power, can lead to a sense of condemned isolation and relational betrayal. Chronic disconnections have been associated with isolation, depression, substance abuse and addiction, eating disorders, and self-destructive behaviors. Hall, Barden, and Conley (2014) mentioned that relational-cultural

theory emphasizes relationships, both internal and external, as opposed to aiming directly to internal pathology and mental illness. Hall et al. illustrated that relational disconnections are an expected occurrence and are necessary for relational growth.

### **Relational-Cultural Perspective of Tattoo Betrayal**

Relationships are an important aspect of human development, and all relationships go through a period of connections and disconnections. But, chronic disconnections can be dangerous to one's psychological wellness and emotional health. Relationships bring a sense of hope or expectation of mutual empathy, but when ruptured, they can result in the experience of relational betrayal (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). Birrell and Freyd (2006) discussed the harm done to an individual who experiences relational betrayal from an individual on whom they had depended for safety and protection.

Rosenbaum, Milam, Seo, and Leger (2016) identified the fundamental relational role of the tattoo artist in their relationship their clients. Despite the prevalence of adverse tattoo reactions, individuals with tattoo-related problems infrequently seek help from medical professionals; instead they often seek help from their tattoo artist (Rosenbaum, Milam, Seo, & Leger, 2016). The researchers concluded that approximately 93% of tattooed individuals perceived tattoo artist as either knowledgeable or very knowledgeable regarding tattoo complexity (Rosenbaum et al., 2016).

Relationships are an important aspect in life, but when a relationship becomes damaged, it could result in a sense disconnection. Such disconnections could be experienced as relational betrayal (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). Comstock et al. (2008) stated, "disconnections in relationship are in large measure a function of the multiple social

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identities operating in that particular relationship and in the relational surround at any given moment” (p. 280). In other words, individuals can experience disconnections in various settings and in relation to different individuals.

Bloom and Bloom (2012) noted that betrayal constitutes a fragmented agreement within in a relationship, and which is considered fundamental to the truthfulness of any type of relationship. Bloom and Bloom explained that disavowal as a defense mechanism to cover-up a transgression could do much more damage than the violation itself. Trust is inevitable even if the offense is not revealed; thus, there can still be great harm to the foundation of the relationship (Bloom & Bloom, 2012). RCT and the concept of relational betrayal are the theoretical backdrops that were used in the analysis of the results of this study.

### **Summary**

In summary, tattoo adversity has become a common challenge as the tattoo industry continues to expand (Serup & Bäumlér, 2017). Currently, as Stein (2011) suggested, there is limited or no literature regarding the experiences and risks of tattoos in general. The lack of information limits mental health professionals’ understanding of the complex issues of tattoo adversity and tattoo regret. It is critically important for clinicians and other mental health providers to be able to effectively assist clients who are considering attaining a tattoo or considering the lengthy, painful, and expensive tattoo removal process.

The literature suggested the importance of a preventive educational platform targeting school children emphasizing health risks such as infections and tattoo regret.

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The importance of awareness of social stereotypes and the cost of removal could reduce tattoo applications (Öosterzee, 2009; Varma & Lanigan, 1999).

The purpose of this study was to provide an understanding of the experiences of tattoo adversity from the perspectives of individuals who have sought laser tattoo removal. This study also sought to determine sources of resilience available to individuals undergoing tattoo removal.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### Research Design

The researcher utilized constructivist grounded theory methodology to illuminate the circumstances, experiences, and events that led individuals to seek tattoo removal (Thomson, 2010). Creswell (2009) suggested that the central phenomenon explored in a qualitative research study should use driven by the specific vocabulary drawn from the language of qualitative inquiry to attempt to convey the understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thus, the purpose of qualitative research was to recognize, explore, and make sense of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009). The researcher utilized constructivist grounded theory methodology to understand participants' tattoo adversity, tattoo regret, and the circumstances and experiences that led them to seek tattoo removal.

#### Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1999) claimed that grounded theory is the desired approach when a researcher seeks to generate and produce a new theory from systematically gathered data. Corbin and Strauss (1990) stated, "the procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well-integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study" (p. 5).

Crooks (2001) explained that grounded theory is ideal for exploring the behavior and relationship of groups where there is minimal or no exploration of the contextual factors affecting such group (Bartlett & Payne, 1997; Creswell, 2009; Crooks, 2001, Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In the context of this study, the group under study was those

who sought tattoo removal. Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) stated, “grounded theory is a methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in people’s lives” (p. 26).

An advantage of grounded theory methodology is that no specific category manipulation is needed, allowing the researcher to explore and understand different concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Categories emerging from the data can be analyzed to identify in-depth similarities and differences. A disadvantage is that grounded theory research design is that it involves a complex and time-consuming data collection and analysis procedures (Babbie, 2007).

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Charmaz, a student of Glasser and Strauss, “has emerged as leading proponent of constructivist grounded theory” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 31). Constructivist grounded theory departs from the conventional grounded theory approach in that it highlights power differentials between the research and participant and seeks to remove power in the interview process (Mills et al., 2006). To reduce power differentials, Mills et al. (2006) suggested researchers utilizing constructivist grounded researchers try to (a) ask open-ended questions to gather insight into participants’ experiences, (b) foster mutuality during the interview process, (c) allow the participant and researcher to co-create reality, (d) be flexible, (e) appreciate the participants’ subjective experiences.

Constructivist grounded theory is a qualitative design where the principal purpose is to study participants in their own natural and tangible setting by using a constructivist lens (Charmaz, 2000). Mills et al. (2006) claimed that constructivism is a research methodology with a paradigm that denies an objective world reality. Constructivist

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grounded theory considers the participant's and researcher's subjective reality and the understanding of such. Mills et al. noted that "realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared)" (p. 26). Furthermore, Mills et al. added, "constructivist approach to grounded theory is both possible and desirable," because "data does not provide a window on reality. Rather, the 'discovered' reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts" (p. 31).

Charmaz (2008) indicated constructivist grounded theory "allows us to address the 'why' question(s) while preserving the complexity of social life. Grounded theory not only is a method for understanding research participants' social constructions, but also is a method that researchers construct throughout inquiry" (p. 397). Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes relationships and considers the impact of *reflexivity* in both the researcher and participant. The emphasis on the relationship allows both researcher and participant to explore and share their own separate experiences regarding the subject under study.

Alemu, Stevens, Ross, and Chandler (2017) suggested that a constructivist approach to grounded theory emphasizes the interaction between the researcher and participants in interviews cannot be neutral as both sides bring their own experiences. Taking the constructivist grounded theory approach, the researcher input his own experience undergoing tattoo removal process, which might have influenced his understanding of participants' experiences of tattoo adversity, regret, and removal.



### **Research Participants**

Participants in this study included men and women over 18 years of age that had sought at least one tattoo removal procedure. Participant recruitment included the use of a flyer, which was placed in the waiting rooms at local laser tattoo removal offices, and snowball sampling (Shi, 2015).

Participant recruitment was limited to a 60 mile radius around the San Antonio area. Total participation took no more than one hour to complete. The research guidelines and survey method were written on a third-grade comprehension level to keep the recruitment open to a wide range of individuals. Potential participants were invited to take an eligibility questionnaire found in Qualtrics (Appendix A). Potential participants were provided with a link to access the eligibility questionnaire. After eligibility was confirmed, participants had the opportunity to participate in an audio-recorded interview (Appendix B).

The eligibility questionnaire contained the purpose of study and participation information. A detailed script containing the purpose of research study allowed the researcher's colleagues to refer potential participants via word of mouth (Appendix C). Specific local laser tattoo removal sites were selected where participants were recruited using a flyer (Appendix D). The flyer contained the purpose of research study, a link, and a QR-code for eligibility questionnaire access (Appendix E). Other recruiting methods included the use of social media such as Facebook (Appendix F).

The audio-recorded interviews were held at a place and time convenient and safe for the participant and the researcher. Mutually agreed upon locations included sufficient privacy for the purpose of the recording the interviews. Participants had the choice to

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terminate their participation at any time they wished without any penalty. Consistent with federal guidelines, all participants made informed decisions to participate and were not compensated (Appendix G). After the interview, the recordings were transcribed and narratives were created for each participant. The researcher provided each participant the opportunity to read his or her narrative for accuracy and consistency before analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection procedures consisted of a brief eligibility survey using Qualtrics software and an in-depth interview. After eligibility was confirmed through the Qualtrics, participants were invited to leave their contact information to be contacted by the researcher for an interview. The interview was designed to explore the experiences that comprised participants' tattoo adversity and regret that led them to seek tattoo removal procedures. The following questions and prompts were included in the interview:

1. How did you decide to seek tattoo removal?
  - a. What types of difficulties contributed to your decision to seek tattoo removal?
  - b. What kinds of things, if any, led you to make the decision to seek tattoo removal?
2. Please tell me about your experience of the tattoo removal process.
3. What kinds of support or information would have helped you before making the decision to seek tattoo removal?

Once the interview was completed, the audio data was transcribed into a Microsoft word document. Participants' interview transcriptions were analyzed, and narratives were created.

Confidentiality and voluntary participation were fundamental and required for participants to understand and agree to before participation. Participants were informed

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about the purpose of the study and risks related to their participation consistent with federal guidelines. Participants were provided with the option to choose a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The interviews were audio recorded by researcher, using an audio digital recorded. After the interview was completed, the audio files were transferred to the researcher's password protected MacBook laptop and converted into an MP3 file. After the audio recordings were transferred to researcher's MacBook laptop, researcher used Microsoft Word 2018 to transcribe the narratives.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher utilized a constructive grounded theory lens as Charmaz (2008) suggested, by taking into consideration the researcher's role and experiences, and participant's experiences. Narratives were analyzed through a process of coding (open, focused, and theoretical coding), theoretical memo writing, emerging categories and concepts, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. Alemu et al. (2017) suggested that the interview processes be open-ended, conversational, and mutually constructed to ensure that the required depth, richness, and accurateness could be obtained.

Lawrence and Tar (2013) stated that "grounded theory is iterative, requiring a steady movement between concept and data, as well as comparative, requiring a constant comparison across types of evidence to control the conceptual level and scope of the emerging theory" (p. 30). Amsteus (2014) suggested two ways to analyze codes and data. The first includes systematically analyzing codes to verify a given proposition, and the second involves examining the data for properties of categories, using memos to track such analysis, and develop theoretical concepts (Amsteus, 2014).

**Open coding.** Coding constitutes the most basic descriptive initial process in grounded theory in which emerging categories are identified. Coding implies exploring and comparing data (Charmaz, 2000, p. 515; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1999). Böhm (2004), noted that in the initial coding stage, data is “broken down” and analyzed such that the researcher can identify principles and concepts from the text (p. 271). Through successively examining the principles and concepts, the researcher pulls together the building blocks that will be used to create the grounded theory (Böhm, 2004).

Mills et al. (2006) stated “open coding is the initial step of theoretical analysis” (p. 29). Following the theoretical analysis, codes can be developed. Mills et al. stated that coding leads to categories, and then “theoretical codes are ‘conceptual connectors’ that develop relationships between categories and their properties” (p. 29).

Charmaz (2008) stated “grounded theory coding generates the bones of your analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton. Thus, coding is more than a beginning; it shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis” (p. 45). Alemu et al. (2017) explained that “coding is the process of labeling a line, sentence or paragraph of interview transcripts or any other piece of data (such as segment of audio tape, video record, etc.) with a short and precise name” (p. 530). Coding imprints from a detailed data analysis obtained from interview transcripts and questionnaires expressed in the form of short phrases called concepts or themes (Alemu et al., 2017).

The open coding done for this research involved the researcher creating a timeline. The timeline served as a road map that was used to identify and separate important issues in each participant’s story. Important issues included things like events,

personal development, and reason for tattoo removal. After the issues were identified, they were reviewed later to explore themes and subthemes relevant across cases.

**Focused coding.** Charmaz (2006) stated that “focused coding is the second major phase in coding. These codes are more directed, selective, and conceptual than word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding” (p. 57). Alemu et al., 2017 claimed that once initial coding is completed, the researcher can focus the codes and work towards creating broad categories). Alemu et al. (2017) further explained that “focused coding facilitates the organization of the codes and concepts, established during the open coding stage, into higher level categories” (p. 534).

The focused coding for this research was done by the researcher reviewing each participant’s personal story and transcript. From the transcripts, the researcher identified specific quotes that best illuminated and highlighted aspects of their journeys. The researcher then began to link quotes across cases.

**Theoretical coding.** Theoretical coding defines the substantive relation of each emerging code, which integrates as a forming theory. Theoretical coding is the assimilation of analysis after focus coding is complete. Charmaz (2006) suggested that theoretical codes are integrative, as these codes help the researcher tell a coherent and analytic story. Furthermore, Charmaz claimed that codes conceptualize how previous substantive codes are related and provide theoretical direction of the participants’ stories.

Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) suggested that since coding is not a linear process, theoretical coding help researchers analyze all emerging codes in the different phases of coding. In addition, Alemu et al. (2017) stated, “theoretical coding, the last stage of coding, enables the saturation of the core categories identified during focused

coding” (p. 534). The theoretical coding for this study was done by the researcher connecting quotes from participants’ stories that were sorted into themes and subthemes.

**Theoretical memo writing.** Charmaz (200) noted that theoretical memo writing is considered a transitional step between the coding process and the first draft of the complete analysis. In the same vein, Böhm (2004) stated that “the writing of theoretical memos requires researchers to distance themselves from the data, and also helps them to go beyond purely descriptive work (motto ‘Stop and memo!’)” (p. 271). Theoretical memos became the starting stage for the construction of the final manuscript (Böhm, 2004). Charmaz (as cited in Mills et al., 2006) noted the importance for researchers to include raw data in their theoretical memos, even if memos become complex, in order to have participants’ present voice in the final theoretical results.

Alemu et al. (2017) stated, “memos help the researcher to think aloud, explore what lies beneath the responses of interviewees, relate and compare various responses, and discover conceptual themes” (p. 535). Alemu et al. suggested that memos serve as enabling tools that provide researcher the opportunity to reflect on the research process as a whole, including the data collection, analysis, and write-up of the final transcripts.

For this research, the researcher used a notebook to write reflections and insights on the emergent themes. The researcher reflected on the transcripts, the participants quotes, and things noticed during the interviews. For example, the researcher noted participants’ body-language, important statements, and analyzed every aspect of participants’ interviews. For example, in the case of Jane, the researcher noted the need to hold space for the pain she shared as it related to her story.

**Emerging categories.** Emerging categories and concepts may produce new meanings as the theoretical transcribing ends. Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1999) stated, “in discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (p. 23). Alemu et al. (2017) suggested that the constructivist approach would “inductively generate concepts, categories, and principles,” which would produce the development of a new theoretical framework (p. 524).

As the themes and subthemes continue to emerge from each participant’s story, researcher started to input the notes, quotes, and any other information generated from the interview into each participant’s timeline. This was done such that the researcher could make the final link noting similarities and differences between each participant.

**Theoretical sampling.** Glaser and Strauss (1967) documented that theoretical sampling is the process of data collection with purpose of generating theory. Researchers code and analyze the data, and identify what data to collect next as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz (2000) stated, “theoretical sampling represents a defining property of grounded theory and relies on the comparative methods within grounded theory” (p. 519).

Charmaz (2006) suggested theoretical sampling is the initial point of departure, not a theoretical elaboration and refinement of the sampling. Thus, a researcher could not assume to know what categories are going to evolve at the beginning research. The purpose of grounded theory logic is to construct categories throughout comparative methods of analyzing the coding data (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling provides a representation of what type of data to collect next (Alemu et al., 2017).

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The researcher used all the information on participants' timelines to identify similarities and differences between each participant's story. From studying the timelines, the researcher identified trends and themes related to participants' stages of change, the events prior to obtaining their tattoos, and the reasons they decided to seek tattoo removal. The researcher then was able to create three separate themes which encapsulated participants' frame of references, involvement, and interpersonal agency.

**Theoretical saturation.** Charmaz (2006) demonstrated how a sample size is more complex than just the number of participants. For example, a researcher who asks "whether obese women experience stigma may find that all of her interviews indicate that they do and claim that her category of 'experiencing stigma' is saturated without beginning to analyze what stigma means and how it is enacted" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 114).

Mason (2010) noted that saturation is a convincing concept with practical weaknesses and that it has limitless potential when attempting to identify saturation perimeters. About saturation, Mason added it is important, "particularly in relation to an approach like grounded theory methodology, which requires that all of the properties and the dimensions are saturated" (p. 5).

Fusch and Ness (2015) stated,

one cannot assume data saturation has been reached just because one has exhausted the resources. Again, data saturation is not about the numbers *per se*, but about the depth of the data" and that "data saturation may be attained by as little as six interviews" (p. 1409).

Saturation is the end of data collection that occurs after exploring and analyzing the coding, emerging categories, and theoretical sampling, to the extent that no new



categories were identified, no additional insights, and new themes have ceased to emerge from transcripts (Alemu et al., 2017).

Fusch and Ness (2015) further suggested the role of the researcher is a vital component of saturation, because bias is present intentionally and unintentionally in both participant and researcher. Fusch and Ness stated “data saturation is about the use of a personal *lens* primarily because novice researchers (such as students) assume that they have no bias in their data collection and may not recognize when the data is indeed saturated” (p. 1410). Khan (2014) suggested that the researcher, as a lens through which the data is analyzed, can work to avoid biases in data collection, analysis and in the presentation of results.

Khan (2014) stated that “the grounded theory researcher has three important characteristics: An ability to conceptualize data, an ability to tolerate some confusion, and an ability to tolerate confusion’s attendance regression” (p. 230). After working to conceptualize the data from the participants’ interviews, the researcher evaluated themes and subthemes generated by analysis. The researcher looked for any additional information that might needed further exploration. Once researcher concluded that there was no more data being generated, the researcher concluded theoretical saturation had occurred.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I come from a traditional Hispanic family where tattoos were prohibited, but I always had curiosity as to what it meant to have one. As I began exploring the possibility of getting a tattoo, I experienced a sense of disconnection from my family and friends. I was 18 years when attained my first tattoo. The first tattoo made me feel a sense of

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independence and uniqueness. Having a tattoo provided me with an opportunity to begin conversations about tattoos in general with people I trusted, but not with my family because I felt too guilty. I knew my family would be disappointed if they knew about my tattoos. As years passed, I noticed other friends getting tattoos which helped me to feel less distress about my previous decision to obtain a tattoo.

A few years after I got my first tattoo, I decided getting a second tattoo. By this time, I was already on my own, and felt no obligation to anyone but myself. Even so, I always felt guilty around my family for having tattoos, but I was able to hide it well. I later realized that hiding it from my family was to avoid experiencing the embarrassment and disappointment they may have felt towards me. I remembered when my sisters found out about my tattoos. They did not say anything to hurt me, but I personally felt a rupture in our relationship. The trust in our relationship had changed. My sisters have always been supportive, and I felt that hiding my tattoos had been a source of betrayal to them because I had not shared such an important decision in my life.

Over time, I realized that the young individual who wanted a tattoo so badly was no longer the man I was becoming. I remember growing up hearing my family say that life is hard, but that it was up to us to “make it harder.” By this time, I understood that my family was right about why tattoos were not a good choice most of the time. I sensed that by having a visible tattoo, my opportunities in life would be, in some way, diminished.

I still recalled the day I disclosed having tattoos to other family members, while also disclosing I was thinking about having them removed. To my surprise, most of my family had known all along that I had tattoos. It was at that moment I became aware of all the shame I caused my family by going against our values and religious principles.

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At the time I disclosed my tattoos to my family, I had just begun my graduate counseling program at St. Mary's University. I am not against tattoos but realized I was not in a position to have them as is illustrated by Patterson and Schroeder (2010). I felt a sense of disconnection from my ability to grow into the man I wanted to be, and into the professional I had chosen. I knew that I was not that 18-year-old anymore, and every time I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt a sense of disconnection from who I was becoming.

I began to realize I was experiencing tattoo regret, along with a sense of not feeling good or smart enough. I felt that my tattoos would limit my options after I finished my graduate studies. Every time I showered, my tattoos were a reminder of the intimate psychological pain and disappointment I was experiencing.

I began researching and navigating the literature on tattoo regret and soon discovered the research by Armstrong et al. (2008). I discovered helpful information about tattoo removal and felt optimistic. I found articles about laser tattoo removal, and I began reading and exploring the different options to remove a tattoo. It took about six months of researching the literature before deciding to pursue tattoo removal. During this time, I took note of how lucky I was to have access to research studies, and grew aware of how unlikely it would be for others to find the kind of research accessible to me as a graduate student.

I felt a lot of anxiety visiting the local San Antonio laser tattoo removal clinic. I arrived to the first laser tattoo removal appointment with no clear expectations, but after the tattoo laser removal specialist explained all the details about tattoo removal, felt empowered to undergo my tattoo removal process. It was an opportunity to reconstruct my relationship with my body, family, and my future.

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My first laser tattoo removal treatment was extremely painful. I felt the laser burning my arm. To this day, the pain, the sound of the laser, and the smell of burning skin is embedded in my brain. It took about five minutes for the tattoo laser specialist to complete my first tattoo removal treatment. I was devastated at the end of the first treatment. I felt somewhat betrayed by the process, because the pain was so unexpectedly intense. I was frightened to know that it was the first of many treatments to come. The other downfall of my tattoo removal process was the financial burdens involved in such an undertaking.

Nevertheless, after the first treatment I knew stopping was not an option. I decided to take it one treatment at a time. The next thing I knew, I had endured 13 painful treatments.

I was able to cope with the physical and mental pain by simply committing to the process. I believe that my determination of completing the tattoo removal was consistent with a character trait I possess. Call it stubbornness or determination, but more often than not, I avoid doing things if I do not believe I can finish them.

After my first tattoo removal process was completed, I felt empowered to continue with the mission to remove my second tattoo. I proceeded to remove my second tattoo during a financial hardship, but found a way to manage a continuous treatment process. When I was ready to begin my dissertation, I wanted to write about tattoo adversity and removal to give voice to others that are undergoing the same painful process. I felt as if God wanted this experience for me, so I could educate others about the tattoo removal process.

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Today, I am grateful for the decision I made a few years ago to remove my tattoos. I now look in the mirror and have a sense of reconciliation between my body, mind, and current opportunities. I can take off my shirt once again around my family and friends without feeling a sense of shame, guilt, or embarrassment. I have reached the end of my tattoo removal process. I now feel a greater sense of freedom and much better about myself.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

To understand how individuals experienced tattoo adversity, which led them to seek tattoo removal, the researcher utilized constructivist grounded theory methodology. This chapter includes the narratives of seven participants. From the participants' narratives, the researcher identified underlining themes that were used to generate grounded theory on the phenomenon of tattoo adversity resulting in tattoo removal. Basic participant demographic data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Personal-Agency for Seeking Tattoo Removal</b>
Diane	Female	Hispanic	Described Tattoo as Worse Mistake
Ezequiel	Male	Hispanic	Described Tattoo as Dumb
Jane	Female	White	Represented Emotional/Psychological Pain
Marcus	Male	White	Reported Feeling Dissatisfied
Mrs	Female	White	Represented No Personal Meaning
Rigo	Male	Hispanic	Represented No Personal Meaning
Zack	Male	White	Displeased with Tattoo Quality/Meaning

**Participant Narratives**

**Diane.** At the time of the interview, Diane reported feeling content with the progress with her tattoo removal process. Diane mentioned being at the last stage of her laser tattoo removal treatments. She explained that she is currently working at a local

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tattoo removal clinic, which made it easier to get access to her treatments. Diane emphasized she was in no rush to finish removing her second tattoo.

Diane began the interview by explaining the circumstances that surrounded her getting her first tattoo. Diane shared she was 23 years old and married to a biker when she decided to obtain her first tattoo. Diane shared that at the time when she was thinking about getting her first tattoo, she did not want her partner's name tattooed on her body. About partners having their names on each other's bodies Diane stated "it [name tattoo] signaled we were the property of one or the other, and I didn't want his name on me." As an alternative, Diane decided to get a "rose" tattoo on the web of her hand.

Diane recalled working as a secretary and about how she did not want people to judge her because the rose tattoo on her hand was visible. Diane mentioned that she found herself hiding her tattoo from her coworkers and employer.

Diane stated that she began tattoo removal in 2011. Diane noted that her decision to remove her tattoo came when she enrolled in a medical assistant program. Diane described the medical assistant program as being a nine-month program. While enrolled in the medical assistant program, she was introduced to a local tattoo removal clinic by a medical class instructor, who was of the opinion that tattoos were not professional. Diane decided she wanted to remove the tattoo from her hand before she finished her medical assistance program.

Diane contacted the laser tattoo removal clinic to discuss her financial situation, goals in life, and her willingness to volunteer for the clinic with the hope to begin her treatments quickly. At the time Diane began her tattoo removal at the clinic, she was doing infrared removal not laser treatment removal. Diane explained that the tattoo

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removal clinic was only doing infrared tattoo removal, and added “it was not something they were supposed to be doing.”

About infrared tattoo removal, Diane stated, “We were doing it almost every day but we were not supposed to.” Diane shared, “I was being used as a ‘guinea-pig,’ I messed up, and should not have allowed it.” Diane described the difference between infrared and laser tattoo removal by stating,

The pain with the infrared is worse. They stick a needle to numb it with lidocaine. And the infrared has a little red light that burns it, that’s the procedure. Within two weeks the area will blister-up, and was very painful. But, I took it, took it, too it. My tattoo removal treatments did get infected because I am a diabetic.

Diane explained that the infrared process is more painful than the laser process and leaves a scar. Diane shared that the laser removal is much better, and that it leaves no scar. About laser tattoo removal, Diane stated,

The pain with the laser is better. The laser is 100% better than this [infrared]. I would never do this on my ankle. Never. And I would never do it again. The reason why I finished it was because I was already halfway through, and had already allowed everyone to clean my wound in order to heal faster. But, with the laser it’s much better, it leaves no scar. The laser pain is like someone is popping you with a rubber-band. I’ve been doing laser removal for about three years now, and it is really light now, maybe three more treatments and will be done.

Diane then shared she got her second tattoo about three years after she had her first one removed. About her second tattoo, Diane stated it was her “biggest mistake.”



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Diane described how it happened during Christmas time, while she was celebrating the Holidays with her daughter's family. Diane disclosed how she had been a cancer survivor. She highlighted feeling proud of being a cancer-survivor. Diane explained that her daughter's husband is a tattoo artist, which was why she decided to take the opportunity to tattoo a ribbon, signifying cancer awareness. However, she explained that at the time she decided to obtain that tattoo they were drinking at daughter's home celebrating Christmas. Diane shared,

We were celebrating Christmas in my daughter's house, and her husband is a tattoo artist. So, I say to him, "Hey, I deserve my [cancer] survival ribbon." So, he put the survival ribbon on my leg, but when I looked at it, I was not happy. I guess we were drunk. It was one of those "drinking wine days," it was Christmas. I didn't like it and didn't want another tattoo. I don't know what got into my head and decided to accept it.

Diane reiterated that at the time, she felt that she deserved her cancer-survivor ribbon, but after seeing the low-quality tattoo, she was very dissatisfied. Diane is now in the process of using laser tattoo removal. She is pleased to be undergoing laser tattoo removal given how much more painful the infrared removal process had been. Diane shared she had already completed about five laser removal treatments, and was hoping that it will take only three more treatments to completely remove it. Diane shared her family was happy that she was seeking tattoo removal again, and that her mother was "pleased" with her decision. She added, "My mom just passed away, but she was happy [about Diane having her tattoo removed]."

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Diane described herself as not being “tolerant” of pain, and emphasized that laser tattoo removal works better for her. About infrared tattoo removal, Diane stated, “I will never do it again even if I regret my tattoo.” Diane mentioned that she continues to work part-time for the local tattoo removal clinic, and that having access to free tattoo removal treatments makes the process accessible to her.

Diane expressed feeling “blessed” and “pleased” to be working for a non-profit laser tattoo removal clinic that provides services for the San Antonio police department and for a local agency which provides services to people experiencing homelessness. Diane took pride in the fact that her tattoo removal clinic provides accessible laser tattoo removal treatment to individuals with no financial means. Diane explained that individuals can qualify for free. She explained “They don’t pay if the person has no job or if they have tattoos on their neck, hands, or face.” However, for others that do not qualify for free tattoo removal, Diane’s clinic charges a flat rate of \$25 per removal treatment. About the size of the tattoo, Diane clarified the size of the tattoo does not matter and added, “If it [the tattoo] is bigger than a calling card, we start at \$25 dollars.”

At the end of interview, Diane shared her choice to remove her latest tattoo felt like an “achievement.” Diane also stated she had a laser tattoo removal procedure the same day as the interview. She described the treated area as “hurting,” but emphasized again that it did not burn in the way she had experienced with infrared treatments. Diane reflected on the seven years she had worked at the laser tattoo removal clinic and shared feeling that the process may be improving and that there is some experimentation with an anesthetic oil that helps to numb the pain. About getting a tattoo, Diane recommends that people just “don’t do it,” and added if they do, to have it applied where it can be covered

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to avoid being judged by other people. Lastly, Diane shared that her daughter has tattoos all over her body, and added she keeps asking her daughter to avoid getting tattoos on her face.

**Ezequiel.** At the time of the interview, Ezequiel reported feeling satisfied with the progress of removing his three unwanted tattoos and was unable to predict when his removal process would be completed. Ezequiel wanted to clarify he only has three unwanted tattoos and intends to keep other tattoos on his body and plans to get more.

Ezequiel began the interview by sharing he got his first tattoo at age 16 years and stated, “I was trying to be cool.” He had no particular reason for removing three of his tattoos and added, “There is no sad story behind it.” Ezequiel mentioned he plans to get additional tattoos.

After his first tattoo, Ezequiel stated, “When I was 18 years old, I decided to begin getting other tattoos.” He recalled that his motivation to get additional tattoos was socially motivated. He stated he wanted to be “cool,” and that he believed that girls liked tattoos. As a way to get girls interested in him, Ezequiel stated, “I rushed into getting tattoos.” About his rushed tattoos, Ezequiel shared,

I got them so young, so cost efficient, and they are not very good. Now I am trying to get them removed – this one in my wrist primarily because of professional reasons. I work in a professional industry, long sleeve shirt, things like that; but, you can still see the one in my wrist, which I always try to hide, and keep away from view. The other two are just unpleasant to me.

Ezequiel described his tattoo removal treatment process as “too painful,” both physically and financially. He stated “I began the process of removing the first one in

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2015, because I can only afford [removing] the one on my wrist.” Ezequiel noted that he began by removing his “worst and most displeasing” tattoo. Ezequiel is spacing removal treatments six weeks apart. About his choice to space treatments, he explained, “The more I wait, the less painful, and the more difference I saw.” When Ezequiel first starting the tattoo removal process he was worried about the financial burden he would experience. About the financial arrangement his tattoo removal clinical offered he stated, “They actually offered me a deal in that if 10 sessions were not enough, they would cover the rest.” However, after considering the price for individual removal sessions, he rejected the deal, and decided to pay for every session separately. Ezequiel shared, “I didn’t see the benefit [of the clinic’s offer] at first.”

Ezequiel described how he does not like the entry costs that laser tattoo removal clinics charge. He explained that laser removal clinics charge a high entry cost, and then after some time, “They offer former clients a better a better deal which makes no sense.” Ezequiel shared he is having to use his work bonuses to pay for tattoo removal treatments.

About his tattoos, Ezequiel shared,

My first tattoo, the one on my wrist is a zodiac sign which is kind of

“meaningful,” but not really. I am getting that one removed, again placement

issues. The other tattoos are fraternity tattoos, and at the moment were so cool.

Now that I look back, they are “so dumb,” kind of embarrassed by them. But, the

other tattoos were very meaningful, a portrait of my family. They [other tattoos]

were on my leg were very expensive but are good work.

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Ezequiel described the laser tattoo removal process as “painful,” and said they felt like “getting beat-up.” He also shared the tattoo removal process left him feeling as if he “wanted to cry.” In spite of all the pain, Ezequiel explained that he was not against tattoos, and clarified “I just want these 3 removed.” Ezequiel shared he wanted his tattoos removed because of “placement issues.”

Ezequiel shared he has a total of 15 tattoos right now. He also explained he had an injury to his face, that was repaired with laser therapy. He described the laser therapy he had on his face as “more painful than tattoo removal process.” About laser tattoo removal treatments, Ezequiel said he wished there was a quicker treatment process. In fact, he described the treatments as so painful he often feels like he does not want to return to his next laser treatment appointment, because he knows how much it is going to hurt him. Ezequiel shared how he responds when people ask him about the laser tattoo removal process,

I tell people to imagine yourself cooking; like eggs, or like bacon and the oil pops out of the pan and gets on your skin or your hand, or it is like a rubber band slapping you fast really fast.

Ezequiel then talked about his family and about how they were pleased he was removing his visible tattoos. He mentioned that his goal of having the visible tattoos removed was to have “no more feelings of shame.” He added, “I am kind of proud of getting them removed.” His family is also unhappy he is getting additional tattoos but stated, “They know these new ones are better.”

Ezequiel noted that he now felt more invested to continue removing the other two unwanted tattoos. He shared he was in no hurry to complete their removal and had no

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“dead-line.” Ezequiel shared he decided to take the clinic’s offer and now gets a discount to cover the complete removal of the remaining two unwanted tattoos. He plans to continue spacing out tattoo removal treatments and plans to make the process “as lengthy as possible due to the pain.” Ezequiel expressed feeling some relief that he can simply endure the physical pain of the tattoo removal process without having to experience the “financial pain.”

At the end of interview, Ezequiel mentioned that he never thought of seeking counseling regarding his unwanted tattoo. He acknowledged that after 10 sessions, his first tattoo is not completely removed. Ezequiel confessed to occasionally cancelling tattoo removal appointments at times when he does not feel up to enduring the pain. Lastly, Ezequiel shared he wished he had had information available to him about the tattoo removal process that covered more than the physical pain including the total price, number of sessions, and pre- and post-treatment processes before he began removal treatments.

**Jane.** At the time of the interview, Jane reported feeling satisfied with the progress she was making with her tattoo removal treatments. She mentioned she did not have a sense of how long it would be until the treatments would be completed.

Jane begin the interview describing how she was “inexperienced” and “naïve” when she was younger. She shared, “When I was 22 years old and found myself in a very abusive relationship.” At the time, Jane explained she did not know “how the world worked, and didn’t recognize how some people can be so cruel to other people.” Jane recalled her past abusive relationship as a “life learning experience,” and added, “I don’t let people like that in my life anymore.”

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Jane stated that she has only one tattoo, which is her abusive ex-partner's name. Jane shared how that tattoo reminds her of a lot of pain and suffering, made worse by the tattoo being visible on her hand. About having her abusive ex-partner's name on her hand, she shared, "I have a lot of regret around it."

Jane explained how it took a lot of courage to leave her abusive ex-partner and to begin rebuilding her life. She shared that removing the tattoo from her hand was a part of the rebuilding process. Jane shared how she is working to restore her self-confidence and that removing the tattoo is her effort "to forget about it [abusive relationship]." Ironically, Jane described how removing her abusive ex-partner's name from her hand has resulted in physical, emotional, and financial pain.

Jane shared that she was in her abusive relationship for eight years. She had attempted to have the tattoo removed immediately after she left the relationship but was not ready to endure the emotional pain related to the process. Jane added that she is fully engaged in the tattoo removal process and that it has brought her a feeling of "relief and satisfaction." Jane added, "Getting it [tattoo] removed feels really good."

Jane described the process of searching for a laser tattoo removal clinic as "complex." Jane has had treatments at several different laser tattoo removal clinics and would go to another location because of the expense. She explained that at some clinics, "It [laser tattoo removal treatment] was pretty pricey and I didn't see much progress." After searching for a clinic, she could afford, Jane finally found a non-profit local laser removal clinic that has better financial access. About her current clinic, Jane stated, "I will be coming here for as long as it takes to remove it [her tattoo]."

Jane reflected on her struggle to find the right tattoo removal clinic and stated,

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I wish I'd have known how tattoo removal works when I started my removal process, because some clinics can take you for a ride. When you get a tattoo, you just walk in, pick what you want off the wall, you pay, and that's it.

Jane shared that her family members were angry when she first obtained her tattoo. She stated her family and friends did not approve of her relationship, and that they often told her she was in a "bad relationship." Jane recalled how it took years for her to recognize that she was in an abusive relationship, and stated, "It was not until I was more mature that I realized about how bad my relationship was."

Jane described her past relationship as "toxic." She also stated that she felt like she had "betrayed" herself by not listening to the warnings from her family and friends about continuing her relationship with such a controlling person. She shared that she had received counseling for her abusive relationship, and that even though she has not gone in a while, she has counseling available to her.

Jane noted that she was currently in her fifth laser treatment session, and stated she felt the process was "coming along pretty well." Jane recognized that the laser tattoo removal process was not as fast of a process as she had hoped. Jane spaced her laser tattoo removal treatments five weeks apart. While Jane believes that some tattoos are "beautiful," she feels that her getting another tattoo is not a choice she will be making.

For Jane, her prior trauma, and the meaning of her tattoo, have led to her a decision that she will not get another tattoo. She added, "I am not altering my body in any form or fashion." About the tattoo removal process and her tattoo, Jane stated clarified, "It's really not that bad compared to the emotional part of having it. It is painful, but physical pain is very different than emotional pain, and physical pain is temporary."



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At the end of interview, Jane wondered how different her first tattoo experience would have been if getting it would have been her choice. Jane explained that she was not forced to tattoo her ex-partner's name on her body, but did it as a way to show her love to him. Jane stated, "I am wondering if I had had a positive experience if I would get another tattoo." For now, Jane recognizes that she needs to heal the emotional pain around her tattoo, and then she can decide what is best for her in life. She also mentioned that she currently in a new relationship with a person that supports and validates her.

**Marcus.** At the time of the interview, Marcus reported feeling content with his decision to pursue laser tattoo removal. He described being at the end of his tattoo removal treatment process and estimated the process might be complete in another nine months. Marcus began the interview by stating that he was uncertain about tattoo removal when he first began to pursue information about the process. He shared that at the time he began researching the laser tattoo removal process he had no concrete plan to actually remove a tattoo. Marcus described changes in his family life, career, and in his feelings towards his tattoos as his motivation for researching tattoo removal. He also added that tattoos that had formerly been significant to him no longer had any meaning. When Marcus made the decision to have tattoo removal he stated, "I was not in a hurry to get them removed." He did know he wanted them removed "sooner or later."

About getting his first tattoos, Marcus stated, "I wanted them at the moment." Those tattoos are now the ones I want completely removed. Marcus described his choice to get tattoos as a "mistake" which he has accepted. He stated that getting them removed feels like a solution to the ongoing going disappointment he feels over impulsive choices.

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Marcus stated he was 17 years old and in high school when he got his first tattoo. He stated, “I had difficult times when I was a youngster.” About getting his first tattoo, Marcus stated, “I think I was inebriated and picked some stuff off the wall that didn’t mean anything.” He described feeling unhappy and ashamed with his past choices, but explained his mistakes do not have to define him as a professional or a father. About his situation, Marcus explained,

I didn’t care [about his tattoos] for a long time but then I had kids and had this stuff on my body that didn’t mean anything to me. I didn’t want my kids to have the same thoughts come into their lives. I want for my kids to learn from my mistakes.

Marcus mentioned that he shopped for laser tattoo removal prices before making his final decision to remove them, and he described the cost as “concerning.” Marcus mentioned that he was finally motivated to remove his unwanted tattoos after finding an online discount through a “Groupon” offer. He emphasized the financial aspect of laser tattoo removal was highly important to him since he already had a family to care for. Marcus described his first tattoo removal experience as “fairly easy.” About his decision process Marcus stated,

When I decided to seek tattoo removal, it was not definite. The obstacles to making the decision were the financial aspect, it is pretty pricy. I was not in a hurry to get them done, had them for lots of years, and knew it was a process.

About choosing to get his first tattoo at 17, Marcus stated, “I wish I could have done it different back then.” At the time of the interview, Marcus had come to accept his

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mistakes of getting tattoos at an early state and simply stated, “It is what it is. I learn from my decisions.”

Marcus was 37 years old when he chose to have his tattoos removed and stated by that time “I had them for many of years.” Marcus noted that now looking back, he acknowledges his poor choices. He described wanting his kids to learn from his mistakes, and mentioned that he was not afraid to coach them about getting tattoos at an early age, in order to avoid making the same mistakes as he did. As for Marcus’ family, he shared they had known all along about his tattoos and that they accepted him. About his family, he stated, “If I am happy, they are happy.”

Marcus described the tattoo removal process as an “easy process, but definitely painful.” He noted that it took about three sessions to remove a couple of his tattoos that had no color, which made the process less painful. Marcus described a removed tattoo as having been about “eight-square inches, which it is considered small for the removal process.” He described his tattoos as a “tribal designs,” and stated “after three sessions, [they] came out easy.”

Marcus explained the tattoo that is currently in the process of being removed is across his back and arms. He has another one on an arm that has color and stated it “still need more treatments.” Marcus is planning to have them all removed. Marcus described the laser tattoo removal process as “painful, similar as getting a tattoo” and “like a sensation burning.” He mentioned that he wishes he could use pain killers to reduce pain. Marcus shared that once he made the decision to get his tattoos removed, that he felt good about his decision. He also mentioned he was glad that tattoo removal technology

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has come a long way. Marcus also shared how many places are offering laser tattoo removal and noted “it helps to bring prices down.”

Marcus stated that the most stressful thing about his tattoo removal process is having to “wait so long” between sessions. He added, “I wish it was quicker.” About the results of his prior tattoo removal sessions, Marcus said he was “pleased” with the outcome. He described that such tattoos had no current meaning due to his current career.

At the time of the follow-up interview, Marcus shared he got motivated to begin plans to remove his last tattoo. He recognized that learning about this research study, gave him motivation to complete his tattoo removal. Marcus said he would be returning to the same clinic he used in the past due to having “fair prices.”

At the end of interview, Marcus expressed feeling a sense of “freedom” knowing that he was able to successfully remove most of his tattoos. He also described feeling “liberated” and ready to “enjoy summer time with my family.” Lastly, Marcus said his experiences prepared him to educate others, including own kids, about the perils of making poor tattoo choices and feels prepared to be a good role-model.

**Mrs.** At the time of the interview, Mrs reported feeling pleased with the progress of her tattoo removal. She is in the process of having two tattoos removed, and also shared she is hoping to finish her laser tattoo removal process after one or two more treatments.

Mrs begin the interview by sharing, “I got my tattoo when I was 19 years old.” Mrs shared that she had been an enthusiastic music fan when she was younger and described her tattoos are “band related.” Mrs stated “I used to listen to a lot of music when I was younger” and that she and her friends “had similar [band] tattoos. It was like

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over 15 years ago.” Now, at 37 years of age, Mrs stated she was “more mature” and found herself “wanting to be tattoo free.” She shared she does not listen to music like she used to and that she is no longer friends with the people she had gotten tattoos with.

About her tattoos, Mrs shared that her family never really cared about her tattoos or the removal process. She added, “they [tattoos] are hidden on my hip, not noticeable, and most of my family members have tattoos.” Mrs shared that her decision to seek laser tattoo removal was “personal,” and she recognized feeling embarrassed by her unwanted tattoos. She also said she was glad that people could now get temporary tattoos.

Mrs is recovering from her fifth tattoo removal session and stated she was “content” that current tattoo that is being treated appears to be “fading really good.” About the laser tattoo removal process, Mrs started, “It hurts, but is worth it.” Mrs shared the following about tattoos and her decision to seek tattoo removal services,

I’ve seen some pretty bad ones [tattoos], but luckily my tattoos are hidden and they haven’t affected anything but my self-esteem. So, that’s why they have to go. I should be done in one more session. I am pretty excited. I have never considered counseling.

Mrs described the laser tattoo removal process as “pretty painful” and added that the pain “is worse than the actual tattoo; like a five on a scale of five.” Mrs shared that the tattoo she is having removed is “pretty big,” which means she has to endure a lengthier laser removal process. On the bright side, Mrs indicated the tattoo being removed is just comprised of black ink, which makes the pigment easier to remove. Mrs explained that she has experienced no infections, but noted that usually after a laser removal treatment, her skin looks a little “distressed” and gets quite red.

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Mrs shared that she made a concrete decision to begin the laser tattoo removal process after discovering a “groupon” discount. About the cost, Mrs explained she paid about \$50 to get each of her tattoos, and was fearful about how much she would pay to have them removed.

Prior to finding the groupon discount she is using at her current clinic, Mrs stated she had paid \$300 for each laser tattoo removal session at another clinic. Mrs reported she had paid a dermatologist \$50 dollars just for a consultation. Feeling dissatisfied with the groupon, Mrs kept searching for cheaper prices. She finally found a clinic that charged \$100 dollars per session. Continuing to keep her options open, she entered a raffle for a \$500 tattoo removal credit, and she won. Mrs stated, “I save \$500 dollars, so I am practically doing it [laser tattoo removal] for free here.”

Mrs described laser tattoo removal as being one of the most painful treatments she has ever had to endure. To ease the pain, she has tried a numbing cream and still, she stated the treatments are “super painful without it for me.” At this time, Mrs waits six weeks in between treatments and stated, “This pace works well for me, gives me time to heal.”

At the end of interview, Mrs expressed being happy about the way her tattoo removal process was going and stated. The only alternative would have been to get another tattoo to cover up an existing one. About that option she stated, “To do a coverup is not a sure thing. It can be as bad [as the original tattoo.” Mrs ended the interview by stating it has been 25 years since she thought tattoos were “cool’ and stated “I would not do that [get a tattoo] anymore.”

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**Rigo.** At the time of the interview, Rigo reported feeling a sense of accomplishment with the progress he has made on the removal of his tattoo. Rigo is not sure how long it will take to complete the tattoo removal process and described his body as being held “captive” by the tattoo ink. He explained that there is something in the tattoo ink pigment that is making it difficult to remove. Rigo shared that most people in his life do not know about his tattoos.

Rigo began the interview by sharing he got his first tattoo at a time in his life when he was experiencing a sense of hopelessness and was not optimistic about his future. He shared that he was 26 years old when he got his first tattoos which symbolized his sense of feeling lost during that time of his life. Since that time, he has stopped associating with the people he knew during that difficult time. Rigo stated it took nine years to make the decision to remove his tattoos and added he has been seeking treatments since 2011. About the clinic that treats him, he stated, “I have been coming to get laser [tattoo removal] treatments since 2011 when I learned about the fair prices in here.”

Rigo described the laser tattoo removal treatment process as “painful,” but he also shared he feels a sense of accomplishment after each treatment. Rigo’s tattoo removal process is going very slow and he stated, “My skin is very stubborn. In theory it [tattoo] should be removed by now. I will just keep going [for laser removal treatments] until is completely removed.”

Rigo described the tattoo removal process as difficult and stated, “It’s painful, you’re going to feel it. It is not easy, and it hurts more than [getting] the actual tattoo.

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Rico also stated that in spite of the pain, “It [getting the tattoo removal treatments] feels like freedom, because you are liberating yourself from something you no longer want.

Rigo recalled the financial hurdles he faced when he decided to pursue laser tattoo removal. He mentioned that money was definitely a barrier to seeking removal treatments because most centers are a part of the private industry. Rigo shared that he felt like laser tattoo removal is not accessible to many people because it is cost prohibited and there is a lack of information.

Rigo stated he has not shared his tattoos with very many people.

When asked how his family felt about his tattoos, and about whether or not they knew about them, Rigo stated,

No, I haven’t really told family, so, it is just something that I know about, and my family doesn’t know about. People that know are only me, [name], and [name], and now you [the researcher]. Maybe a friend or two.

Rigo described his search for tattoo removal information as complex and misinformed. He recalled wishing there were more honest and transparent sources of information about tattoo removal. About his particular tattoo removal experience, Rigo stated, “You would think that it [tattoo] would be removed quickly.” Rigo added, “You don’t get the honesty with the advertising, which says it [tattoo removal] is easy and quick, but is not true.” Rigo stated that he hoped this study could highlight tattoo removal clinic advertising because the tattoo removal process is not a “quick removal” as it is advertised. Rigo would like consumers to know that tattoo removal is not easy, that it takes some time, and that it is not a definitive way to change anybody’s life.



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At the end of the interview, Rigo mentioned that he never thought about seeking counseling for his tattoo regret. After reflecting, Rigo did state he recognizes there is a psychological process to the tattoo removal process. In his case, Rigo feels that his tattoo removal process is his way of improving how he perceives himself. About the whole tattoo removal process, Rigo shared he is able to embrace life more positively, and to think about his future and values.

**Zack.** At the time of the interview, Zack was seeking a lightening treatment for a tattoo. His plan was not to remove his tattoo completely, but to fade it to a degree that he can have a cover tattoo applied over the area. In addition to being a tattoo removal client, Zack is also a professional tattoo removal technician.

Zack began the interview by sharing he was 19 years old when he got his first tattoo, which is also the tattoo he is having lightened. About his first tattoo, Zack described drinking with a friend who told him he was “an inspiring tattoo artist.” Zack described his experience getting his first tattoo and shared,

My friend was an aspiring tattoo artist, so I decided to get the last name of my adoptive family tattooed on my left bicep. It was only the second tattoo my friend had ever done. It was done poorly. It got infected the first time, so I had to go back over it second time.

About Zack’s tattoo regret, he stated, “It [adoptive family’s last name] is just something that I would not choose for myself at the age I am now.” Zack is not opposed to tattoos and explained, “Since then [when he got his first tattoo], I got many other tattoos, American-tradition tattoos.” Zack stated, “I view tattoos as art. I like my pieces to look aesthetically-pleasing, to fit a certain style.” He explained he is choosing to have it

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lightened and covered because “It [his first tattoo] was a rough font that didn’t look so great, so I wanted to have it removed to get it covered originally.”

Zack described his tattoo regret as “aesthetically displeasing,” and as something that he wants off of his body. Fortunately, Zack currently operates a tattoo removal clinic and is able to treat himself without financial burdens, which he stated was a “blessing.” Zack did indicate that if he had to pay to get his tattoo removed, he would have found a way to pay for it. Altering his tattoo at this point in his life is very important. Zack noted that his current lifestyle and a conflict with adoptive father are his major motivations to remove his unwanted tattoo, which he described as “a dump.”

About his family’s reaction to his first tattoo, Zack stated, “My mom, as soon as she saw it, she freaked out.” He noted that his family now understands his love for tattoo art. Zack described how his favorite tattoos are “American-traditional tattoos” that are designed to fit a certain style, and represent his way of life, family, and aspirations.

Zack stated, “I know a lot about tattoo removal.” Given his knowledge, he feels satisfied with his progress. Zack also shared he has not experienced any adverse complications, but did state the process is painful. He stated, “It doesn’t feel good” and commented another difficulty is the length of time between removal treatments.

Zack shared some of his experiences working with clients at his tattoo removal clinic, and he noted that his job is not only to remove tattoos, but to educate people and provide consultations about the tattoo removal process. He mentioned that on occasion, people will get “frustrated” with the process when they do not notice any lightening progress, or what he called “lack of results.” Zack explained that he tracks clients’

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progress by taking pictures of tattoos before each treatment. Zack added, “There is always progress going on.”

Zack then shared how one client at his clinic looked at the price-sheet and exclaimed, “This is a \$15 dollar tattoo I got Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> and now it is going to cost me \$1000 to removed it.” Zack affirmed that the cost of tattoo removal treatments is another form of discomfort for many clients. Zack explained how he likes to work with people and offer them discounts. He stated he tells clients, “I understand this is an expensive process.” Zack described wanting to treat people with a “level of compassion.”

Zack advised how people looking for tattoo removal treatments should shop around local clinics, and ask for tattoo removal certifications to validate clinic and staff credentials. Zack also shared that in the state of Texas, tattoo removal was regulated by “Radiation Emissions” and not by the state health department. Zack shared, as a professional tattoo removal technician, that he has witnessed tattoo removal clinics taking advantage the lack of regulations to increase clinic sells by hiring technicians without certification. Those kinds of practices can “injured people.” Zack also disclosed how some clinics are not honest with clients by advertising they can remove all colored tattoos. In reality, Zack explained that green and highly reflective blue tattoo inks are almost impossible to remove as the necessary laser optic technology has not yet been developed.

At the end of interview, Zack noted that he personally never thought about seeking counseling because of his displeasure with his first tattoo. Zack did share a few experiences with clients he believed might benefit from counseling. He recalled a client

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that came in to have her “marriage-bond” tattoo removed. He stated she broke into tears and “told me that she had just gone to her first divorce hearing.”

Zack also shared how he learned that sex traffickers, which he called “predators,” abuse their victims. He stated they “will mark the abused individuals with their brand.” Zack ended the interview by reinforcing that he likes to comfort clients by showing empathy. He said he takes the time do what he can to reduce pain when applying the laser treatment. Lastly, he feels really good when a tattoo is completely removed, and clients shed “tears of joy.”

### **Presentation of Themes and Subthemes**

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the kinds of tattoo adversity experienced by individuals who seek laser tattoo removal. By using constructivist grounded theory methodology, the researcher sought to uncover rich data to create grounded theory from the participants’ narratives. Face-to-face interviews were semi structured and the following questions and prompts were utilized by the researcher:

1. How did you decide to seek tattoo removal?
  - a. What types of difficulties contributed to your decision to seek tattoo removal?
  - b. What kinds of things, if any, led you to make the decision to seek tattoo removal?
2. Please tell me about your experience of the tattoo removal process.
3. What kinds of support or information would have helped you before making the decision to seek tattoo removal?

During the interview, participants had the opportunity to elaborate on any experiences they felt were relevant to their decision to seek laser tattoo removal. Then interviews were transcribed, coded, and participant narratives were created from which

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the researcher gleaned grounded theory. The researcher sorted themes found in the data by associating similarities and central subthemes between participants' responses. Table 2 includes the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Table 2

### *Themes and Subthemes*

<b>Frame of Reference</b>	<b>Evolution</b>	<b>Interpersonal Agency</b>
Transformation	Maturity	Reconciliation
Emotional Regulation	Tattoo Meaning	Acceptance
Context Perspective		Resourcefulness

### **Frame of Reference**

Each participant shared a unique frame of reference that led to the decision to undergo laser tattoo removal. Each participant shared some form of transformation through emotional pain and described various sources of resilience as they went through the tattoo removal process. Participants' narratives included personal anecdotes, regrets, the meaning of their tattoos, and the ways in which they found ways to cope while enduring the painful process of laser tattoo removal. Participants' frames of reference highlighted their transformation, the way they perceived themselves, and how they experienced context perspective.

**Transformation.** The subtheme of transformation is demonstrated by the way participants verbalized their goals and self-confidence as they persevered through their laser tattoo removal treatments. Zack got his first tattoo at the age of 19, after agreeing to let a friend apply his adoptive family's last name on his bicep. Since that time, Zack has

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had a rupture in his relationship with his adoptive father. The family name on his arm does not fit with where he is in his life or relationship with his adoptive family. About Zack's first tattoo, he stated "it is just something that I wouldn't chose for myself at the age I am now."

Years later, Zack continues to enjoy tattoo art, and takes time to research more meaningful tattoos that are connected with his current lifestyle. Zack stated he "loves" tattoos, and that he sees them as art. Zack's objective was to have only those tattoos that were consistent with his current style on his body.

Jane's goal was to get a new start in life by removing the tattoo of her abusive ex-partner's name from her hand that represents "so much emotional pain." Jane described the physical pain of the tattoo removal process as "not that bad" compared to the emotional pain related to her tattoo. She stated, "physical pain is very different than emotional pain, and physical pain is temporary." Jane has resolved she will not get any more tattoos and stated, "I am not planning to alter my body again."

Jane noted that having her tattoo removed has brought a sense of a second opportunity. She now feels she is able to look forward to a life full of happiness.

**Emotional Regulation.** The subtheme of emotional regulation was highlighted by Ezequiel and Marcus as they both viewed the laser tattoo removal process as a way to reverse their tattoo regret and to improve the way they see themselves. Reversing tattoo regret resulted in changes in the way participants are able to see themselves. Ezequiel described how he had gotten his first tattoos in an effort to be "cool," and even confessed that he thought tattoos would attract girls. In total, Ezequiel has 15 tattoos, and was

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seeking the removal for a couple of tattoos because he does not like where they are placed.

Like other participants, Ezequiel spaced out his treatments, but was the only participant to confess he sometimes rescheduled his tattoo removal treatments “for personal reasons” on days when he was simply feeling unprepared to cope with the pain. Ezequiel endured the painful treatments confident a day would come when he no longer experiences “feelings of shame.”

Marcus pursued laser tattoo removal because his tattoos no longer fit with his family and career. Marcus explained how he had made some bad choices when he was younger, and in some way, laser tattoo removal was a way for Marcus to take responsibility for his “mistakes.” Marcus does not dwell on the past, and about his mistakes he simply said, “It is what it is.”

For Marcus, the tattoos he is having removed represent a time in his life when he made choices he now regrets. While Marcus reported he does not feel defined by his mistakes, he stated that having his tattoos removed gives him a feeling of being “liberated.” Marcus perceives himself to have opportunities he did not have before. Marcus shared that going through the tattoo removal process has prepared him to be a role model for his children and perhaps somebody who could educate others so they would not make the mistakes he made.

**Context Perspective.** The subtheme of context perspective is demonstrated in how participants struggled with the reasons they chose tattoo removal with the realities of the painful removal process. Diane shared that her first tattoo was of a rose that she had placed on her hand. Diane eventually took an office job and began to feel embarrassed

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that her tattoo was visible to those with whom she worked. She felt a sense of urgency to have it removed and stated, “I knew people will judge, so I wanted them to remove it fast.”

Diane had the unfortunate experience of getting infrared tattoo removal treatments that were extremely painful and produced blistering and infections. Diane eventually switched to laser tattoo removal treatments she described as “like someone is popping you with a rubber-band constantly.” Diane was able to manage laser tattoo removal better than the infrared treatment. About the pain associated with infrared tattoo removal treatments, “I will never do infrared removal again even if I regret my tattoo.”

Mrs described each her tattoos as a reminder of her naïve younger years and a of a time when she made poor choices. For Mrs, her choice to remove rather large tattoos of a few of her former favorite bands is an effort to have her body reflect where she is in her current life. About the laser tattoo removal process, Mrs stated, “It is super painful for me.” Mrs added, her experience of the pain “is worse than the actual tattoo; like a five in a scale of five, but I look forward to not having them [her tattoos].” In spite of the pain, Mrs reported she felt a sense of accomplishment with each treatment and said, “I am pretty excited about the progress, it [laser tattoo removal] is worth the pain.”

### **Evovement**

The theme of evovement connects participants’ experiences, motives for seeking laser tattoo removal, and the personal transformations that led to getting laser tattoo removal treatments. Participants described how they endured years of tattoo regret before finding the courage to undergo painful laser tattoo removal. Participants shared moving through feelings of shame and betrayal while attempting to reconcile these feelings



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through the tattoo removal process. Many participants described that the tattoos they had gotten at a younger age were mistakes, and recognized that their early tattoos left them feeling disconnected from the person they were at the present. They also recognized that spending more time researching tattoos would have helped them make a better choice.

**Maturity.** The subtheme of maturity captures most participants' sources of tattoo regret. All participants got their first tattoos as young adults and they reflected on that decision during the interviews. About his tattoos, Ezequiel stated. "At that time, I thought was cool because girls like tattoos." Ezequiel noted being proud of himself for getting tattoos removed. He now recognizes that his family members do not like that he continues obtaining more tattoos, and added, "But, they know these new ones are better."

Ezequiel also noted that after graduating from college his life has changed, and he stated, "I now have to be mindful of my professional work." Ezequiel described his sense of maturity by explaining that he continues to "love" tattoos, but now spends a great amount of time searching for quality tattoos when obtaining new ones. He stated "My current tattoos have more personal meaning, and are done professionally."

When Marcus got his first tattoo he stated, "I just wanted to show off, didn't really care much at that time." Marcus now described his idea to get his first tattoo as a "poor choice." He added, "I am not the young guy I once was." Marcus showed signs of maturing when he stated his "motto" is "living by choices and mistakes and takes responsibility for them."

Participants now recognize that life and people continue to change. About her first tattoo, Diane stated, "I was dumb at the time, but now I don't have to worry about people at my job judging me."

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Participants reflected on their own past choices when obtained their current displeased tattoos. The narratives illuminated how participants felt disconnected from the tattoos they were having removed. Consistent with relational-cultural theory, the laser tattoo removal process represented a way of reconnecting with who they felt themselves to be now. For participants, the tattoos being removed seemed to function as a source of disconnection in that they were emotional and physical barriers to their ability to feel fully connected in relationships and present in their current lives.

**Tattoo Meaning.** For several participants, their tattoos had significant meanings related to a prior painful time in their lives. For example, Rigo recalled how he got his first tattoo “at that time in my life when I felt hopeless.” About his tattoo, Rigo stated his tattoo “represents a sense of loss.” His experience of the laser tattoo removal process represents his best effort to take “back control of his life,” and to not let his past undermine his future.

Rigo described his decision to seek tattoo removal treatments as “personal,” and stated that very few people know about his tattoo. He also shared his tattoo was a source of “shame.” Consistent with relational-cultural theory, Rigo’s tattoo serves as a source of disconnection as he keeps it hidden. Rigo appeared to be moving forward in his tattoo removal process and in his life in spite of feeling his body is held “captive” by the ink which is slow to fade. It is unclear if Rigo’s tattoo will fade completely, but he feels good he in at least in the process of having it removed.

Zack shared he got his first tattoo at the age of 19. In an unfortunate story Zack described how, during a night of drinking, his friend told him he was an “aspiring tattoo

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artist.” Before the night was over, Zack had the name of his adoptive family tattooed on his left bicep. Zack’s tattoo was only the second tattoo his friend had applied.

Now, years later, Zack was getting laser tattoo removal treatments to lighten this tattoo and he had plans to cover it with a new design. Zack had grown to acquire a preference for certain styles of tattoos, and described the one being lightened as “aesthetically-displeasing.” While Zack was technical in describing how the tattoo was from a bad “font,” he added that he was also having it removed because of a conflict with his adoptive father. Zack did not elaborate on the nature or severity of the conflict, but stated, “It [tattoo being lightened] is my adoptive family’s last name, so now I don’t want it on me.” A tattoo that had some significant personal meaning at one time in his life, became a source of pain in the years that followed.

Consistent with relational-cultural theory, Zack’s choice to lighten and cover the tattoo of his adoptive family’s last name represents a disconnection. In Zack’s case, his choosing to lighten and cover this tattoo is not about the past, but about the present. Zack’s tattoo alteration represents his effort to remove a tattoo that has no meaning to him in his current life. His effort solidifies his disconnection from his adoptive family and his moving forward in a way that is consistent with his current lifestyle.

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The process of tattoo removal demonstrated various changes in the participants' lives and their emotional maturity. Participants' tattoo removal processes were efforts to not be reminded of their past mistakes, emotional states of mind of current relational disconnections. Participants courageously shared their stories, highlighted their regrets, and had accepted that life does not have to be so painful or complicated. Their narratives demonstrated how they evolved as human beings without forgetting their journey or how they arrived to laser tattoo removal.

### **Interpersonal Agency**

The theme of interpersonal competency reflects how participants were able to reconcile with their past, accept their mistakes and successfully navigate their resources to find affordable tattoo removal services. The subthemes of reconciliation, acceptance, and resourcefulness are discussed below.

**Reconciliation.** Participants demonstrated an ability to reconcile their previous, and often youthful mistakes, through the tattoo removal process. Most individuals do things they regret in their youth, and for most, these errors in ways become distant memories and are sometimes forgotten altogether. For the participants, the errors of their youth were literally tattooed on their bodies, leaving them feeling regret about their former choices and a sense of tattoo regret. For several participants, their tattoos served as stark reminders of past mistakes that were visible for the world to see.

Regardless of placement, most participants shared a collective sense of shame and embarrassment they were able to reconcile through the tattoo removal process. As Rigo noted, at the time in his life when obtained his first tattoos, he felt hopelessness, have no future aspirations, and in general felt having no general purpose in life. He noted feeling

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a sense of reconciliation by undergoing laser tattoo removal, as he stated, “It feels good removing something that no longer means anything to me.”

Jane recalled that pursuing laser tattoo removal has given her a sense of reconciliation with her experience of having been in an abusive relationship. She acknowledged that her tattoo was a reminder of her immaturity and poor judgment, and by having it removed empowers her to be more mindful of her choices. Jane noted that removing her tattoo is a way to strengthen her connection with her family and friends.

Mrs noted that removing her tattoos continue to help her increase her self-esteem and stated, “I now like looking at the mirror, and knowing that soon they will be gone”. Mrs recognized that even as her tattoos are hidden on her body, she still struggles with her self-esteem.

**Acceptance.** Participants had varying degrees of attachments to their prior mistakes. Regardless of how they currently felt about those mistakes, they were all seeking tattoo removal treatments. For some participants, acceptance was concurrent with their tattoo removal treatments, but Marcus and Ezequiel seemed to have accepted their past mistakes prior to seeking laser tattoo removal.

Marcus was open about the poor decisions he made when he was younger, but stopped short of saying he regretted anything. Marcus stated, “I don’t regret my experiences in my life, I had good times when was younger.” About his past mistakes, Marcus added, “It is what it is.” He acknowledged that life is about making mistakes and learning how to overcome such mistakes, by becoming a better person.

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Ezequiel's described his first tattoos he got in an attempt to "be cool," as "so dumb." He has accepted that those first tattoos no longer fit with her character, or with the style of subsequent tattoos he has attained.

Jane admitted she was naïve when she got her first tattoo, and recognizes it was a bad choice not only because she was in a noxious relationship at that time, but because she decided to have her ex-partner's name tattooed on her body. She noted that it has taken her some time to accept such past poor choices, but that currently having a positive support system is helping her to thrive emotionally and psychologically.

**Resourcefulness.** Participants described various ways in which they were resourceful in finding accessible tattoo removal services. Rigo described how he got his first tattoo at a time in his life when he believed he had no life purpose and no positive support system to guide him. He noted that when learned about laser tattoo removal, it took him time to self-redirect to get an appointment. About his tattoo, Rigo stated, "I don't really like to talk about it." Rigo felt encouraged when the tattoo removal clinic affirmed his information would remain confidential. Even with his initial trepidation, Rigo made the appointment and is following through.

While other participants were resourceful in the financial aspects of attaining tattoos, one resource that was helpful to Jane was counseling. In her narrative, Jane described how immediately after leaving her abusive relationship she attempted to get her ex-partner's name removed. She stated at that time she was not emotionally ready to go through with the process, and she sought counseling instead. In spite of emotional or financial obstacles, all participants found the resources they needed to go through with the process. Lastly, several participants found ways and resources to cope with the

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physical pain. One participant shared she uses topical pain relief, while other shared they were taking their time between removal appointments. One participant even stated on days when he feels like he can't manage the pain, he simply cancels the appointment for a day when he has the psychological resources to handle a removal session.

### **Discussion**

Constructivist grounded theory methodology was utilized to understand the experiences of participants' tattoo adversity, and how it led to their seeking tattoo removal. The grounded theory generated by this study is: *Participants in this study experienced a range of tattoo regret that was predominantly related to tattoos attained in their youth. Laser tattoo removal was sought to reduce distress such that participants' bodies were congruent with their current life experiences.* As it related to relational-cultural theory, tattoo removal was sought as a means for participants to heal the disconnection they felt in their bodies.

All participants were dogged in their determination to seek laser tattoo removal. Each participant narrated their motivation for obtaining their first tattoos and for seeking tattoo removal services. Similarities included, but were not limited, to participants obtaining their unwanted tattoo in their late adolescence years. It wasn't until later in their life when they were more mature, that they began formulating plans to seek laser tattoo removal.

While there was some variation in participants' tattoo regret and laser tattoo removal, all participants described emotional pain prior to seeking tattoo removal, and physical pain throughout the duration of their laser tattoo removal treatments. In spite of the pain of the tattoo removal treatments, participants appeared to grow increasingly

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inspired and able to complete tattoo removal.

About their tattoos, participants reported a range of distressing feelings that most commonly included shame and embarrassment. Several participants reported hiding their tattoos from others. One participant experienced shame to such a degree, that his tattoo was likely a source of social isolation and relational disconnections. Consistent with previous studies, the participants experienced tattoo regret for years after attaining the tattoos they had chosen to remove (Swami, 2011). Two participants reported experiencing tattoo related infections following tattoo application and infrared tattoo removal. Both participants discussed the infections only briefly and described minor problems such as blisters, irregular pigmentation, and redness. No participants report any major infection that required immediate hospitalization intervention.

While participants did not discuss feeling betrayed by the tattoo artists who had applied the tattoos they were seeking to have removed, nearly all participants discussed some displeasure with the experience of finding a tattoo removal clinic they could trust. Several participants discussed issues with the costs associated with tattoo removal and shared feeling mistrustful of financial discounts offered to them. None of the participants discussed any type of problem with a specific tattoo removal technician, nor did they appear to have any particular attachment to the technicians who were working to relieve them of unwanted tattoos. In most cases, the participants had settled on a specific clinic based on the costs of their services.

Lastly, most participants were tentative about discussing their tattoo removal journeys and experiences. In most cases, the participants just wanted their unwanted tattoos privately removed so they could go on with their lives. It was apparent from the



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interviews that tattoo removal is a sensitive issue and painful process, but that the costs are worth it as a powerful solution to ending personal pain and stigma.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of the study was to understand the events, circumstances, and personal experiences that led participants to undergo laser tattoo removal through semi-structured interviews. The researcher utilized constructivist grounded theory to assess participants' experiences of tattoo adversity leading to tattoo removal. The study included three female and four male participants ranging from 25 to 55 years of age. Participants that were recruited from local tattoo removal clinics.

From the interviews, the researcher identified themes and subthemes that highlighted each participant's personal story, cultural background, and professional status. The first main theme was participants' frame of reference and subthemes included transformation, emotional regulation, and context perspective. The second theme was evolvment, and subthemes were maturity, tattoo meaning. The third theme was interpersonal agency and the subthemes included reconciliation, acceptance, and resourcefulness.

From the themes, the following grounded theory statement emerged: *Participants in this study experienced a range of tattoo regret that was predominantly related to tattoos attained in their youth. Laser tattoo removal was sought to reduce distress such that participants' bodies were congruent with their current life experiences.* As the emergent grounded theory relates to relational-cultural theory, participants experienced their unwanted tattoos as sources of disconnections that impacted their sense of self- and relational-worth.

### **Implications**

This research generated a number of implications that should be considered for future studies and in clinical settings. During the recruitment phase, the researcher encountered a number of individuals who were interested in the study, but were not willing to share their stories, even using a pseudonym to conceal their identities. The notion of having their stories highlighted in a document for others to read appeared to scare many prospective participants.

The researcher found that many individuals wanted the distressing experience of laser tattoo removal to end. The idea of having one's tattoo experience recorded and documented was not an easy sell to most individuals. In one encounter, the researcher extended an invitation to one individual who responded, "Thank you, but I just want to finish this and move on."

Other prospective participants voiced concern over having to be recorded while sharing their personal stories. While the researcher can only speculate as to the reasons behind prospective participants' reservations, the implication is that the experiences leading up to tattoo removal are very sensitive.

Tattoo removal, like acquiring a tattoo, is a form of body modification. While it may seem unreasonable to equate laser tattoo removal with elective plastic surgery, such as face lift, the expectations of improvements in one's appearance are the same. Individuals commonly prefer to keep their decisions about seeking elective plastic surgery private, and there are implications that individuals seeking laser tattoo removal share this preference. The need for privacy has implications as to the sensitive nature of the process.

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During the recruitment phase, the researcher encountered a number of potential participants were exploring financial help with their tattoo removal treatments. When the researcher extended an invitation to one prospective participant, their first question was, “Would I get a discount for my next tattoo removal treatment?” Indeed, the cost of having a tattoo removed far exceeds the cost of acquiring a tattoo. It is reasonable to expect that a \$15 tattoo would cost up to \$1000 to have removed. The expense of tattoo removal treatments was a subject that all participants shared in their interviews.

The participants’ narratives generated implications for tattoo parlors and tattoo removal clinics to take a client centered approach to the way they provide services. At the time of this writing, the reality that these providers would adopt a client centered approach is highly unlikely. Like other businesses, tattoo parlors and tattoo removal clinics are fiscally driven. Given the services provided by tattoo parlors have the potential to cause their clients a great deal of adversity, screening, age restrictions, and waiting periods are warranted.

The cost of tattoo removal treatments combined with there being no state level regulatory body overseeing clinics has implications for the exploitation of their clients. Several participants spoke of the difficulty they had in understanding the tattoo removal process regarding what was guaranteed and what was simply not possible. One participant shared that some tattoo removal clinics advertise they can completely remove tattoos, when in reality, some tattoos with blue and green inks are impossible to fully remove.

The notion that some individuals seeking tattoo removal services feel exploited by clinics has implications for researchers’ ability to access this population for future

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studies. It is worth noting that all of the participants in this study were in the process of having their tattoos removed. Additionally, all of them were anticipating their tattoos would be completely removed after additional treatments. In short, the participants in this study did not report feeling exploited by clinics because they were still in the process of having their tattoos removed.

Several participants reported they did not like some “entry fees” charged by tattoo removal clinics and most reported they had been to several clinics before settling on one. Participants also reported they had secured discounts through various means. Their experiences reveal implications related to the cost of laser tattoo removal being, in and of itself, a sensitive issue.

The cost of laser tattoo removal has implications for community agencies to provide financial assistance to members of marginalized groups who may desire tattoo removal treatments. Non-profit health and human services programs can help to bridge financial disparities by providing grants or other forms of aid to make laser tattoo removal accessible for people facing financial obstacles.

No participants in this study reported to have sought counseling for their tattoo adversity. Ironically, most participants described the laser tattoo removal process as being therapeutic. In general, the participants in this study were seeking tattoo removal treatments to mitigate negative feelings. The negative feelings most commonly reported were shame and embarrassment. Shame and embarrassment resulted from the circumstances surrounding the tattoo they were having removed, or from the fact that they got the tattoo in the first place.

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The fact that not all participants will be able to have their tattoos completely removed generates implications surrounding their mental health should their goals not be met. Some participants reported expecting to feel unburdened, liberated, able to get a fresh start, and free from past mistakes. Others were anticipating improved self-esteem and increased self-confidence once they were free from the visible reminder of a failing in their youth. These expectations generate implications for potential mental health issues should individuals not be successfully freed from their distressing tattoos.

Collectively, the issues relating to the sensitivity surrounding laser tattoo removal along with the expectations and potential disappointments have implications for mental health professionals. At best, counselors and mental health professionals should work to educate clients who may be considering a tattoo on the potential for tattoo adversity. Additionally, counselors and mental health professionals should also explore what the options are should clients experience tattoo adversity including the cost of tattoo removal.

The results of this study have implications for the need for counselors and mental health professionals to demonstrate empathy and awareness surrounding the complexity of tattoo regret. Furthermore counselors, mental health professionals, and educators should advocate for an increase in awareness of tattoo regret and of all the treatment options including tattoo removal and counseling. Lastly, the participants were getting tattoos removed that they had attained in their youth. This implies that educators should include discussions of developmental vulnerabilities that lead to impulsive decisions in human growth and development courses. The following section includes recommendations for future research based on the implications from the finding of this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results and implications from this study generated a number of recommendations for future research. Tattoo removal, tattoo regret, and tattoo adversity are sensitive topics for many people. It is recommended that researchers continue to investigate these experiences by offering potential participants multiple ways to share their stories. It is recommended that future studies be designed to offer alternatives to face-to-face interviews. It is likely that individuals may be willing to tell their stories in their own way and in their own time.

In an effort to examine the complexities of tattoo regret, it is recommended future studies utilize mixed-methods research designs with large, diverse samples. The primary quantitative method could include a demographic survey and measures of shame and adverse childhood experiences. Qualitative data could be used to complement the quantitative data and participants could be offered multiple options for providing additional information about their experiences. Some participants might feel comfortable participating in a virtual interview, instead of a face-to-face interview, while others might be more willing to provide short answers to brief questions about their experiences.

It is recommended that the results of an ambitious study as described above be analyzed to examine for gender differences, and other differences between racial/ethnic groups. Findings of interest should generate smaller, focused studies to further tease out the impact tattoo adversity has on individuals' mental health and to identify sources of support.

Additionally, it is recommended that future research be designed to capture the experiences members of marginalized communities have with tattoo adversity and

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removal. Future research could explore if there is a relationship between help seeking behaviors and attaining tattoos as none of the participants in this study had sought counseling as a means to resolve their tattoo adversity. While feelings of accepting past mistakes was reported in the results of this study on tattoo adversity, future research should examine if cultivating acceptance is possible when tattoo removal treatments are not an option. Additionally, it is recommended that future research be thoughtfully designed to capture the adjustments individuals face after successful tattoo removal as well as those of individuals who did not have successful tattoo removal experiences.

The researcher trusts that the results of this study will serve to expand general discussions about how to best educate young people who find themselves making the choice of getting a tattoo before they are developmentally prepared to consider the long-term implications. Most important, this study serves to highlight that prevention is ideal for avoiding tattoo adversity, and that tattoo removal treatment is a lengthy and costly alternative with varying results. Finally, it is recommended that anyone considering obtaining a tattoo educate themselves to the possible consequences and complications using as much forethought as possible.



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**Appendix A**

**Participant Eligibility Questionnaire**

The eligibility questionnaire will also include information about the purpose and rationale for the study, and participation consent.

Participant first name or pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Are you at least 18 years of age? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

Have you had at least one laser tattoo removal treatment? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

I anticipate needing about one hour of your valuable time for the interview. I might need to ask additional questions after our interview in order to clarify any responses that might need more exploration. Would you be willing to email such responses?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Participant Interview

My name is Luis R. Esparza, and I am a doctoral candidate at St. Mary's University. I am conducting a research study titled Tattoo Adversity, Regret, and Removal: Constructivist Grounded Theory. The purpose of the study is to understand the events and circumstances that led individuals to seek tattoo removal. I am seeking individuals at least 18 years of age, who have sought at least one tattoo removal treatment. Participation include willing to participate in a face-to-face interview. As a voluntary participant, you have the right to refuse to participate in this study and you can withdraw your participation at any point of research study.

Your participation in this study will provide valuable information that will lead to a greater understanding of tattoo adversity and tattoo regret. This information will assist mental health professionals in providing quality services and support to their clients who may be considering obtaining a tattoo or seeking tattoo removal. The study attempts to answer the below question:

1. How did you decide to seek tattoo removal?
  - a. What types of difficulties contributed to your decision to seek tattoo removal?
  - b. What kinds of things, if any, led you to make the decision to seek tattoo removal?
2. Please tell me about your experience of the tattoo removal process.
3. What kinds of support or information would have helped you before making the decision to seek tattoo removal?



## TATTOO ADVERSITY, REGRET, AND REMOVAL

If you are interested in participating in my research study, clicking NEXT will take you to the qualifying information.

For more information about this study email the primary researcher Luis R. Esparza at [tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com](mailto:tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com), or dissertation supervisor Dr. Dana L. Comstock-Benzick at [dcomstock@stmarytx.edu](mailto:dcomstock@stmarytx.edu), and in case of any other questions regarding participant rights to the St. Mary's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 210-436-3315 or email at [IRBCommitteeChair@stmarytx.edu](mailto:IRBCommitteeChair@stmarytx.edu).

## Appendix C

### Script to Refer Potential Participants

A doctoral candidate colleague is conducting dissertation research study titled tattoo adversity, regret, and removal: Constructivist grounded theory. The purpose of his study is to understand participant experiences of tattoo adversity in individuals who have sought laser tattoo removal, and to explore sources of resilience available to individuals undergoing such a lengthy, painful and expensive process. Researcher is interested in the events, circumstances and experiences that comprise tattoo regret and adversity to such a degree that life with an unwanted tattoo is no longer bearable. If interested in participating in this research project, follow the link below or send primary researcher an email. Potential participants will need to take an eligibility questionnaire before participating in in-depth interview. The study is expected to last about one hour long. Here is how to contact primary researcher Luis R. Esparza, email at [tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com](mailto:tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com). You can also reach out to the dissertation adviser, which is supervising the research study, Dr. Dana L. Comstock-Benzick at [dcomstock@stmarytx.edu](mailto:dcomstock@stmarytx.edu).

**Appendix D**

**Site Permission Letter**

[Site info]

To: St. Mary's University Institutional Review Board

[Site name] laser tattoo removal clinic agrees to assist primary researcher Luis R. Esparza recruiting potential participants for the research study titled Tattoo Adversity, Regret, and Removal: Constructivist Grounded Theory. [Site info] laser tattoo removal clinic will provide present tattoo removal clients with a flyer comprising the purpose of study. Any questions regarding the research study will be redirected to primary researcher Luis R. Esparza at [tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com](mailto:tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com).

Utilizing constructivist grounded theory methodology, the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of tattoo adversity in individuals who have sought laser tattoo removal, and to explore sources of resilience available to individuals undergoing such a complex process. The researcher is interested in the events, circumstances, and experiences that comprise tattoo regret and adversity to such a degree that life with a tattoo is no longer bearable. Participation is voluntary and all results will be anonymous.

Respectfully,

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Site signature]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Primary researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix E**

**Recruitment Flyer**

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY TITLED:

TATTOO ADVERSITY, REGRET, AND REMOVAL:

CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to share the circumstances and experience that led you to seek tattoo removal. To qualify for inclusion in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age, and have sought one tattoo removal session minimum. The researcher will collect data via a face-to-face interview. The interview will take place at an agreed upon public location and will take no more than 60 minutes.

Participation is voluntary and NO compensation will be given.

For more information about the study or to volunteer for participation please contact:

Luis R. Esparza, MA., LPC

St. Mary's University Counseling Department

**Appendix F**

**Social Media Post**

A St. Mary's University doctoral student is seeking participants for a research study. I, Luis R. Esparza, a doctoral candidate at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, wants to invite you to participate in a research interview to share your experiences that led you to seek tattoo removal. My dissertation adviser is Dr. Dana L. Comstock-Benzick. I am conducting the dissertation chapter to my final doctoral studies, and I am seeking to interview individuals, who are at least 18 years of age, who have sought at least one tattoo removal treatment. To be eligible, you must have sought at least one tattoo removal treatment. For more information about this study email the primary researcher Luis R. Esparza at [tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com](mailto:tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com). You can also contact dissertation adviser Dr. Dana L. Comstock-Benzick at [dcomstock@stmarytx.edu](mailto:dcomstock@stmarytx.edu).

## Appendix G

### Consent for Participation in a Research Study

Dear Participant,

You are being invited to participate in a dissertation research study, “Tattoo Adversity, Regret, and Removal: Constructivist Grounded Theory.” The study is being conducted by Luis R. Esparza, a doctoral candidate at St. Mary’s University Department of Counseling in San Antonio, Texas.

1. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences that led you to seek laser tattoo removal. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to decline or opt-out of participating at any time of the study without being penalize. Your participation in this study will provide valuable information to assist the public and mental health professionals in providing quality services to best support their clients who may be considering tattoo removal.
2. While I do not anticipate any risks related to your participation in this study, you might experience some discomfort reflecting on difficult experiences.
3. The data collected from this study will be used for education and publication purposes.
4. Research will be conducted under the supervision of the faculty dissertation adviser, Dana L. Comstock-Benzick, Ph.D. If any questions or comments, please contact the principal investigator Luis R. Esparza at [tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com](mailto:tattooresearchstudy@gmail.com) or faculty dissertation advisor Dr. Dana L. Comstock-Benzick at [dcomstock@stmarytx.edu](mailto:dcomstock@stmarytx.edu). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the St. Mary's

## TATTOO ADVERSITY, REGRET, AND REMOVAL

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 210-436-3315 or email at

IRBCommitteeChair@stmarytx.edu

**End**