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# "This so clearly needs to be marked" : an exploration of memorial tattoos and their functions for the bereaved

Elizabeth Schiffrin

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Eliza Schiffrin  
“This so clearly needs to be  
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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how memorial tattoos function as mourning rituals in the grief processes of the bereaved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 individuals who had honored at least one deceased loved one with a tattoo. Demographic questions as well as open-ended interview questions were put forth to participants in order to determine the meanings and uses of memorial tattoos for the bereaved. The objective of this study was to establish if memorial tattoos function as effective grief rituals as defined by the literature, namely if they integrated structure, symbolism, and the inclusion of others into the ritual experience.

All participants stated that their memorial tattoos provided them with a connection to others during their grief process and with a symbolic representation of their loss. All but two of the participants identified ways that the process of obtaining a memorial tattoo provided structure during a chaotic grief experience. All but one of the participants articulated a least one way in which their memorial tattoo had been helpful in their grief process. More than half the participants identified ways that the memorial tattoos had changed them personally, and ways in which the tattoos had marked the significant transformation of their lives following the death of their loved one. The majority of participants spoke about their tattoos as functioning as tools for connecting with the dead, and half the participants identified how the tattoos have created gateways to talk about their grief experience.

“THIS SO CLEARLY NEEDS TO BE MARKED”: AN EXPLORATION OF  
MEMORIAL TATTOOS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS FOR THE BEREAVED

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Eliza Schiffrin

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063

2009

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I am grateful to my advisor, Diana Fuery, for her sharp mind and wealth of knowledge as a researcher. I am also deeply thankful to Tracy Donsky and Brian Coltrin who shared their stories with me in an effort to workshop my interview guide for this project.

The impetus of this study was born of my own experience with memorial tattooing and the death of a beloved person. I am infinitely grateful to my cousin, Mira Kathryn Golda Kardon, whose life and death continue to inspire me to create, transform, and extend myself to others on a path toward wholeness and healing. Thank you, cuz.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the meaning of memorial tattoos for bereaved individuals who obtain them as a part of their grief process. The question this study intends to answer is, “*Do memorial tattoos function as adaptive mourning rituals for the bereaved?*” Grieving individuals may feel isolated in their experience of loss or may feel that they cannot find the language to communicate about the extremity of their loss. This study inquires into the potential for memorial tattoos to be utilized as a ritual to honor one’s own grief, and as the beginning of a conversation that connects the internal experience of loss with an external world. This research intends to offer the social work profession a deeper understanding of the grieving process, the use of tattoo as ritual in this process, and the perception of individuals who have obtained tattoos.

Mourning rituals are regarded as a significant step in the grieving process that offers the containment of space and time for the expression of grief (Imber-Black, 1991). Rituals that honor the death of a loved one are recognized and regarded as valuable tools in the facilitation of the healing process. However, there is very little literature on the use of tattoos in the grieving process and their function for bereaved individuals, particularly as rituals contained in a specific space and time, but with meaning and presence that persist through the wearer’s lifetime. Concurrently, tattoos have been recognized as an empowered action taken in response to fear of disease, social conditions, and cultural

trends (Atkinson, 2004), while not being discussed in the literature as responses to intimate experience with death. This study seeks to begin filling in the gap of research concerning the use of tattoos in the process of grieving.

From a narrative stance, this study is interested in mourning rituals as the construction of a story about relationship and loss. Narrative therapy is interested in assisting people to fully explore the stories of their lives, the meaning they attribute to these stories, and to uncover potential alternative stories that open up new possibilities for a client's experience of themselves in the world (White & Epston, 1990). One aspect of this process is "externalizing the problem," a concept from narrative therapy that suggests the separation of the person from the problem they are experiencing (White & Epston, 1990). This study seeks to explore bereavement tattoos as ritual performed by the bereaved to make external an internal experience of pain or deficit.

The participants in this study have obtained a memorial tattoo (a tattoo acquired in reference to the death of a loved one). Participants were recruited through a snowball sample. This is a qualitative, exploratory study using interviews and basic demographic questionnaires. Interviews have taken place over the phone or in person at a location to be determined.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study seeks to better understand the use of memorial tattoos as post-death rituals and how they do or do not function in facilitation of the grief process for the bereaved. There is no literature pertaining primarily to the use of tattoos in the mourning process. However, tattoos as vehicles for commemorating the death of a loved one are acknowledged briefly by some authors (Clerk, 2009; Atkinson, 2004; Grumet, 1983). The study of tattoos as mourning rituals will be placed in the context of literature exploring ritual and metaphor in the grief process in order to investigate the qualification of memorial tattoos as established mourning rituals. Furthermore, literature on tattoos as transitional objects, motivational forces leading to tattoo acquisition, psychological characteristics of tattoos, and the significance of inscribing the body will be included in order to contextualize the phenomenon of memorial tattoos within the greater understanding of tattoo significance in U.S. culture. Literature pertaining to the cultivation of ongoing relationships with the dead will be referenced in order to give context to how memorial tattoos may or may not be experienced as an exercise in relating with the dead.

### *Metaphor and Meaning Making in Bereavement*

Research suggests the use of metaphor and ritual are helpful in the grieving process (Nadeau, 2006, 2008; Castle & Phillips, 2003; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wrostock 1995; Imber-Black, 1991; Reeves & Boersma, 1990; Rando, 1985). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). Nadeau (2008) describes metaphors as giving structure to “how we perceive, what we think, and what we do” (p.524). Stepakoff (2007) describes the use of symbolization, a process of giving form to an unexpressed experience or emotion, and its healing power in the aftermath of massive war atrocities. She writes of the relief experienced in giving form to internal experience, particularly when that form “opens up the possibility of being understood by another” (p.402). Healing is deepened when such form (i.e. language, drama, dance, art, music, or any “sharable” artistic medium) is experienced by another who can acknowledge and appreciate it (Stepakoff, 2007, p.402).

Nadeau (2008) outlines how the bereaved often speak metaphorically about their experience and suggests that metaphors used by family members in the aftermath of a death in the family will structure how the death is perceived, thought about, and “how (family members) will grieve” (p. 524). Nadeau asserts that therapists can listen for metaphors as a tool to uncover meaning that might otherwise be missed, and to use these metaphors to help families make meaning out of their loss (Nadeau, 2006, 2008). Furthermore, the use of metaphor in grief therapy offers a deeper understanding to the

therapist about how the loss is being experienced, and provides a simpler and less-threatening language to the bereaved for talking about the loss (Nadeau, 2006).

Anderson (2001) writes about language as metaphor in therapeutic context, and the power it has to manage and construct the experience of grief. He states,

Within the conversational process private thoughts and feelings are socially re-invented and reconstructed, seen anew and afresh by counselor and client. Private trauma and public self come to cohere in the counseling process so as to effect 'cure' (p.136).

Referring to the definition of metaphor as imagining one thing in terms of another, Anderson (2001) suggests that metaphor can facilitate the movement from the “insecurity and danger” of the unfamiliar to the “certainty of the known” (p. 138). Moller (1996) asserts the significance of “personal construct systems” for making sense of life following a devastating loss of a loved one. In the case of grief, image and language can be used to transform the experience of a fragmentation of self to a “once again bearable, narrative whole” (Anderson, 2001, p.138). Concurrently, Nadeau (2008) describes how narrative therapy can be employed when working with grief therapeutically in order to make sense of disorder and meaninglessness (p.521). Furthermore, Gilbert (2002) states that “we make meaning and create stories in the context of real and imagined relationships” (as referenced in Nadeau, 2008, p.521) suggesting that meaning can be illuminated in relationship with clinicians, but also in relationship with the dead. One of the tasks of this study, therefore, is to discern if memorial tattoos offer structure and meaning to the bereaved and their relationship with the loved ones they have lost, and, furthermore, if the tattoo constructs a narrative that can be shared- either literally in conversation with the living, or metaphorically in conversations with the dead.

The development of narrative therapeutic practice influences this study through an interest in memorial tattoos as constructing a story about relationship and loss. Narrative therapy is interested in assisting people to fully explore the stories of their lives, the meaning they attribute to these stories, and to uncover potential alternative stories that open up new possibilities for a client's experience of themselves in the world (White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapist Michael White (2000) writes about descriptions as "relational, not representational" (p. 36). Relating to the concept of metaphor described earlier as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5) we can understand this relational nature of description as suggesting that one description of meaning implies that a second description exists. The second description he refers to as the "absent but implicit," a concept that is central to the work of narrative therapists in exploring the multidimensional nature of their client's stories (White, 2000). If tattoos may be thought of as descriptors, then they will be explored here as metaphors for a complex story that may be asking to be externalized. The act of externalization, in the case of tattoos, is quite literal, and may be an attempt by the bereaved to begin an "externalizing conversation" in which to separate sense of self from grief (White & Epston, 1990).

### *Mourning Rituals*

#### *Modern Society as a Context for Grief Ritual*

The literature on mourning rituals in modern American culture identifies contemporary expressions of grief as taking place privately and in isolation, and within the context of a society that values expressions of individualism and pleasure over the public display of suffering (Moller, 1996). Modern grief rituals are regarded as having

evolved into something quite removed from those of the nineteenth century Victorian period in which there were expectations of public displays of grief- such as wearing mourning clothes or “widows weeds,” altering behaviors during a period of mourning, erecting elaborate structures to honor the dead, and representing grief and death through artistic expression (Howarth, 2001; Moller, 1996). Wyrostok (1995) cites the split between medicine and religion as a precursor to the de-ritualization of grief, as Western medicine has increasingly been “purged of ritual” (p.398).

Moller (1996) cites the work of Geoffrey Gorer and other historians in establishing that modern Judeo-Christian culture is in a unique historical period in which “the overwhelming majority of people lack rituals and social patterns to help them deal with the inevitable crisis of human death and grief” (pp.110-111). The result, according to Moller (1996), is that a once public and communal process of facing death has been reduced to an individual struggle whose resolution relies upon one’s own personal coping skills. Furthermore, Moller (1996) suggests the possibility that as grieving becomes more individualized, it may also become more emotionally intense in its impact upon the individual. In other words, denial of the struggle associated with grief may actually promote and make more acute the suffering of the bereaved. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) assert that with the deterioration of bereavement rituals in modern society, there has been the development of “insufficient grieving and inadequate resolution of grief” (p.699).

Imber-Black (1991) explores the use of rituals in the healing process during periods of mourning. He states, “the lack of authentic mourning rituals in contemporary life frequently impedes the required healing process following a death” (p. 209). Kubler-

Ross (1969) writes of the rituals associated with the death of a loved one as expressions of “sorrow, grief and shame” that solicit empathy from the community, thus implying that placement of mourning rituals within community is essential to their efficacy (p. 18). The reduction of ritualistic acknowledgement of death in the public sphere, therefore, denies individuals the placement of their grief experience within the context of a supportive community that facilitates the integration of the experience into the ongoing existence of the individual as a member of the living. As a result, bereaved individuals may create their own venues for expressing grief and seeking community support as is shown by Gilbert (2006) who explores the mourning practices of the modern world as evolving with the technology of the times through mediums such as “virtual cemeteries” in which individuals can electronically post tributes to their deceased loved ones and can respond and offer encouragement to one another (p.245). Gilbert (2006) identifies this phenomenon of technological community around death as a response to the lack of public forum for the expression of grief in modern American culture. Howarth (2001) also explores how the bereaved may create their own public expressions of sorrow when the community is devoid of grief outlets. This is particularly true, according to Howarth (2001), when a death is “violent and untimely,” and the bereaved feel more conviction regarding their “right to grieve” (p.253).

Doss (2002) explores contemporary expressions of commemorating death in the material and public sphere in the United States, asserting that “visibly public material culture rituals pertaining to death and grief suggest broad and diverse interest in ‘reclaiming’ death, in making death meaningful on personal, individual levels and challenging an ‘American way of death’ that has largely been, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,

the purview of medicine, science and technology” (p.63). She discusses this theory in terms of communal expressions of grief and loss as in the Oklahoma City National Memorial and temporary shrines near Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and suggests that such sites for public mourning may indicate that “an American public that is often hesitant and fearful about death and dying has equated the visual and material culture of grief with the transformative milieu of the sacred...” (p.70).

Laird (1984) identifies how ritual is a powerful medium for helping to facilitate transformation in families that are struggling. She identifies American society as “underritualized,” and highlights the suggestion that “at least some forms of mental illness may be nurtured by the fact that individuals are forced to accomplish their transitions alone, with private symbols” (p.124). She speaks of collective ritual as “dramatic efforts to bring some particular part of life firmly and definitely under control,” and calls on social workers to “invite families to consider how to mark and celebrate such transitions and symbolize the altered family system” (p.124, 127). Memorial tattooing, therefore, will be explored through this study as a practice seeking to articulate an experience of loss in both public and private ways. The public element of memorial tattoos which are performed through the body and which can announce a loss experience will also be explored as an act which may have political, isolation-breaking characteristics in the context of a death-denying society.

### *Religious Ritual and Modern Grief*

Certain cultural groups within American society have maintained traditional post-death rituals that continue to be practiced in efforts to facilitate the grief process of those in mourning. Examples of such practices can be found in the Jewish tradition and is

described by Gordon (1975) as founded in a belief system that “opposes repression of the emotions and enjoins the mourner to express his grief and sorrow openly” (as cited in Kubler-Ross, 1975, p.49). A series of rituals are instituted by the community in order to assist the bereaved in this task, and to offer guidance during a period of intense loss. These rituals are both concrete and symbolic, such as *Kriyah*- the tearing of clothes prior to the memorial service- and the assignment of responsibility for the burial planning to be placed on the mourner so that they are given an outlet for their desire to offer something to the dead (Gordon, 1975). During *Kriyah*, the bereaved individual performs this dramatic and symbolic representation of an internal tearing that has been caused by the death of a loved one. Furthermore, it seeks to allow the mourner cathartic release of pent up anguish (Gordon, 1975). The week following the death is called Shiva and is described by Gordon (1975) as

The institution through which the tradition advances the grief work for the mourner most effectively. Grief work begins with the initial release of feelings usually expressed in the recounting of the events that led up to the death, and moves from there to the recounting of the memories of the life (as cited in Kubler-Ross, 1975, p.50).

Therefore, there is a framework within the Jewish tradition for mourners to turn following the death of a loved one which provides concrete instruction for how to proceed during a difficult time, community containment for expression of emotion and memory, and symbolic acknowledgement of the change incurred by the bereaved as a result of the death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These are all qualities that are ascribed to effective post-death rituals, as will be revealed later in this review.



Gordon (1975) contrasts Jewish grief traditions with modern American customs, stating that rituals “such as viewing the body, cosmetics, elaborated pillowed and satined (sic) coffins, and green artificial carpeting that shields the mourners from seeing the raw earth of the grave are all ways in which the culture enables us to avoid confronting the reality of death” (as cited in Kubler-Ross, 1975, p. 47).

Christianity, on the other hand, struggles, according to McConnell (1998), to offer sufficient bereavement support to its constituents within the context of a religion that assures, and reveres, the promise of eternal life. Still, McConnell (1998) writes of the symbols used in Christianity to offer comfort during times of grief. He writes:

It is the crucified Christ that helps to remind Christians that they are not alone in their suffering but that God, in Jesus Christ, has suffered with us, experiencing the pain of seeming betrayal by the Father in heaven and the abandonment of earthly friends. Comfort comes in knowing that there is a God who understands, and has felt, our pain. Coupled with this image of the cross is the empty tomb: the sign of Christ’s resurrection, the belief that death is now conquered and that life does not end with our last earthly breath.

Furthermore, Braun and Zir (2001) write about the role of the church in facilitating grieving through rituals, such as prayer and ceremony. They write:

...Religious rituals help provide structure to the survivors, prescribing steps for observing death and remembering deceased loved ones. They also help give meaning to the death, both by facilitating the eulogy and by putting life into the larger framework of the spirit. Finally they assure survivors that the deceased lives on in heaven...

Additionally, Klass and Goss (1999) offer an historical comparison of Western Christian grief practices with those of Japanese Buddhism. Within a context of “spiritual bonds to the dead,” Klass and Goss (1999) discuss the differences between ancestor bonds, which imply “mutual obligations between the living and the dead (with) equal power to help or hurt,” and bonds with the sacred dead, in which “there is nothing the

living can do for the dead although the dead have power to help the living” (p.548). Klass and Goss (1999) note that, historically, Western culture has been ambivalent “between valuing bonds with the dead and suppressing those bonds in favor of a bond to God alone” (p.556). Japanese Buddhism offers a model which is characterized as treating death as “a new phase of family membership,” in which “the dead remain ancestors for the lifetime of those who knew them personally and then, if the proper rituals have been performed, their spirit merges with the general sense of the family ancestors” (Klass & Goss, 1999, p.549). However, Klass and Goss (1999) conclude that “the dead” in modern Western culture are present, but in ways that are confined to the private sphere and which utilize only rituals for the sacred dead, suggesting that “the living can do nothing for the dead although the dead can help the living to be better persons” (p.564). Klass and Goss (1999) offer the possibility that “as the 21st Century progresses, we (may) see continuing bonds with the dead that more resemble those with ancestors (ancestor bonds), or we may see bonds with the dead taken out of the private cooperative sphere of individual and family meaning and put in the service of political and economic power structures” (p.565). One task of this study, therefore, will be to examine where memorial tattoos can be placed within the contemporary discourse of continuing bonds with the dead, and how such bonds are impacted by religious beliefs. More literature on continuing bonds will be considered later in this review.

### *Ritual Defined*

Various definitions of ritual have been utilized by different authors for their purposes. A common definition referred to in the literature is that of Denzin (1974) who defines ritual as:

A conventional joint activity given to ceremony, involving two or more persons, endowed with special emotion and often sacred meaning, focused around a clearly defined set of social objects, and when performed confers upon its participants a special sense of the sacred and the out of the ordinary (as cited in Reeves & Boersma, 1990, p. 272).

Reeves and Boersma (1990) amend this definition, eliminating the word

“conventionalized,” and changing the phrase “involving two or more persons” to “at least one person and the symbol of loss” (p.282). Castle and Phillips (2003) define ritual as “any activity that includes the symbolic expression of a combination of emotions, thoughts, and/or spiritual beliefs of the participant and has special meaning for the participant” (p.43). Rando (1985) asserts that rituals makes statements- both conscious and unconscious, that they are meaningful for the participants, and “through their order and formality serve as a declaration against indeterminacy and as a symbolic mechanism for regulation of control” (p.237). Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) describe rituals as “cultural devices that facilitate the preservation of social order and provide ways to comprehend the complex and contradictory aspects of human existence within a given societal context” (p.698). Rituals pattern the life cycle, offering order and stability at the same time as signaling change (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Kollar, 1989). Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) state that a distinguishing characteristic of rituals is “the use of symbols within a performance framework” (p.698). Boas (1911), Freud (1918) and Langer (1942) have noted how “ritual has the capacity to transform experience as wordbound (sic) thought usually cannot” (as cited in Rando, 1985, p.237). The many nuances of ritual described above signal the potential for memorial tattoos to be defined as effective rituals given their use of the symbolic, their personal and individualized

nature, their permanent marking of change, their ability to be performed, and their non-verbal nature.

### *Tasks of Grief Work and Ritual*

Freud (1925) describes the work of mourning as involving a conflicting and simultaneous set of experiences that, on the one hand expose the reality of a loved one's absence, while on the other hand inspire intense opposition to such a reality. Freud asserts that the irreversible departure of a loved one when death occurs demands that the bereaved withdraw psychic attachment from the dead, but that the process can only be "carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy," and that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (p.245). In contrast, Field (2006) asserts that "despite the fact that the deceased now exists exclusively as an internal bond, the transformed inner representation of the deceased nevertheless may continue to provide important emotionally sustaining attachment functions...promoting inner resource in enhancing the bereaved's capacity to function on their own" (p.741). Field, therefore, suggests that while the work of mourning involves the integration of the reality that the relationship to the dead has forever changed, this does not necessarily require that the bereaved relinquish their psychic attachment to the dead.

Lindemann (1944) describes the three tasks of grief work: "emancipation of the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and formation of new relationships" (as cited in Rando, 1985, p.238). Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) identify successful grief resolution as involving three types of grief work that can be facilitated through ritual: transformation of the bereaved person's sense of self

resulting from the loss, mediation between the person's pre-death and post-death social status, and continuation of an intrapsychic connection with the deceased within a communal context. Similarly, van Gennep (1960) identifies 3 stages of ritual: 1) pre-liminal or separation, 2) liminal or margin, and 3) post-liminal or aggregation. He writes:

The first phase comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more, and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-a-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural type' (as cited in Reeves & Boersma, 1990, p.282).

Likewise, Sanders (1999) identifies three steps common to rituals devised by ancient societies to mark rites of passage: 1) severance- or separation from a past state 2) transition- or the gradual change from one state to another 3) reincorporation- or the acknowledgement of a re-entry into life that incorporates the transformation that has taken place. In the pursuit of understanding the practice of obtaining a memorial tattoo within a framework of grief ritual, this study will seek to uncover at which phase the wearer incorporates the use of tattoo as ritual, and how, or if, the tattoo facilitates progression through the phases.

### *Properties of Mourning Rituals*

Throughout the literature, three properties of effective mourning rituals emerge over and over: those that offer structure, symbolism, and involve other people (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wyrostok, 1995; Imber-Black, 1991; Kollar, 1989; Rando, 1985). Kollar (1989) states that "good" rituals "include people, symbolic objects, and recognized structure" (p.275). Wyrostok (1995) outlines properties of rituals

to include structure, public witness, social bonding, symbolism, and altered states of consciousness. Gowensmith (2000) found in his study that important components of post-death ritual were “symbolic elements, presence of emotions, presence of spirituality, meta-awareness of performing rituals remembrance, and chosen others to participate in the ritual” (as cited in Castle & Phillips, 2003, pp.46-47). Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) state that grief rituals will only be effective when created to suit the personal needs of the bereaved person.

### *Structure*

An important goal of mourning ritual, as identified throughout the literature, is to offer structure and establish a sense of control and order among the experience of grief (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wyrostok, 1995). Rituals give structure and an opportunity for the bereaved to take action, rather than to behave passively, in the process of their grief (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Rando, 1985). Furthermore, they offer containment and expression of strong emotion (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Rando (1985) describes one role of mourning ritual as providing an opportunity to channel the overwhelming experience of grief into a focused activity, “with a distinct beginning and ending” (p.238). Imber-Black (1991) identifies how rituals allow the bereaved to grieve with others “in a time limited manner,” and recommends that distinctions should be made between time to grieve for the dead, and time to reenter the activities of the living (p. 207). Kollar (1989) suggests that the opportunity to take leave of the deceased is important and that “sometimes it is appropriate to have participants carry something tangible away with them” (Kollar, 1989, p. 275).

### *Symbolism*

Wyrostok (1995) states that symbolism in grief ritual accesses the unconscious meaning of the mourner's distress and the "story" they have written internally to explain their loss (p.402). Symbolic objects, as described by Castle and Phillips (2003), offer the bereaved an opportunity to externalize the internal experience of grief. They function to validate the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased, to facilitate remembrance, and to encourage feeling and expression of emotion (Castle & Phillips, 2003).

### *Including Others*

Castle and Phillips (2003) identify an important aspect of the mourning ritual as reducing the isolation experienced by the mourner, therefore suggesting that others should be involved, particularly as there is evidence that talking about the dead (an externalization process) can be healing. Imber-Black (1991) states that mourning rituals bring people together, "in a context designed to promote interpersonal connectedness" (p.207). Reeves and Boersma (1990), however, make a point to assert that ritual can effectively take place with one individual, as long as a symbol of the loss is involved.

Memorial tattoos, therefore, are explored in this study to determine how they incorporate the three properties of mourning rituals- structure, symbolism and the inclusion of others- described above. In particular, attention is given to how memorial tattoos function as rituals whose original application existed in a clearly defined time and space, but whose presence persists physically and intra-psychically throughout the wearer's lifetime.

### *Functions of Mourning Rituals*

Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) state that grief rituals involve a transformation of self such that an internal working model is created that incorporates a changed relationship with the deceased. Gilligan (1991) studied the use of ritual with the bereaved and found that many of his clients experienced a shift in identity, or a new sense of self (as cited in Wrostopk, 1995). Functions of mourning rituals, therefore, can be described as facilitating transformation (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wrostopk, 1995; Rando, 1985), and as acting as a bridge- “between the concrete and the symbolic, between the conscious and unconscious, between the participants and the community, between the world of the living and that of the dead” (Castle & Phillips, 2003, p.45). This integration can also be thought of as the union of opposites, resulting in a holistic sense of self, following an experience of fragmentation. Furthermore, the transformation does not take place only in the identity of the bereaved, but also in the internal representation of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased, acknowledging that the relationship, though changed, does endure (Castle & Phillips, 2003).

### *Mourning Ritual and ‘Self-Harm’*

Kubler-Ross (1969) identifies rituals of self-harm in the context of grieving a loved one as evidence that the person feels guilt and anticipates punishment for having survived the deceased. Wrostopk (1995) writes of the shamanic healing rituals that are based upon “pain, privation and stress,” but which evoke opioids in the body that are believed by neurobiologists to “provide anxiety relief, pain reduction and even



immunocompetence” (p.403)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, Gilligan (1996) writes of the role of physical pain for people who describe an experience of not being able to feel anything emotionally. He writes that physical pain becomes “the only way to feel alive” (p.39).

The act of obtaining a tattoo is referred to in the literature as self-harming behavior, with the intention to eliminate guilt, distract from memories, and self-punish (Roberti & Storch, 2005; Briere and Gil, 1998, as cited in Anderson & Sansone, 2003). Myers (1992) found that body modification used in rite of passage rituals emphasized the role of painful stimulation, which, in turn, released anesthetizing endorphins in the body (as cited in Frederick & Bradley, 2000). Memorial tattoos, therefore, will be explored as practices that not only express a loss, but also which inflict a contained experience of pain upon the wearer.

#### *Memorial Tattoos as Transitional Objects*

Winnicott (1971) introduced the concept of the *transitional object* to describe the use of an object to negotiate a transition between a psychic reality that differs from an external reality, and which must be reconciled in childhood development. Winnicott identified how children utilize symbolic objects as they become conscious of their dependence on others and, subsequently, look for ways of managing the anxiety that results during separation from them. The transitional object becomes representative of the separate caretaker, facilitating a consistency of presence even during the person’s absence. Gibson (2004) applies the concept of the *transitional object* to the role of

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<sup>2</sup> Immunocompetence is defined as the normal bodily capacity to develop an immune response following exposure to an antigen.

material objects utilized in the grieving processes of the bereaved- what she labels “melancholy objects” (p.285). Through the exploration of how the bereaved utilize photographs and clothing of the dead during periods of grief, Gibson studies the role of such objects in mourning, and, over time, in the memory of mourning. She asserts that transitional objects “mediate nothingness” and that “in grieving, as in childhood, (they) are both a means of holding on and letting go” (p.288). Melancholy objects, then, are “memorialized objects” that can “signify the incompleteness of mourning- a reminder that grief never entirely goes away...the residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting” (p.289). Memorial tattoos, then, will be explored as to their qualification as transitional objects that assist in the grieving process and that, as Gibson describes, offer a way for “reclaiming and rehousing the remains of a life now gone,” specifically within the bodies of the bereaved (p.297).

#### *Motivations for Tattoo Acquisition*

Early exploration into the psychological motivation for tattooing was reported by Hambly (1927) as being related to life stage, religion, status and identity, protection from danger, allegiance to family or groups, and as signs of mourning for the departed (as cited in Grumet, 1983). In the recent past, the phenomenon of getting tattooed has become more mainstream in the U.S., increasing in popularity across populations and social classes (DeMello, 2000; Sanders 1989, as cited in Wohlrab, Stahl, & Kappeler, 2006). Historically, the act of obtaining a tattoo has often been associated with social deviance and rebellion in the U.S. (Aizneman & Jensen, 2007; Birmingham, et al, 2006; Roberti & Storch, 2005). Much of the research on tattoos points to them as indicators of some sort of pathology- associating tattoos with depression, anxiety, and excessive risk taking

(Roberti & Storch, 2005); sexual and physical abuse and eating disorders (Aizenman & Jensen, 2007); and imprisonment, schizophrenia and psychotic disorders (Birmingham, et al., 1999). However, tattoos have also come to be understood as an assertion of selfhood and identity (Albin, 2006); as a method of affect regulation (Anderson & Sansone, 2003; Atkinson, 2004); and as a performance of social belonging and desire for communication with others (Atkinson, 2004). Atkinson (2004) explores tattoos as speaking “a language of culturally normative ‘emotion work,’” suggesting that they offer containment of affective expression for the wearer (p.136). Re-formation of identity following the death of a loved one, emotional outlet and containment (i.e. affect regulation), and communication with others are all properties that are identified in the literature as significant factors when assessing an effective mourning ritual. Memorial tattoos, therefore, will be investigated as to how, and if, they accomplish such “emotion work,” to the benefit of the wearer.

Researchers have suggested that tattoos may be a process of personal transformation (Schildkrout, 2004). Additionally, it has been proposed that the act of becoming tattooed may “enable traumatized individuals to handle personal experiences” by engaging in an act of personal transformation (Atkinson & Young, 2008; Atkinson, 2003; Carroll and Anderson, 2002, as cited in Wohlrab et al, 2007, p.88). Atkinson and Young (2008) discuss tattoos and other forms of body modification as asserting a desire to move beyond a previous experience, to claim agency and control amidst challenging situations, and to mark the enduring of painful ordeals- all qualities that should be compared, through this study, to qualities of effective mourning rituals.

### *Inscribing the Skin*

Many different theorists have examined the surface of the body as a borderland between internal and external worlds (Albin, 2006; Roth, 2006; Schildkrout, 2004; Gell, 1993; Grumet, 1983). Freud (1923) wrote about the body's surface and ego formation:

A person's own body and above all its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring. It is seen like any other object, but to the touch it yields two kinds of sensations, one of which may be equivalent to an internal perception (as cited in Roth, 2006, p. 182).

Fleming (2001) suggests that tattoos represent a "border skirmishing" between the self, the other, and the social group, involving the experience of pain, the passage through rituals such as death and rebirth, and the redefinition of the relationship between the self and the society (as cited in Schildkrout, 2004, p. 320).

Roth (2006) explores the surface of the skin as the place where self and other meet, and describes this location as "the nexus at which the biologic, psychic, and social intersect and shape one another" (p. 184). Gell (1993) uses this concept in relation to tattooing as "simultaneously the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior" (pp. 38-39). Tattoos, in other words, externalize an inner experience while, at the same time, they internalize the understanding that such an inner experience has now entered the public realm. The tattooed are aware that others will be exposed, in some way, to their tattoos. For the bereaved with memorial tattoos, this could translate into an awareness that others will be explicitly made aware of an internal grief experience that is often confined to the private and personal realm. This study will explore if memorial tattoos serve a function of breaking isolation around grief.

Albin (2006) discusses the act of finding external expression for experiences that cannot always be conveyed through language (p. 23). Engaging in the act of getting a tattoo is an act of announcing an internal experience- through the sign or symbol that is tattooed- to an external audience. This action, according to Albin (2006) “speaks symbolically to some narrative or story being told by a body that does not articulate, but still speaks” (p. 34). It is implied, therefore, that tattoos are a means for connection and communication between the inner and outer worlds. Furthermore, the choice to obtain a tattoo in honor of a loved one who has died may signify an effort to externalize a personal narrative, while at the same time- through the assumption of public recognition of the tattoo- seeking to internalize a reader of that narrative.

*Continuing Bonds: A Context for Grief and Relating with the Dead*

Postmodern writings on grief have begun to shift the conversation away from one that emphasizes the grief process as having a goal of recovery from loss and detachment from the deceased. Instead, the boundaries between life and death have become regarded as areas where there is communication and relationship, even after a loved one has died. Mitchell (2007) discusses the concept of “continuing bonds” with the dead as offering an understanding of “behavior that, to outside observers and some professionals, can be difficult to explain” (p.4). Mitchell (2007), along with Howarth (2000, 2007), Bennett & Bennett (2000), and Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996), challenge Kubler-Ross’ (1969) description of grief as a process that includes stages that culminate in the resolution of extreme feelings of loss for the deceased. Instead, it is suggested that the deceased can be integrated into the continued lives of the bereaved, and that this

integration can aid in the ability of the bereaved to adapt to a new life reality following a traumatic loss. As Mitchell (2007) asserts,

The psychological literature on coping with bereavement provides evidence that talking with the deceased, keeping objects that belonged to them and frequent dreaming about them as alive are very common and can be sources of great comfort (p.3).

Furthermore, Mitchell (2007) goes on to suggest that the concept of continuing bonds with the dead regards them as “public entities rather than as the focus of private grief, through biography, obituary, and visual representation” (p.11). Howarth (2007) discusses a new context for relating between the living and the dead, one that does not demand a belief in an afterlife, but instead one that is relevant to the experiences of the earth-bound living. The process of living through bereavement, therefore, has become regarded as a process made easier through the ability to continue to acknowledge the presence of the dead in everyday life. The literature on the concept of “continuance” offers a context in which to place memorial tattoos, exploring them as efforts toward ongoing incorporation of the dead into the present realities of the living.

### *Summary*

There is a dearth of literature exploring the significance of memorial tattoos for grieving individuals and the role they play in the experience of grief for the bereaved. Modern society lacks structured mourning rituals to facilitate the transition experienced by the bereaved as they adjust to the devastating loss of a loved one. In turn, people who are suffering as survivors of a loved one’s death often create their own forum for expression of their loss experience. Mourning rituals have been described as symbolic acts that give structure to the transition of the bereaved through a transformation of

identity that involves, first, a separation from a prior state of normalcy, second, a period of ambiguity, and, third, a re-integration into community as a changed individual. At the same time, tattoos are understood as symbolic acts that allow for assertion of selfhood, acknowledgment and containment of internal pain and struggle, and transformation of one experience into something else. This study seeks to see how tattoos as mourning rituals function in the grief processes of those mourning their loved ones who have died.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study has been to explore the function of memorial tattoos for bereaved individuals in their grieving process and to address the question: *Are memorial tattoos adaptive mourning rituals?* The research design for this study is qualitative and exploratory, seeking to obtain narrative data. The subject of memorial tattoos has been minimally researched, and this study seeks to gain descriptive information as to the meaning of this cultural phenomenon for those who perform it, and how it fits into the grieving process. According to Anastas (1999):

“When a phenomenon has been unstudied or poorly defined, traditional and nontraditional views alike recognize that it is impossible to frame specific hypotheses, to find or create quantified or standardized instruments with which to describe the phenomenon, or to define precisely the nature of the population and sample in which it might occur without prior ‘pilot,’ or flexible method, study” (p. 60).

As the phenomenon of memorial tattoos has not been clearly defined in the literature, the methods employed in this study are flexible, using semi-structured interviews and open ended questions, calling upon Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) “grounded theory method,” seeking to generate theory from systematic research and data collection, rather than through testing an hypothesis.



### *Sample*

The sample for this study was limited to persons over the age of 18 who had at least one memorial tattoo obtained for a person who died at least 3 months ago. These limitations were based on previous literature seeking to protect the vulnerability of the young and the newly bereaved (Castle & Phillips, 2003). Participants were recruited through a non-probability snowball sample in which a recruitment letter (see Appendix C) was sent out by the researcher to acquaintances and colleagues via email, as well as posted publicly on craigslist.com, myspace.com, and facebook.com. Furthermore, the researcher distributed recruitment letters to tattoo parlors in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. As potential participants began contacting the researcher, priority was given to the first people with whom the researcher was able to make contact and schedule an interview. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher provided participants with her contact information for them to share with other potential candidates for participation in the study. Due to the enthusiastic response of potential participants, the researcher was contacted in some way by all participants, although the researcher was given contact information for additional potential participants. Therefore, the study has been conducted among a pool of participants who were in some way eager to share their stories.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected through semi-structured and open-ended interviews conducted at previously agreed upon private locations or over the phone. The format of the interview included a pre-established set of demographic questions and semi-structured, open-ended questions about the experience of loss related to the death of a loved one and

the subsequent decision to obtain a memorial tattoo. Two pilot tests of the interview were conducted with colleagues who have memorial tattoos before the researcher began her interview process.

Procedures to protect the rights and privacy of participants were described in a proposal of this study for presentation to the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at the Smith College School for Social Work, and was given approval before any data was collected (see Appendix F). This approval indicated that the study was in concordance with the NASW Code of Ethics and the federal regulations for the protection of human research subjects. Before interviews were conducted, each participant was given an informed consent document which described the expectations of the participant and their rights as human subjects, as well as potential risks and benefits of participating in the study (see Appendix C). Additionally, the participants were provided an optional photographic consent form (see Appendix D) to sign if they wished to allow for a photograph of their tattoo to be included in the study. The researcher obtained a signed copy of the informed consent documents and will maintain these documents in a secured environment separate from the data for three years or until they are no longer needed. After the three years, or once the documents are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

Participants were asked to read and sign the informed consent and photographic consent forms, and then reviewed them with the researcher, being given the opportunity to ask questions. Any questions related to the researcher's personal motivation in regards to the study were requested to be postponed until after the interview so as not to influence the participant's answers. Brief demographic questions were asked first and then followed by the interview questions, asked sequentially and intended to bring forth the

participant's reflections on their grief experience and, more specifically, the role of their memorial tattoos in their grief process as well as in their ongoing relationship to the deceased (see Appendix B for a copy of the Interview Guide). Interviews were digitally recorded and the researcher took written notes during the interviews. The actual interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. All interviews took place between March 9, 2009 and April 6, 2009. All interviews were subsequently transcribed by the researcher and all identifying information was deleted or disguised in the transcriptions.

### *Data Analysis*

The basic unit of analysis in this study is the semi-structured interview, in person and over the phone, using open-ended interview questions. The process of analysis for the data collected through the interviews calls upon Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "Grounded Theory Method," and will be used to categorize narrative data into thematic groups which will be labeled, defined, and described. Following the completion of the interviews recorded by digital audio recorder, they are transcribed by the researcher. Ryan & Bernard (2000) outline the analytic approach taken by grounded theorists. The transcriptions are meticulously investigated- line by line- in a process referred to as "open coding," in which the researcher highlights possible themes grounded in the actual text (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.783). Identified themes relate to "processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences" as they are expressed by the interviewee (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.780). As themes present themselves for coding, the investigator begins the process of coding through overlapping stages of comparison.

“The first step in the method of constant comparison is that of comparing indicators with each other...indicators (feelings, attitudes, events, statements) that are similar to each other and different from others are joined together in categories or codes. In examining the indicators, the coder confronts ‘similarities, differences, and degrees of consistency of meaning’ (Strauss, 1987, p. 25)” (as cited in Anastas, 1999, p. 424).

Data which can be coded thematically is organized into a codebook in which mnemonic devices are used to reduce the data into groups. In this study, coded data is tagged into labeled- or worded- groups. Memoing is used to “record relationships among themes” through code notes, which outline unfolding concepts, and theory notes, in which ideas of the researcher are summarized (Ryan & Bernard, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.783). The derivation of themes, and the coding and memoing of data, all contribute to the formation of a theoretical model within which to conceptualize this study. Once a model is developed, the researcher looks for negative cases to identify problems in the research design. Theoretical results will be illustrated through quotes and text segments from the transcriptions of interviews.

### *Discussion*

This study is primarily concerned with establishing whether or not memorial tattooing should be regarded as a legitimate and adaptive mourning ritual. The implications of the results may be to encourage the support of- and inquisition into- the presence of memorial tattoos for clients, and to alter perspectives on the presence of tattoos as signifying problems in psychosocial functioning. Limitations of this study include the small sample of participants included, therefore truncating the generalizability of results among a previously un-researched population; the use of telephone *and* in-person interviews which may have impacted the length and quality of the data provided

by participants from each group; the sole inclusion of participants that contacted the researcher directly, thereby conveying a certain location in their grief process that has made them eager to share their experience; the homogeneity of the research sample which primarily includes white women between the ages of 21 and 37; the researcher's own experience obtaining a memorial tattoo, and the individual meaning she has ascribed to the experience.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter contains the findings from interviews conducted with 14 individuals who have marked their experience of the death of a loved one with a memorial tattoo. Interview questions were designed to elicit first the nature of the relationship between participants and the deceased and the initial impact of the death on the participants. Next, questions sought to explore the motivation of participants for obtaining their tattoos, the meaning and symbolism ascribed to the tattoos, and the function of the tattoos in the grieving process of the participants. Further questions inquired into any change experienced by the participants as a result of their tattoos, the communication value of the tattoos, the existence of an imagined relationship with the dead following tattoo acquisition, and the experiential element of constructing a narrative through the interview process about the experience of obtaining a memorial tattoo.

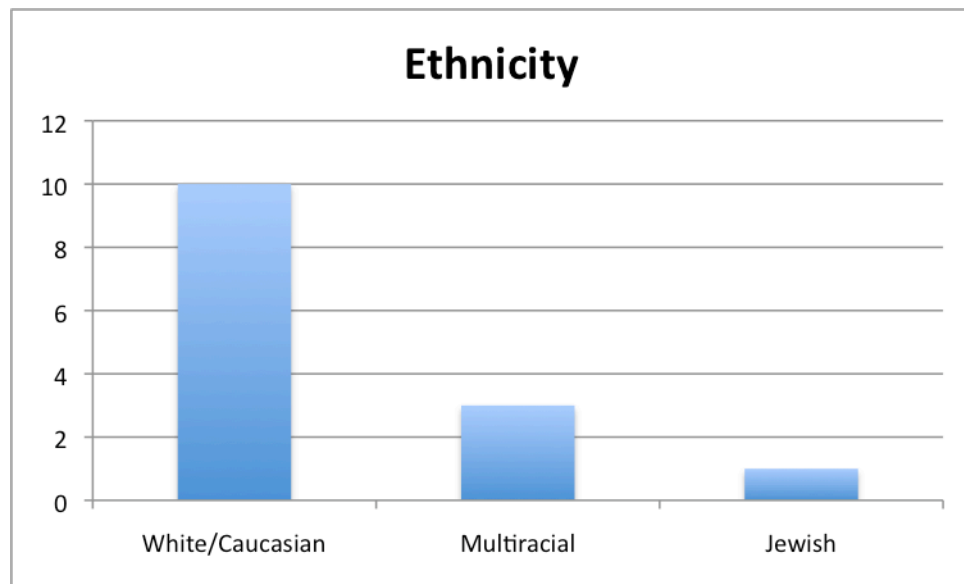
The data of this study will be presented in the following order: demographic information; tattoos as fulfilling the mourning ritual characteristics of structure-symbolism-inclusion of others; the role of pain in the experience of obtaining a memorial tattoo; the tattoo as facilitating personal transformation during the grief process; tattoos in the context of continuing bonds with the dead; the personal and private nature of memorial tattoos; narratives and the construction of shared stories about the tattoos; and

the role of time passage in the relationship between the participants, their grief processes, and memorial tattoos.

*Demographic Information*

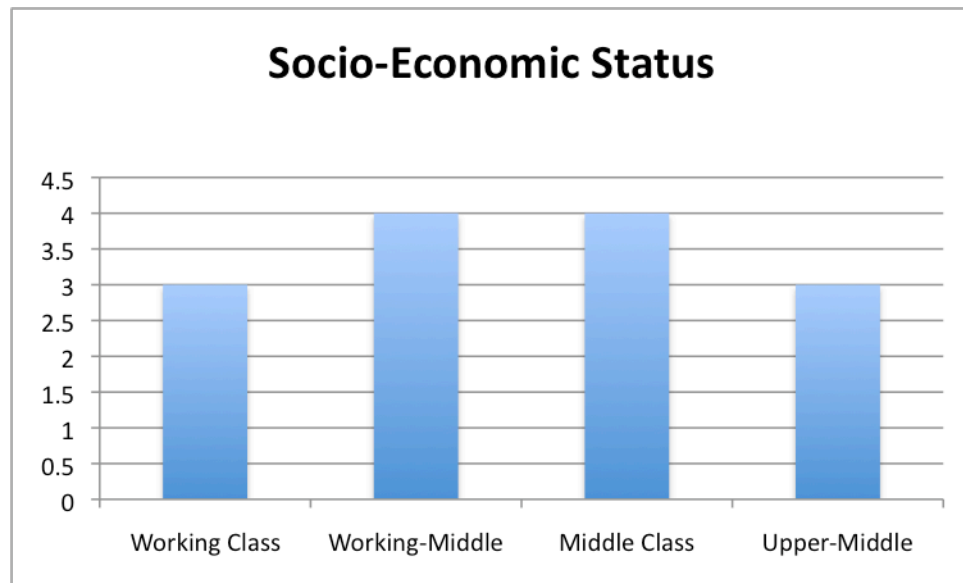
This study was comprised of 14 participants; 12 women and 2 men. The ethnicity of participants is shown in Figure 1 below, indicating the ethnic groupings that participants identified for themselves.

Figure 1.



5 participants were students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate or doctoral degree programs, 2 were store managers, 1 social worker, 1 legal secretary, 1 landscape contractor, 1 accounts coordinator, 1 children’s yoga teacher, 1 stay at home mom, and 1 retired government worker. Participant’s socio-economic status as they self-identify is shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

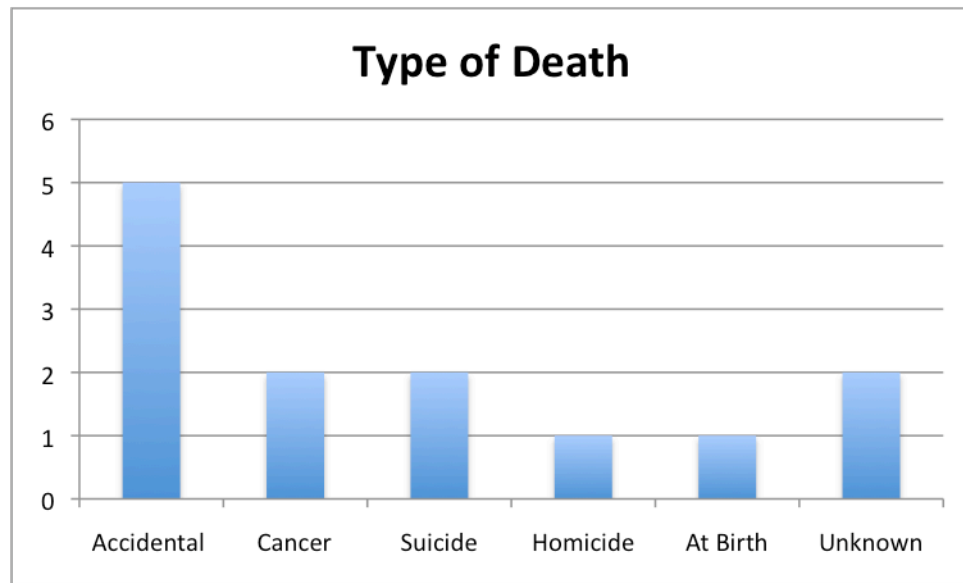


8 participants live locally in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, 1 in Arizona, 2 in Maryland, 1 in Connecticut, 1 in Massachusetts, and 1 in Virginia. The ages of the participants ranged between 21 and 59, with a median age of 28 and a mean age of 32. The age when participants obtained their memorial tattoo ranged between 17 and 54, with a median age of 23 and a mean age of 28.

3 participants obtained multiple memorial tattoos for a deceased loved one, and 2 of those 3 participants obtained memorial tattoos for more than one deceased loved one. Therefore, of the 14 interviewed, the interviews explored 16 different reactions to 13 deaths. Of these 13 deaths, 13 are characterized as untimely, and the types of death can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3.



11 participants obtained at least one of their memorial tattoos within the year of their loved one's death.

### *Structure*

Memorial tattoos will be examined in this section in terms of the ways they have provided structure during the grief experience of the bereaved. Structure will be described in this section as achieved through providing participants with a sense of control, ownership, or agency over their grief experience; through creating a physical reference point that embodies a connection with the dead; through allowing the completion of a task related to the dead or an offering to the dead that offers some sense of closure to the bereaved; and through the creation of a parallel process of healing as the experience of becoming tattooed is creating a wound that heals.

86% of participants spoke about their memorial tattoos as providing some structural element to their grief process. 36% of participants reported that the tattoo

offered them some sort of agency or control during a time period when they were dealing with a chaotic experience of grief. 100% of these participants described the tattoo experience as offering something different than other mourning rituals in that it allowed them to move from being an observer to whom something was happening, to being a participant in the process who was able to “do something.” One participant spoke about the importance of taking physical action to change her role from target to agent in the experience of loss:

“When I was first grieving I had a lot of physical experiences like vomiting and diarrhea and wasn’t able to eat...but nothing that I, like, chose to do. And this was a moment (getting tattoo) when I was choosing to go through that experience, and I feel like I was almost taking the reins or something...taking control of something that just felt really, incredibly out of control for a period of months.”

Over 50% of participants described their tattoo as providing them with some physical embodiment of either the deceased or the grief experience. Of these participants, 50% spoke about their tattoos as something they physically “touch,” “rub,” or “look at” to embody a connection with the deceased, or when they are in need of “grounding.” One participant said that when he looks at his tattoo he thinks about his deceased grandmother and “I just get filled with that feeling I had when I was in the same room as her...that nice familiar love feeling.” One participant spoke of the tattoo as serving to keep her father physically present:

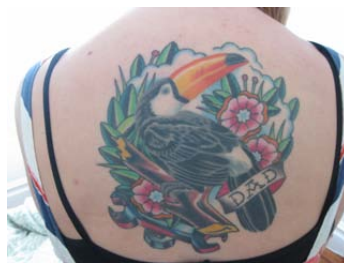
“...it’s always present...there’s something about that moment of just seeing it in the mirror...like some moment of stopping or almost some moment of communication, and I don’t know if that would be present if I didn’t have it on my body...I could never forget, but I do a good job of trying to push it away sometimes.”

One participant described her tattoo as physically creating a location for visiting with the dead stating, “I got the tattoo because I didn’t have a gravesite for him.” One participant

spoke about the tattoo providing her with some physical reference in the wake of her son's death, saying, "I can't have him, so I need something." Three participants referred to their tattoo as having "a piece of (deceased loved one) on me."

36% of participants referred to their tattoo as something that has allowed them to make an offering to the dead, to send the dead a message, or to complete a task for the dead. 80% of these participants obtained the tattoo that they believed their dead loved one would have gotten had they lived. One participant, shown in Figure 4 below, stated, "...It was my dad's favorite bird and he wanted one himself but he could never get one, so I did it for him."

Figure 4.



Another participant shared that her loved one "wanted to get a tattoo but she wasn't old enough and then when she was finally old enough, she was sick and then she passed."

One participant actually sat for the tattoo that had been a scheduled appointment for her deceased friend.

"I got this tattoo probably the day or two after she died and she had an appointment for a tattoo artist- her and her sister were getting a matching tattoo...so her sister got the tattoo she was meant to, and I went in (my best friend's) place and got this tattoo instead..."

One participant spoke about her tattoo as "one of the biggest gifts you can give," and described it as an effort to boost her deceased friend's self-esteem in the afterlife by

sending a message that “you were so important to me, I want to remember you forever.”

Another participant stated, “It was a piece of me- a piece of him in my mind- and to have it done was just my way to say back then, ‘Even though you’re gone, you’re still here.’”

Two participants spoke about the tattoo as offering “closure” and “a final goodbye.”

21% of participants described their memorial tattoos as embodying the healing process following the devastation of grief. Two of these participants described their tattoos as “scars.” One participant stated, “When you see a tattoo healing, part of you is healing.” Another participant described the parallel process of healing:

“...the tattoo has all this process built into it...you go in, you’re sitting there for however many hours and there’s this healing process...it takes time...I’m in the chair and I’m like, ‘Fuck this hurts...I never remember how much this hurts.’ And then the next couple of days, ‘Fuck it burns, shit it itches...’ That whole process...it makes you pay attention to it.”

This section has showed that the majority of participants experience their memorial tattoos as offering structure to an experience of grief that can be characterized as overwhelming, disempowering, and chaotic. Structure, in this context, offered the bereaved a sense of agency and control, grounded the illusive experience of loss in a physical reality, and facilitated communicative exchanges between the bereaved and their deceased loved ones.

### *Symbolism*

This section reports the ways in which participants described the symbolic elements of their tattoos. Symbolism will be described here in terms of: common images or trends among memorial tattoos in this study; memorial tattoos as symbolic of the deceased’s permanent presence in the lives of the bereaved, as symbols of life, and as symbols of strength and survival; memorial tattoos as having symbolic significance that

changes over time; memorial tattoos as symbols that allow access to emotion; the symbolic use of the deceased's ashes in the tattoo ink; and symbolic rituals integrated into the experience of sitting for a memorial tattoo.

100% of participants described their tattoos as having some symbolic significance. 50% of participants incorporated the name or initials of the dead into their tattoo. 36% of participants had memorial tattoos that included images containing wings. 29% included the artwork of the deceased in their tattoos. 14% included the birthdates and death dates of the deceased. 14% included a heart in their memorial image.

Figure 5.



93% of participants acknowledged their tattoos as symbolizing a sense of permanence regarding the presence of the dead in their lives. 79% of participants used the word “reminder” to describe their tattoos. 79% described their tattoos as either guaranteeing that the dead will “always be a part of me” or that “I will never forget.” Of these participants, 55% mentioned that the tattoo allowed them to stop worrying about “forgetting” or “losing” their dead loved one, or described that the tattoo takes some of the burden of grief so “you don’t feel like you have to do something all the time.” One participant stated:

“You always worry that you’re gonna forget them and...(that they will) become less important in your life. (The tattoo) is just a way to always remind myself that I could never forget.”

A negative case example from this pool of participants includes one subject's description of her tattoo as a reminder that is *burdensome*. She stated:

“There are times when I see it...and I feel a little bit guilty that maybe I should be sadder for longer...sort of the guilt of ‘life goes on’ and it’s nine years later...am I really being the person that my friend would have been proud of?”

29% of participants described their memorial tattoos as containing some life-affirming symbolic properties. One participant described her mental state following the death of her friend as “flat-lined,” and shared how she used her tattoo (the word “alive”) as “a reminder to love being alive.” One mother described the tree image in her tattoo as symbolizing “life,” and that it “gets me to look forward to better times.” One father refers to his tattoos as offering him guidance as he navigates life following his daughter’s death, describing one as “a roadmap,” and another as “a sign post.” Two parents who obtained memorial tattoos for their children as their first-ever tattoos, described the tattoo as symbolizing their connection or bond to the younger generation.

29% of participants spoke about their tattoos as metaphors of strength and survival. One participant said, “There was some part of me that felt like I had a strength that I could get through that (tattoo)...maybe it affirmed some things that needed to be affirmed in that moment.” Another participant said, “...it does communicate that- that I’ve survived...well, survived having a tattoo, but also losing a child.”

29% of participants noted that the symbolic meaning of the tattoos has changed over time. One participant stated, “...at first my tattoos were much more symbolic and about the process and the marking...then later they became more about the image.”

22% of participants articulated that the tattoos aided them in accessing and expressing their emotional experience of grief. One participant shared:

“...getting the tattoos...I can feel her (deceased) saying, “I love you,” and when I first see them (the tattoos) on there, I get real emotional and I can feel...like this one (points to shoulder)- I cried...I wish it was in my nature to cry more...so it definitely open up that place of feeling gratitude.”

Figure 6.



Another participant spoke about not being “good at expressing myself,” and that the tattoo “helps me put it out there.”

14% of participants shared that their tattoo artists mixed some of the ashes of the deceased into the tattooing ink. One participant stated, “I was really aware that part of her body was being embedded in my skin.” The other participant shared, “...that way he could always, you know, be with me.”

14% of participants spoke about the action of getting tattooed as being symbolically ritualized. One participant got her tattoos on the birthday of the deceased and listened to the favorite music of the deceased and chewed on the favorite candy of the deceased. The other participant spoke about how she and her partner would bring food to share with others at the tattoo parlor as “an offering we were making” that reminded her of “the offering when someone has passed and people come to visit.”

The symbolic element of memorial tattoos have been shown in this section as providing the bereaved with images, words, and practices that further integrate the presence of the dead into their ongoing lives. Most significantly, the symbolism of memorial tattoos is shown to have allowed the bereaved an opportunity to mark the permanence of the importance of their relationship with the dead, even as that relationship has been forever transformed.

#### *Inclusion of Others*

In this section, the inclusion of others in the experience of obtaining a memorial tattoo will be reported as the sense of connection the participants felt: symbolically to the dead; concretely to the living- including those who accompanied them during their tattoo, the tattoo artists, those who also obtained tattoos for the same deceased loved one, the tattooed in general, and, for parents who have lost their children, to the younger generation. The inclusion of others will also be noted through one participant’s report of her ability to internalize an empathic community of others who gain something through their exposure to her memorial tattoo.



100% of participants spoke about their tattoos as providing a sense of connection with the dead. One participant described the connection that was conjured with her dead loved one as a result of the tattoo:

“...it was a bonding with her, too, but of course she wasn’t there...although I think she would have loved that I got it...(laughs)...I mean that was fun- to kind of- it still is- to kind of hear her in my mind...and supported.”

93% of participants spoke about their tattoos as an experience that connected them to the living during their grief process. 71% of participants described feeling connected to others who were there while they were sitting for the tattoo- 60% of these participants spoke about their connection with the tattoo artist, 60% got their memorial tattoo at the same time as one of their community members who was also sitting for a memorial tattoo in honor of the same loved one.

Participants who spoke about the role of the tattoo artist described the significance of sharing the experience of loss with the artist performing the tattoo. One participant who obtained her memorial tattoo for her father shared the significance of finding out that the artist’s father had also died. She said:

“...there were some stories exchanged...my tattoo artist had lost her dad and so there was some dad things exchanged...that was really meaningful...”

Another participant described his tattoo artist symbolically as a “shaman” and stated:

“...he’s taking something and he’s creating its own little ritual around it...he’s creating meaning out of it, for it, with it...because he also had lost somebody recently...so there’s people who understand grief and people who don’t...and the tattoo artist needs to be that person who can really stand up and hold that space...”

Another participant, who was herself a tattoo artist, spoke of her experience performing a memorial tattoo on another bereaved person. She shared:

“I was glad I was really there for her to get that tattoo and she was really there for me because...her situation and me having mine right here (points to memorial tattoo)...it was like she went through that process and I went through it with her and so I got to talk about...I think it was really helpful for both of us.”

71% of participants mentioned that they brought friends or family members with them when they sat for their tattoos. 71% of participants related that other members of their community also got tattoos for the same deceased loved one. One participant described this as a “club,” another described it as a “tribe.” One shared that the tattoos created a “communal” experience when people all got together to show each other the tattoos they had obtained in honor of the same deceased loved one. Another participant shared, “...this community that formed, this sort of inner community- all would have to get tattoos and they all ended up going to (the same tattoo artist) to get them done, which was really beautiful... ” Furthermore, a third participant spoke of the experience of getting her memorial tattoo in honor of her deceased daughter in tandem with her other daughter as “a bonding thing for us (participant and her living daughter)...it was kind of a female sharing ritual...” As a negative case example, one participant shared that she had mixed feelings about sharing her memorial tattoo with a community of people who also obtained a similar tattoo in his honor. Because the tattoo was based on a symbol that was significant between this participant and her deceased loved one she expressed, “...there’s times when I felt...possessive, that I didn’t want other people getting it, I didn’t like other people getting it, that it felt a bit trivialized...”

100% of participants over 50 who had lost a child spoke about their tattoos as something that connected or bonded them to a younger generation. One parent stated:

“...the tattoo culture and the younger age group, they really respect tattoos. They feel it’s part of their culture- kind of marks they’re making on *their* world...and

there's this whole side to being (over 50) as an adult where you could really easily lose your connection to young spirits...But now, because of the tattoos and what you're dealing with and the depth of how you deal with it...you show up with these kids in a way that it's like my experience and how I go through my experience is what my gift to you is. And I want you to go off in your life and remember that when you were 19 years old, this person died and you were hanging out with this family and is how they did it...that's a memory that they can take into their life forever, right?"

Additionally, a participant who did not lose a child shared how she has been able to use her memorial tattoo as a way to connect with a younger generation and, perhaps, to articulate something life-affirming in the face of significant loss. She shared:

"When I was a little kid I knew a guy who had a hula lady and he could flex and it was on his arm and make her hula, and I was like, 'Oh, I'm gonna do that for little kids. That's just too cool.'...I got it in a great placement where I can make the heart beat. (Flexes muscle to show how she makes the heart beat- see Figure 7 below). So...I don't think I thought of that right away when I got it...but I moved my arm and was like, 'Oh!' So my nephews and nieces, and all little kids I'm in contact with...they love it. I'm like, 'This is for my best friend and her heart still beats...'"

Figure 7.



21% of participants spoke about how their tattoo as providing them with a connection to or deeper understanding of others in the world who have tattoos. One participant described that “the ritual of tattoo is so old and it is a ritual for a lot of people and I really feel like it also connected to a way in which many people have...expressed themselves and also endured the pain for maybe similar reasons.” Two other participants spoke about how getting the tattoo opened their mind to understanding others who are tattooed. One said that one of the ways the tattoo has changed her is by making her “more open to people- to how people’s experiences shape their lives...and less judgmental of them.” The other stated that the tattoo made her more “curious about people’s hidden identities,” and that she changed from thinking people with tattoos were “crazy” to knowing, “it just means they have been through something that they want to keep with them forever.”

One participant spoke of her tattoo as connecting her to others, and being able to internalize their empathy, in its ability to give others a window into her grief process and to provide them solace in that she is able to keep something permanent with her in the wake of her baby’s death. She said:

“I think it gives people comfort knowing that I have it- that it’s my baby who is a part of me- like a piece of him is still with me on my arm...they see how it makes me feel to have it and so maybe it helps them a little bit just to understand the grief process.”

### *Pain*

This section will report on the role of physical pain in the process of sitting for a memorial tattoo. Participant’s experiences with pain will be reported in terms of both the positive and negative functions of pain, physical side effects as a result of enduring

extreme pain from tattooing, a sense of enduring pain in solidarity with the dead due to the nature of their deaths, and pain from tattooing as providing a temporary distraction from the experience of loss.

79% of participants spoke about their tattoo experience as causing physical pain. 36% of participants referred to the experience of pain in the tattoo process as serving some helpful function in their grief experience. One participant described the pain as “transformative”:

“...you go in, you experience this pain- it’s not a lot of time, but it’s a transformative pain...it’s not harming you...so it’s a pain you are accepting into your body, into the rest of your life...”

Another participant stated, “I felt like I needed the pain of the tattoo- it was a good pain.”

21% talked about the pain as the extremity of their bodies reactions to the pain with side effects of “back spasms” in the days after tattoo acquisition, looking “like I had smoked a couple of joints” while getting the tattoo, having “amazing sex” during the days just after sitting for the tattoo, and the release of “endorphins” in the body. One of these participants stated that there was “something chemical trapped in my body around the grief,” and that post-tattoo she felt “that things were really moved chemically.”

21% of participants described their experience of the pain as providing them with a sense of connection to the experience of the dead who had either endured a painful death or illness, or who had been killed so suddenly that they would have experienced no pain. Of these participants, one said, “I told the person giving me the tattoo, ‘It’s not as much pain as she had to go through while she was alive, so I was willing to suck it up...’”

Another participant described, “...the thought that got me through some of the most intense pain was, ‘well, this is nothing compared to what dad probably experienced...’”

Yet another participant talked about her memorial tattoo on her chest, stating, “.he got shot in the chest...and I remember thinking how badly it hurt but how that was so indicative of my being alive and that pain was actually a gift, because he probably didn’t even have a chance to feel pain, it was so sudden...”

14% of participants described the experience of sitting for a tattoo as a temporary distraction from the loss due to the pain endured. 14% stated that there was something difficult or unhelpful about the tattoo because of the experience of pain. In contrast, one participant described her experience as one that was “impervious to pain” due to her internal experience of grief.

### *Transformation*

64% of participants said definitively that their memorial tattoos had changed them. One participant stated:

“...it’s about claiming ownership of the circumstances I’ve had and trying to be one with them in a sense, rather than be overcome by them or numb...rather than seeing them as something that happened to me. It’s like something that I was a part of...and was a part of me.”

36 % said that they did not feel the tattoos had changed them. 93% of participants shared at least one way that their memorial tattoos have been helpful in their grieving process, while the additional 7%, whose loved one had died within six months, stated that it had not been helpful yet, but that she believed it would be "in the long-run." 36% shared that they felt there were no unhelpful elements of the memorial tattoo in their grief process. However, 29% of participants made a point to acknowledge the limitations of the tattoo’s ability to offer significant assistance when dealing with the extreme experience of grief. One parent said this:

“...the monumental loss of (my daughter) no longer being on this planet and no longer sharing her life with me- that’s way bigger than the tattoos. The tattoos are just fun and games compared to that.”

29% spoke specifically about how the lives and deaths of their loved ones had changed them much more than the memorial tattoos.

79% of participants described their tattoos as announcing or honoring that significant transformation in their lives had occurred. 29% of participants described the tattoos as “markers” that a significant change had taken place. According to one participant who had obtained tattoos for both her deceased sister and best friend:

“I think it’s been helpful for me because I really feel totally marked by these people’s deaths and they happened so close together...and it was such a formative time in my existence...they really imprinted me, so it feels like for me it’s an authentic way of displaying myself, or being who I am, to be actually physically marked.”

A father, speaking about the death of his 20 year old daughter, stated, “Tattoos never worked for me...I never felt anything was going to be important enough. And when, oh my God, when she died, it was so...so...this so clearly needs to be marked.” A mother speaking of the tattoo she obtained following her daughter’s suicide stated, “...There’s something about marking the change- the drastic change of your life- to your body- that is meaningful.”

50% of participants referred to feelings of “pride” about their tattoo. One participant stated, “I feel...this sense of pride almost...just acknowledging...imprinting and honoring it...beautifying it in a sense, or accepting and acknowledging the beauty there is in loss, because it really is there.” Another participant stated, “...the tattoos kind of take the scar and put an image to it, something that you can take pride in...You’re honoring somebody, but you’re also honoring that wound.”

43% of participants reflected on the experience of answering questions about their tattoos as transformative. One participant stated that the experience was “eye opening,” while another described it as “evocative.” 21% shared that answering the questions made them give form to internal experiences in ways they had not before. One participant shared that the interviewing experience challenged her perception of stigma associated with people who have memorial tattoos, and stated:

“...it allows me to have the proper area in which to talk about this person and my experiences with it...that is what this interview has done for me, to be like, “Oh, whoa, I can talk about this...”

29% of participants spoke about their tattoos as signifying a change in their status in the world. One participant who obtained her memorial tattoo for her husband who committed suicide described, “In the beginning I remember being really proud of the tattoo- kind of like (it was) a status symbol of being a widow.” Another participant said, “...when people do notice it and see it, they know I’ve gone through something pretty tough.” Two other participants discussed the tattoo as giving voice to their change in status as parents who have lost their children. One of these participants spoke about the tattoo’s role in announcing this change:

“...it’s marking that side that’s (saying), ‘You’re a warrior spirit, there’s a power and integrity in your life.’ You’re saying, ‘I’m proud of this legacy and I’m wearing that and you can ask me about it- don’t be afraid to ask me about my daughter’s death.’ Stand up and say that...and the tattoos sort of do that. It makes it so it’s okay to talk about death and the loss of my daughter.”

29 % of participants spoke about their tattoo as helping them to stay engaged in the world by externalizing the experience of grief. In one participant’s words:

“...your whole life is turned upside down and...I think you have two choices. You can either go into the ground, you know, metaphorically, and not be open about it and kind of let things destroy you internally, or you can try to work through it. So



I try to do the second one. Not always successfully, but I try and do it and the tattoo has been a piece of that. I wouldn't say it's been a very big piece, but it has been a piece."

14% of participants described the tattoo as "honoring" the way life changed as a result of their loved one's death. 14% of participants spoke about the tattoo as helping to "make (the death) real" or to combat "denial," as they talked about the death more often as a result of being asked about their tattoo.

One participant spoke about the tattoo as being helpful in his reconstruction of self following a significant loss. He states, "...It's been very calming and centering for me because, you know, when you lose someone like that you stand a good chance of losing a bit of yourself along the process, and I feel like (the tattoo) helped me, kind of, maintain myself..."

### *Continuing Bonds*

This section will report on how participants described their ongoing relationships with the dead during their interviews. This will include how they continue to think about their deceased loved one as present, ways they communicate with the dead, and how the dead remain alive in their internal realities. Memorial tattoos, in this section, are understood as tools for communication and the maintenance of an ongoing relationship, which is experienced by the survivors as either real or imagined. A negative case will also be reported, as well as the experience reported by some participants of being a reminder of the dead for others due to their similarity in physical appearance.

As was reported in the *Symbolism* section, 93% of participants acknowledged their tattoos as symbolizing a sense of permanence regarding the presence of the dead in their lives: 79% of participants used the word "reminder" to describe their tattoos, and an

additional 79% described their tattoos as either guaranteeing that the dead will “always be a part of me” or that “I will never forget,” suggesting that the tattoos may, in part, symbolize a continued relationship with the dead. Furthermore, 71% of participants described their tattoos as functioning as a tool for connecting with the dead. 43% of participants described their tattoos as having a role of keeping the deceased present in their continuing lives, either by “keeping his memory and spirit alive,” as a way to “feel (his/her) presence” or “feel closer to him,” or as an entry to access the deceased person’s “love” or “protection.” 29% of participants spoke specifically of their tattoos as a message to the dead.

43% of participants spoke about their dead loved one as a separate entity whose existence continues to be present posthumously. 14% described “talking to” the dead, 14% mentioned an imagined community of dead people spending time together, 29% spoke of the experience of the deceased “coming to me” as a spirit, either symbolically, physically, through meditation, or in dreams. In contrast, one participant stated, “I think the person who is gone is pretty much gone.”

100% of participants answered a question about what their deceased loved one would think about their tattoos. 93% answered definitively that they knew what their loved one would think; while one participant reported, “I think she would love it...in my imagination she would think it’s cool. In reality, who knows what her life would be like right now.” 71% answered that they believed the dead would have positive reactions to their tattoo saying the dead would “be psyched,” “think it’s cool,” and “love it.” 14% answered that they thought their loved ones would have negative reactions saying, “he would kill me,” or “she would be weirded out.” One participant reported that he believed

his grandmother would say, “Oh, it’s beautiful, oh, it’s pretty...it would look good on the wall, too,” suggesting that she would appreciate the design, but not be a fan of the medium of tattoo. 14% of participants channeled the voices of their dead loved ones when answering this question.

21% of participants made a point to note that people tell them they look like their deceased loved one. Of these participants, 67% stated that they believe this might make it difficult for others who are grieving the same loss. One participant said, “I think some folks have a little bit of a hard time with me because I remind them of her in some ways...I think in some ways it’s comforting for some folks, and in some ways it can be a little disarming.” Another participant said, “I look like my dad, and so I think just my presence through this process...I feel like sometimes it’s hard for my family to be around me in some moments...”

### *Personal and Private*

This section will report on how participants relate to their memorial tattoos as a personal experience or object. Different descriptions of how the tattoo is “personal” will be shown. Furthermore, the use of the memorial tattoo as a ritual that functions specifically for the participant, in contrast to a community of bereaved individuals, will be described. Finally, the experience of being asked about the memorial tattoo will be explored in the context of participant’s experience of being asked about a private experience of grief.

43% of participants described their memorial tattoos as “personal.” One participant described that the tattoo is something “between you and that person,” while another participant stated, “...it has such a dual purpose of connection to myself and

connection to my dad that it feels like something really intimate and personal...,” and another said, “...the memorial tattoo is more private and personal and it’s not really for show...”

50% of participants described their tattoos as being “for me,” in contrast to other rituals that felt more community oriented. One participant shared, “The funeral was more for other people, it wasn’t really for me or him...so the tattoo was more for me...I guess the tattoo meant more to me than anything else after he died.”

71% of participants spoke about the memorial tattoos as being difficult to talk about during certain phases of grief. 43% answered specifically that being asked to talk about their tattoos was, at times, “not helpful” in the grieving process. One participant described it like this:

“They’ve (memorial tattoos) been really helpful...but, you know, sometimes you have a lot of self-doubt...and you have to make money and take care of your family and there’s all of these obligations...and to be able to do that, sometimes you just have to put a paper bag over your head and almost become invisible...and the tattoos can kind of make you vulnerable to that because they are such a powerful reminder and somebody will go, ‘Wow, I love that tattoo...What’s that?’ And it’s just like, *kapow!* Do you really want to go there? Do you really have the energy to go there?”

21% spoke about how looking at the tattoo made them “sad.”

### *Narratives*

In contrast to the private and personal, this section will expose the function of memorial tattoos as constructing stories to be shared. As one participant stated, memorial tattoos can be “a way of publicly putting it out to the world that I have this giant thing on my back and it means a lot to me, and although the meaning can be private, the tattoo is a symbol that doesn’t go away, can’t wash off, won’t be forgotten...”

The tattoos will be shown as offering the bereaved an entryway to talk about their grief, and the significance of this for the participants. The experience of being interviewed about one's memorial tattoo will also be reported on in this section. Furthermore, the choice to obtain a memorial tattoo will be contextualized by some participants within a social reality that often denies the existence of death, therefore demanding alternative cultural mediums that allow for grief expression. Lastly, this section will report on examples of how participants have used their memorial tattoos to give voice to different aspects of their loss experience that are not necessarily acknowledged by the larger society.

50% of participants described their memorial tattoos as creating gateways for talking about their loss experience. One participant shared,

“I believe communication is part of grief and the more you talk about it, the more you let it out and let it go and are okay with it...It's easier for me to talk about it (the tattoo) because I have it with me when people ask me about it...I don't think if somebody would have asked me, 'What was your grandma like?'...I don't think I would have had *as* easy a segue into talking about my grandma unless they say, 'Hey, what's that...what does that mean?'”

Of these participants, 85% spoke about the importance or necessity of having more opportunities created to talk about their loss.

79% of participants expressed that some aspect of being interviewed about their memorial tattoo was a positive experience. 36% of participants spoke specifically about how talking about their loss is an important aspect of their healing from loss. One participant said:

“I mean I get choked up and sad when I talk about it, but for me, it's an important experience for me to talk about it, it definitely helps with the healing process for me to talk about it. So I don't mind talking about it. It's not one of those things where I'll ever say I can't talk about it...I need to. It's important for me to.”

In contrast, one participant reported that answering interview questions about the memorial tattoo felt “uncomfortable.” Another participant shared, “I was anxious about it.” And another participant described it as “challenging.” Finally, two participants reported that it was a complex experience- neither “good or bad,” and “enjoyable” as well as “self-indulgent.” It may be significant to note that the two participants reporting on the experience as complex are both parents over 50 whose children died.

14% of participants referred to a dominant cultural experience that denies death and grief as a context for their tattoo acquisition. One participant stated,

“I feel like in white dominant culture there is still some silence and taboo around death...I was very, like, outwardly choosing to go through a process where I was putting something permanent on my body that symbolized that experience that I had...(it) helped me break through some of those feelings...like ‘maybe I shouldn’t talk about this now,’ or ‘maybe I don’t know when it’s appropriate to talk about this’...but it (the tattoo) helped me sit with that somehow...because it didn’t feel like a quiet process...”

Another participant said,

“...traditional cultures have ways to deal with this...but our culture, we don’t have these traditional values. We have sort of our western, we can do this. We can drink a lot of wine and smoke cigarettes and you can go to a doctor and he’ll give you an anti-depressant. You can medicate however you need to do to get through this...and so you just really sort of have to use the resources that you have...”

An additional 14% of participants spoke about their tattoos in the context of grieving a loss of relationship that may not be socially recognized or accepted, such as a same-sex lover relationship that was hidden from the deceased’s parents, or a relationship of parents to their child who died at birth. Another 14% of participants shared that they obtained their memorial tattoo/s in the context of feeling “cursed” due to their experience of multiple deaths at a young age (in this case, both participants were 27 by the time they had experienced untimely deaths of more than one significant person in their lives).

### *Time Passage*

This section will report on the factor of time passage in the loss experience of the bereaved and their relationships to their memorial tattoos. The passage of time will be considered in terms of how it has impacted the ways that participants speak about their loss experience through their tattoos, and how participants experience their tattoos differently over time.

43% of participants brought up the factor of time as it relates to their loss experience. These participants are between the ages of 21 and 34, identify primarily as middle class, and lost their loved one to an untimely death. 67% of these participants lost their loved one to a sudden death; 33% lost their loved one to Cancer. Of these participants, 83% suffered the loss of a loved one who they honored with a memorial tattoo at least five years ago. Additionally, 83% of these participants spoke specifically of a change in their relationship to their memorial tattoo as their experience of grief became less acute. One participant, in response to a question about her experience when asked about her tattoo, stated, "...it was a lot more painful to talk about back in the beginning...it's been seven years so...I still miss him, but it's not the same like it was." One participant who had experienced the loss of a father over six years ago and a best friend one year ago, both of whom she honored with memorial tattoos, compared the experiences:

"...her (best friend's) death is just one of those things- it's always harder when someone is so young and so bright and has so much of a future ahead of her...and we're coming up on the year anniversary since she's been gone, and it's just absolutely mind-boggling that she's been gone a year...so I think just still because it's so new, it's still hard to talk about it... With my dad it's been almost seven years. After seven years you can talk about it...you know, I mean I feel I've accepted my dad's death. I still cannot accept (best friend's) death. I mean, on

some sort of level I do, but for the most part it's still very, very hard for me to accept her death. So that's why it's a lot harder to talk about her."

Overall, 29% of participants described it being more difficult to speak about their tattoos during the initial phase of grief.

29% of participants spoke about the role of time passage in the significance of their memorial tattoos. One participant, whose loved one died only 4 months ago, stated, "I'm sure it (tattoo) will be helpful in the long-run and just knowing I won't forget about her...it's definitely a major reminder for the purpose of what I want for years to come, but not right now." Another participant, whose loved one died nine years ago, shared, "in the beginning it (tattoo) meant friendship...symbolizing that our friendship would always be a part of me...it's turned into, kind of, just a symbol of him- as so many people have it...a united symbol that we all knew him and loved him and that he was important to us." Yet another participant, who memorialized two deaths with tattoos, the first five years ago, stated, "...at first my tattoos were much more symbolic and about the process and the marking, and then later they became more about the image." Finally, one participant who obtained her tattoo for a death that occurred seven years ago, shared, "...later on, after having looked at it in the mirror, it became more significant."

### *Summary*

The findings indicate that 93% (or n=13) of participants were able to share at least one way that their memorial tattoos have been helpful in their grieving process, while 71% (or n=10) acknowledged that at certain points it was difficult to talk about the tattoo, and 43% (or n=6) indicated that the tattoo, at times, was not helpful in the grieving



process. 36% of participants (or n=5) spoke about being subject to physical pain during tattoo acquisition, and its healing process, as helpful in their grief experience.

86% of participants (or n=12) described their memorial tattoos as providing some structural element in their grief process, either through offering them a sense of agency and control, giving physical embodiment to their loss experience and/or to the deceased, allowing them to make an offering to the dead, or in creating a parallel process of healing. All participants (100% or n=14) described their memorial tattoos as containing some symbolic element; and 93% discussed the symbolism as keeping the dead symbolically and permanently present in their lives. 100% of participants described their tattoos as providing a sense of connection with the dead; and 93% described their tattoos as providing them with a connection to the living during their grief process. 71% of participants mentioned that they brought friends or family members with them when they sat for their tattoos. 71% of participants related that other members of their community also got tattoos for the same deceased loved one.

64% (n=9) of participants said definitively that their memorial tattoos had changed them. 79% (or n=11) referred to their tattoos as announcing or honoring that significant transformation in their lives had occurred as a result of their loved one's death, either as markers of change, as indicators that a shift in status had occurred for the bereaved, as symbols that honored the deaths of their loved ones and combated denial, or as tools for staying connected to the world of the living.

79% of participants used the word "reminder" to describe their tattoos, and an additional 79% described their tattoos as either guaranteeing that the dead will "always be a part of me" or that "I will never forget." Of this 79%, 55% (n=6) mentioned that the

tattoo allowed them to stop worrying about forgetting their loved one, or that they were able to transfer some of the burden of grief onto the tattoo. 71% of participants described their tattoos as functioning as a tool for connecting with the dead.

50% (or n=7) of participants specifically described their memorial tattoos as “for me.” 43% described them as “personal,” while 50% also spoke of their tattoos as creating gateways for talking about their grief with others. Of this 50%, 86% or (n=6) spoke of the importance or necessity of having more opportunities to talk about their loss. 79% of participants expressed that some aspect of being interviewed about their tattoo was a positive experience.

43% of participants brought up the passage of time as related to their loss experience, and 29% (n=4) spoke about how time impacted the significance of their memorial tattoos.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study has been to explore the function of memorial tattoos for bereaved individuals in their grieving process, and to address the question: *Are memorial tattoos adaptive mourning rituals?* The discussion of the findings will address this question in terms of the literature related to metaphors and narratives, qualities of effective grief ritual, central tasks of grief ritual, self-harm, and memorial tattoos as political action. Finally, the bias of the researcher, implications for social work, and general conclusions will be discussed.

#### *Metaphors and Narratives*

Stepakoff (2007) writes of the power of symbolization and the relief experienced when a suffering person is able to give form to an internal experience, particularly in a way that “opens up the possibility of being understood by another” (p.402). As 100% of participants described their tattoos as symbolic, and 93% of participants described their tattoos as providing them with a connection to the living during their grief process, the majority of this study can be seen as using metaphor through the medium of tattoo to communicate about their grief with others. One participant displayed how symbolization can allow for such relief to take place when she described her ability to internalize a community of support through the awareness of her memorial tattoo. She stated, “I guess

it's just to communicate to anyone who sees it...I think it gives people a little bit of comfort knowing I have it...I think it helps them just kind of understand it more...to understand the grieving process.” In addition, 21% of participants (or n=3) articulated that answering the questions made them give form to internal experiences in ways they had not before.

Nadeau (2008) advocates for therapists to listen for metaphors, when working with grieving families, as tools for uncovering and constructing meaning. 93% of participants said that their tattoos symbolized the permanence of the presence of the dead in their lives. One participant used the metaphor that losing his loved one was:

“...like the story of the guy who has his arm amputated and he still thinks the arm is there. You look down and you don't see the arm, but you still try to pick up a glass with it. And it's like that. You just know that she's still here, that she's gonna call you on the phone.”

This particular participant went on to obtain four memorial tattoos for his loved one- all of them on his arms. Therefore, it can be interpreted that this participant used the amputee metaphor to give form to what has gone missing as a result of his loss experience, and that the tattoos have served to give form to the changed life that persists and must incorporate that loss.

Anderson (2001) describes how image and language can be tools for transforming an experience of loss that creates a fragmented sense of self into a “once again bearable, narrative whole” (p.138). 79% of participants described their memorial tattoos as symbolizing the transformation that had occurred in their lives since the death of their loved one. 43% of participants reflected on the experience of answering questions about their tattoos as transformative. One stated that the experience was “eye opening,” while

another described it as “evocative.” One participant gave voice to the cohesive properties of his memorial tattoo when describing that “when you lose someone like that you stand a good chance of losing a bit of yourself along the process and (the tattoo) helped me, kind of, maintain myself.” In this case, the tattoo is transformative in its role of reinstating a sense of wholeness following a period of fragmentation as a result of the grief experience.

One of the tasks of this study has been to determine if memorial tattoos offer structure and meaning- through image and language- to the bereaved and their relationship with the loved ones they have lost, and whether the tattoo constructs a narrative that can be shared- either literally in conversations with the living, or metaphorically in conversations with the dead. This task will be explored in more detail as we move into discussion of the elements of effective grief ritual- structure, symbolism and the inclusion of others- as they relate to memorial tattoos.

### *Effective Grief Ritual*

The literature on mourning rituals has indicated that three elements in particular are central in the creation of an effective ritual- structure, symbolism and the inclusion of others. The findings illustrate that the majority of participants felt their tattoo experience incorporated all three elements- 100% described their tattoos as connecting them to others; 100% of participants referenced the symbolic properties of their tattoos; and 86% of participants described their tattoo experience as creating structure in their grief process.

### *Structure*

The literature describes the structural element of mourning rituals as providing mourners with a sense of control over their experience and an opportunity to be active in their grief process (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wprostok, 1995; Rando, 1985). The findings show that 36% of participants describe their memorial tattoos as offering them a sense of control and agency in their grief process. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) assert that mourning rituals offer containment and expression of emotion, an element which was referenced by 21% of participants as a property they experienced when obtaining their memorial tattoos.

Kollar (1989) writes about grief rituals as allowing the bereaved to take leave of the deceased and perhaps to “carry something tangible away with them” (p.275). The findings can be interpreted in different ways in regards to this property of grief ritual. On the one hand, the permanence of presence of the deceased embodied in the memorial tattoos, as described by 93% of participants, could suggest that such leave-taking is not necessarily occurring for these bereaved individuals as they are symbolically carrying the deceased with them for the rest of their lives. However, 43% of these participants indicated that the ability to be physically marked in honor of their deceased loved one had allowed them to stop worrying about “forgetting” or “losing” the dead. Furthermore, over 50% of participants described their tattoos as providing them with something physical to represent their loss. One interpretation of this data, therefore, is that sitting for a memorial tattoo can be the ritual that allows the bereaved to take leave of the dead as participants in the world of the living, and the actual tattoo becomes the physical

representation that the bereaved are then able to carry with them in honor of their significant loss. This process, in turn, contributes to the facilitation of what Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) outline as a goal of grief rituals- a transformation of self that allows for the creation of an *internal working model* for the bereaved that incorporates their changed relationship with the deceased.

### *Symbolism*

As noted in the literature, Wyrostok (1995) describes symbolism in grief ritual as *accessing* the unconscious meaning of the mourner's distress and the "story" they have written internally to describe their loss (p.402). Furthermore, Castle and Phillips (2003) describe symbolic objects as being useful in the externalization of a grief experience. 93% of participants reported that their tattoos were symbolic of the permanent presence of the dead in their lives, and 79% reported more specifically that their tattoos functioned as a "reminder," as something that will "always be a part of me" or that "I will never forget." It can be inferred, therefore, that memorial tattoos serve a function of externalizing a persisting relationship with the dead, while simultaneously constructing a story that serves, perhaps primarily, to facilitate a conversation between the bereaved, their deceased loved ones, and their future selves. Additionally, as 79% of participants described their tattoos as representing the significant transformation that has occurred in their lives as a result of their loved one's death, this symbolic conversation can also be seen as extending to the larger world as an announcement of how loss and grief has changed the lives of the bereaved.

The symbolic process of memorial tattooing can also be compared to religious practices regarding grief that have been cited in the literature. For instance, the Jewish

tradition's practice of *Kriyah*, which is the tearing of clothes to represent an internal tearing due to the death of a loved one, is comparable to the report of 79% of participants that their tattoos represent the permanent transformation within their lives that had taken place as a result of their loved one's death.

Additionally, the sitting of *Shiva*, the Jewish practice of sitting in mourning for the week following a death during which feelings are expressed and memories recounted, can be compared to sitting for a tattoo. In both cases, special time is being set aside to engage in a communal practice that is focused on feeling the pain of the loss and remembering the person who has died. This is accentuated by the report of 71% of participants who shared that they felt connected to others while they were sitting for the memorial tattoo- either to the artist, to friends or family members that came to give them support, or to those who were also bereaved for the same loss and getting a memorial tattoo as well. It is significant to note that tattooing is forbidden by the Torah and frowned upon by many Jews due to its connotation with a system of identification during the Holocaust. However, there is evidence that younger generations of Jews are engaging more and more in the ritual of tattoo, often times in honor of their Jewish heritage (Belkin, 2004). Only one participant in this study identified as Jewish and there is further study required to determine the role of memorial tattoos within the Jewish community. Furthermore, one of the limitations of this study has been the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the participants. 71% of participants in this study identify as Caucasian or White, while the remaining participants identified as multiracial or Jewish. Clearly there is much more research needed to be done on the function of memorial tattoos within communities of color- particularly within Black and Latino communities which are



culturally recognized as participating in the practice of memorial tattooing, but which have not been given voice through this study.

The Christian symbols of Christ crucified on the cross and the empty tomb (the sign of Christ's resurrection) are seen as offering comfort to the bereaved by signaling that they are not alone in their experience of grief and pain, and that life does not end with death (McConnell, 1998). These symbols can be compared with the practice of 14% of participants who mixed the ashes of the dead with their tattoo ink to indicate that "he could always be with me" and that "part of her body was being embedded into my skin," suggesting that the presence of the dead persists posthumously and, more literally, through the physical bodies of the bereaved.

Over 50% of participants described their tattoos as providing them with some physical embodiment of either the deceased or the grief experience. Furthermore, these participants spoke about their tattoos as something they physically "touch," "rub," or "look at" to embody a connection with the deceased. Gibson (2004) describes a similar practice in her study on transitional objects in grief, what she names "melancholy objects" (p.286). She describes one participant's, Lisa's, experience with a melancholy object:

She has held photographs of him to her heart. When a person presses a photograph to their chest they are not looking at the photograph. Lisa is holding a photograph like it is a body, her father's body... (p.291).

In terms of memorial tattoos, the practice of infusing symbolic meaning into a physical object- in this case the tattooed body of the bereaved- becomes a literal expression of the concept that the dead "live on" through the lives, and in the bodies, of the bereaved. As Gibson (2004) states, "The ongoing absence of the deceased in their bodily being is one

of the profound existential shocks of bereavement and the desire for their bodily return is a powerful fantasy in the early months of death” (p.291). Therefore, the medium of tattoo may be particularly astute in negotiating what Gibson (2004) describes as “the transitional nature of human corporeal existence,” particularly given that 79% of participants obtained their memorial tattoos within the year of their loved one’s death (p.291).

The practice of incorporating ashes into the tattoo ritual can also be compared to the Japanese Buddhist tradition that treats death as “a new phase of family membership” in which “the dead remain ancestors for the lifetime of *those who knew them personally*” and are honored through ritual until the bereaved, too, have died and then the spirits merge with a general family ancestry (Klass & Goss, 1999, p.549). Memorial tattoos, therefore, can be seen as honoring and remembering the dead by maintaining their physical presence, symbolically, through the bodies of the living until the bereaved, too, die. As one participant said:

“...it’s a reminder- the reminder is of the pain that you feel but also of (the) transformation...and it lasts as long as you do, and no longer. People are like, ‘Oh, but it’s so permanent!’ And it’s not permanent at all...we’re not permanent.”

Memorial tattoos, then, can be seen as representing the eternal life or presence of the dead, yet very much within the context and service of the finite experiences of the living.

It is important to mention that as 21% of participants described that being interviewed about their memorial tattoos had made them give form to internal experiences in ways they had not before, this study has led some participants to enact the use of language in giving form to their loss experience for the first time within the context of the interview process. Therefore, the memorial tattoos, as symbols, are

initiated by the researcher as paths for accessing stories about grief that may not have been articulated by the participant prior to the interview. This fact can be seen as a limitation of this study such that the interview has the potential of being a space for enacting a function of the memorial tattoo, rather than reflecting upon its function. Perhaps some participants would not have utilized the tattoo for the purpose of putting language to their grief experience had they not been asked to do so by the researcher. However, 43% of participants spoke about their tattoos as providing a needed gateway to talk about their loss experience. Furthermore, due to the fact that 100% of participants took steps to contact the researcher in regards to being interviewed it can be deduced that all of these participants had some interest in telling their story.

Symbolism, in the case of memorial tattoos, cannot be confined into a singular representation of a one-time experience. Due to the persistence of the symbol throughout the lifetime of the bereaved, it can be expected that the meanings and language ascribed to the tattoos will change over time, though that is beyond the scope of this study. Considering the study done by Gibson (2004) about melancholy objects in which she asserts “that when the intensity of grief changes so too does the meaning, value and emotional effect of the transitional object,” it can be inferred that personal transformation over time will impact the significance of the memorial tattoos for the wearers (p.288). This is also evidenced in the pool of participants in this study whose time of bereavement ranged from 4 months to 9 years, and in which 36% of participants who lost their loved one over 5 years ago described time as having a significant impact on their loss experience. 36% also articulated a change in relationship to their memorial tattoo as the grief experience has become less acute. Further research is recommended to explore the

longitudinal functions of memorial tattoos and how they function throughout the lifespan of the bereaved.

### *Inclusion of Others*

As is identified by Castle and Phillips (2003), an important aspect of grief ritual is reducing isolation in the grief experience. Imber-Black (1991) writes about grief rituals as bringing people together “in a context designed to promote interpersonal connectedness” (p.207). Reeves and Boersma (1990) point out that grief ritual can be effective, also, between one person and a symbol of the loss. As 100% of participants described their tattoos as providing a sense of connection with the dead, and 93% of participants spoke about their tattoos as connecting them to the living, memorial tattoos emerge, through this study, as an effective tool for breaking isolation in the loss experience. In fact, one of the most striking findings of this study has been that 71% of participants reported that other people in their community also obtained memorial tattoos for the same dead loved one, and that these tattoos were shared- either through using the same tattoo artist, sitting for the tattoos at the same time, obtaining the same image as a tattoo, or by communally unveiling memorial tattoos to one another in a ritualistic way. Further research on memorial tattoos, therefore, is required to continue an exploration into the communal experiences for groups of people who have memorial tattoos in honor of the same loss.

### *Tasks of Grief Ritual*

Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) describe successful grief resolution as involving three types of grief work that can be facilitated through ritual: transformation of the bereaved person’s sense of self resulting from the loss, mediation between the person’s

pre-death and post-death social status, and continuation of an intrapsychic connection with the deceased within a communal context. As was mentioned above, 79% of participants identified their memorial tattoos as representative of the significant transformation of their lives resulting from their loss experience. Furthermore, 64% of participants said definitively that their memorial tattoos have changed them. Moreover, 29% of participants referred to their tattoos as signifying a change in their status in the world as a result of their loved one's death. One participant identified that the tattoo gave her a sense of pride and referred to it as "a status symbol of being a widow," while another participant, a parent who lost his child, stated that the tattoo was a way of saying, "I'm proud of this legacy and I'm wearing that and you can ask me about it- don't be afraid to ask me about my daughter's death." The aforementioned statistics address the first two elements of Romanoff and Terenzio's (1998) tasks of grief work, and the next section will address the third element- continuation of an intrapsychic connection with the deceased in a communal context- while also placing it within the context of the literature on continuing bonds.

### *Continuing Bonds*

The literature on continuing bonds challenges traditional ideas about grief resolution and offer an alternative conceptualization of effective methods for coping with loss in contrast to traditional theories about "recovery" or "resolution" of grief. These methods incorporate communication and relationship between the bereaved and the dead. Howarth (2007) describes the continuing bonds context as one that does not demand a belief in the afterlife, but which honors the experience of the bereaved as one that incorporates an ongoing and symbolic presence of the dead. Mitchell (2007), Howarth

(2000, 2007), Bennett and Bennett (2000), and Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) all identify that the concept of continuing bonds allows for the continued integration of the deceased into the different life stages of the bereaved, which has potential to empower the bereaved to adapt to a new life following traumatic loss. 71% of participants described their tattoos as functioning as tools for connection with the dead, and 43% spoke specifically about how the tattoos have a role in keeping the deceased present in their continuing lives. Given that the majority of participants referred to their tattoos as representative of life-transformation, as facilitating a connection with the dead, and as something that helped them feel connected to the living, it appears that memorial tattoos can be qualified as facilitating an ongoing intrapsychic connection with the dead in a communal context that assists in an adaptation to, and identification with, their changed lives following the experience of bereavement.

#### *Severance-Transition-Reincorporation*

As mentioned above, Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) write of three types of ritualized grief work which can also be identified in the literature among different theorists. Sanders (1999), Reeves and Boersma (1990), and van Gennep (1960) all write of three steps in ritual which involve a first stage of separation from a past state of existence- or *severance*; a second stage of gradual change- or *transition*; and a final stage of re-entry into a life that incorporates the transformation that has taken place- or *reincorporation*. One task of this study, then, has been to identify which stage or stages of this process can be served by the practice of memorial tattoos.

As discussed in the *Structure* section of this chapter, the findings have indicated that memorial tattoos can be of assistance in the marking of the severance phase of this

process and, as one participant shared following the death of his loved one, “...it was so...so...this so clearly needs to be marked,” indicating the need to honor and announce that life had been forever changed. Furthermore, this particular participant went on to explain how one of his memorial tattoos, which had been a compilation of phrases from his loved one’s paintings, shown below in Figure 8, offered him guidance as he made his way through his grief process. He stated,

“...it became intensely more powerful like a month after I went through a deep meditation...and I understood what this (phrases that had been tattooed onto his arm) meant. And when I understood what this meant, then I realized I had something I wanted to do, which was to write what they meant and explain it. And that turned into its own little journey...it all sort of stemmed from this tattoo, which is like a little road map.”

Figure 8.



This case example represents the potential of memorial tattoos to offer ritualized assistance to the bereaved in different ways through different phases of grief. Following the marking of this participant's severance from a prior state of being as a result of his loved one's death, he entered a transitional, or liminal, period in which he was unsure of the full meaning of the tattoo ritual, but was still able to incorporate it into other healing practices. Then, he was able to use the tattoo as a facilitator of his move toward reincorporation, in which he began to write books about his journey of grief based on the phrases from his loved one's art that had been tattooed on his arm. Through this process, this participant has begun to reincorporate his loved one- and himself- into a life that has been irrevocably transformed, by first marking it, then contemplating it, and, finally, constructing stories about it to share with a larger community. Again, the full functions of memorial tattoos for the bereaved would be explored more thoroughly through a longitudinal study.

### *Self-Harm*

Self-harm in the context of grief has been discussed in the literature as evidence that the bereaved is feeling guilt and anticipates punishment for having survived the deceased (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Additionally, the literature on tattoos as self-harming behavior identifies that tattoos can be an effort to eliminate guilt, distract from memories, and self-punish (Roberti & Storch, 2005; Briere & Gil, as cited in Anderson & Sansone, 2003). 14% of participants described their tattoo experience as a temporary distraction from the loss due to the physical pain. One participant described how this distraction could be a potentially unhelpful role that the memorial tattoo could play when she stated:



“...if they stand in for other ways of grieving then they can be detrimental...like with (one of her memorial tattoos) it hurt so bad getting it done...I just wanted to be over it...I just wanted to medicate...so maybe that was too much...”

At the same time, 21% of participants described the pain of their tattoo experience as providing them with a sense of connection to the experience of the dead in their dying process, which could suggest that the tattoos are functioning as tools of self-punishment due to survivor’s guilt. However, beyond a theory of self-punishment, there is also the potential of memorial tattoos to allow the bereaved an engagement with their own mortality and ability to tolerate pain. Enduring physical pain can be a means of constructing a narrative of strength amidst devastating grief and the overwhelming reality of death. As one participant noted, “...it does communicate...that I’ve survived...well, survived having a tattoo, but also losing a child.”

Gilligan (1996) writes of the role of physical pain for people who describe an experience of not being able to feel anything emotionally. He writes that physical pain becomes “the only way to feel alive” (p.39). One participant described her memorial tattoo that is the text of the word “alive” that she got during a period when she “had just been really flatlined and having a really shitty time,” as “a reminder to love being alive.”

Figure 9.



Myers (1992) writes about body modification used in rites of passage rituals as having a role in creating painful stimulation to release anesthetizing endorphins in the body, and Wyrostok (1995) writes of shamanic healing rituals which use pain to “provide anxiety relief, pain reduction and even immunocompetence” (p.403). 36% of participants described the role of pain in their tattoo experience as helpful in terms of their grieving. 21% spoke about the physiological reactions of their bodies as a result of the tattoos and the effects, which included having back spasms, looking high on marijuana, having amazing sex, feeling the release of endorphins in the body, and feeling chemically altered. 21% of participants described their tattoos as embodying the healing process following the devastation of grief. As one participant stated, “When you see a tattoo healing, part of you is healing.”

Further research is necessary to more fully explore the function of physical pain as part of the memorial tattoo experience when dealing with grief. Furthermore, given that 93% of the loss experiences of this pool of participants were sudden and untimely, exploration of this type of loss experience, and its confrontation of the bereaved in terms of their own mortality, requires further study.

#### *Memorial Tattoos as Political Action in the Context of a Death-Denying Society*

Within the context of the past Century in America, death and grief has been discussed in the literature as shifting from communal facilitation of loss and its repercussions into an individual experience that relies on one’s personal coping skills (Moller, 1996). In this study, 14% of participants acknowledged this experience explicitly during their interviews. As one participant put it, “...in White dominant culture there is still some silence and taboo around death...” This same participant acknowledges

her choice to get a memorial tattoo as a public announcement of an experience that the culture had designated as belonging to the private sphere. She stated, “I was...outwardly choosing to go through a process where I was putting something permanent on my body that symbolized (the grief) experience.” Klass and Goss (1999) introduce the possibility that with the progression of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century “we may see bonds with the dead taken out of the private cooperative sphere of individual and family meaning and put in the service of political and economic power structures” (p.565). Doss (2002) suggests that “the visual and material culture of grief in contemporary America seems to suggest heightened popular commitment to shift the discourse on death from medicine to culture, and distinctive efforts to make death meaningful- memorable- on personal and public levels” (p.80). There is a movement within the literature, then, recognizing the acknowledgement of death and grief as an increasingly public phenomena.

As is shown in the findings of this study, memorial tattoos play dual roles for their wearers, serving functions that are both public and private. 43% of participants used the word “personal” to describe their memorial tattoos, while 50% specifically articulated that the tattoo was “for me.” As one participant stated, “I got the tattoo for me, and if anyone else sees it or likes it or cares about it...I tell them about it and I tell them why I got it and who I got it for...but it won’t bother me if they never see it.” At the same time, 50% of participants spoke of their tattoos as gateways for talking about their loss experience, and 6 of these 7 participants spoke of the need to have more opportunities to share their relationship with grief. The same participant quoted above about the private nature of his tattoo also shared:

“I believe communication is part of grief and the more you talk about it, the more you let it out and let it go and are okay with it...It’s definitely helped because, not only when I look at it, but when somebody asks me about it, I’m reminded of it and I can talk about it.”

One of the strengths of memorial tattoos as mourning rituals, then, is the capacity of the medium to operate on individual as well as communal levels for the bereaved.

Furthermore, whether they recognized it as a helpful or unhelpful aspect to their experience, all participants acknowledged that some element of their tattoo established their grief process within the public sphere.

Given the suggestions of Doss (2002) and Klass and Goss (1999) that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century may mark a turning point in the role of death and grief as assigned to the private sphere, the cultural phenomena of memorial tattoos begins to take on political significance. Further research as to the meaning of memorial tattoos as public unveilings of an intimacy with death is necessary to better explore the shifts taking place in society in terms of the appropriate “spaces” for death. In a sense, the choice to assign one’s body as a location of the representation of death can be seen as an announcement that death is in any space- and every space- that the bereaved inhabit.

#### *Bias and the Role of the Researcher*

Hoffman (2001) refers to the work of communication theorist Gregory Bateson when she states, “Bateson used to say that the other end of the probe the researcher sticks into the human material sticks into the researcher himself” (p.155). Due to the placement of this study within the literature in terms of the potential of memorial tattoos to be used in the construction of narratives *between* people that give form and meaning to an overwhelming experience of grief, it is important for me, as the researcher, to be

transparent about my presence- and the presence of my own grief- in this study. Through the exploration of memorial tattoos and their meanings for the bereaved, it has been difficult, at times, to distinguish my own grief process from that of my participants. Although it was not clear to me when I began, this project has been an extension of my efforts to negotiate my personal understanding of grief. As one participant put it, “There’s people who understand grief and people who don’t.” It became clear to me during the course of this project- specifically during an experiential sandtray training at my internship- that part of what drew me to the exploration of this topic was my own desire to place myself within a community of those “people who understand grief.” As I chose a small deer figurine to humbly represent myself in the sandtray with 14 figurines laid out in front of me to represent my participants, and their 13 deceased loved ones hovering in the corner, I began to understand that my own loss experience became more powerful, and more palatable, when contextualized within a community of tragic loss. The deceased who have been honored with memorial tattoos documented in this study have become part of my own community of the dead; their bereaved as part of my community of the living.

As I have become more intimate with the rationale for the bereaved in tattooing our bodies with “scars” of our grief, I have come to view this paper as a similar effort to *mark* my personal loss and share it within community. As one participant remarked,

“You always worry that you’re gonna forget them and (that they will) become less important in your life. This is just a way to always remind myself that I could never forget.”

Similarly, this study and paper has provided me with another medium for marking down the persisting presence of my experience with loss and grief in my continuing life,

another reminder that I will continue to remember- and make physical- the loss of my loved one.

The role of the researcher in this study, therefore, has not been one of removed objectivity, although I took measures to ground the data in a methodology that would maximize validity of the results. However, there is a body of literature that contests the capacity of qualitative research to be conducted objectively (see Davison, 2006). As Jameson (1988) articulates:

There is something quite naive, in a sense quite profoundly unrealistic...about the notion that reality is out there simply, quite objective and independent of us, and that knowing it involves the relatively unproblematical process of getting an adequate picture of it into our own head (p.121).

Furthermore, some studies suggest that having personal knowledge of a culture being researched can enrich the data that is being collected. As Coar & Sim (2006) suggest, “As an insider, the interviewer can gain potentially rich insights by capitalizing on a shared culture and a common stock of technical knowledge, as well as feelings of collegial trust” (p.255). While I chose to disclose my status as a bereaved individual with a memorial tattoo only after the completion of the data-collecting interview, there often was a general assumption that I had experienced grief. It is impossible to discern exactly what impact my experience with grief has had on the data in this study, but it can be assumed that it did impact both the collection and the analysis of the data included here.

#### *Implications for Social Workers*

Nadeau (2006, 2008) advocates for therapists to listen for metaphors when working with bereaved clients as tools for uncovering meaning that might otherwise be missed. In conversation with bereaved and tattooed clients, we, as social workers, would

be missing a rich opportunity to assist our clients in the construction of a comprehensible narrative about their loss if we were to avoid asking them about their tattoos. In asking clients about their tattoos, we should also remember the 43% of participants in this study who shared that being asked about their tattoos was, at times, unhelpful in their grieving process, and we should undertake such conversations with deep sensitivity to the readiness of the bereaved to articulate their stories to us.

The findings in this study strongly suggest that the medium of tattoo is becoming a vehicle for expression of a grief experience which may often be unspeakable for the bereaved in the context of a society that predominantly denies death. The union of image and language in conversations about memorial tattoos allow for the uncovering of what Albin (2006) describes as “some narrative or story being told by a body that does not articulate, but still speaks” (p. 34). Bodies, in this study, are sites of death, grief, transformation, and, storytelling. To avoid engaging with the bodies of our clients, in collaboration with their minds and spirits, we may miss out on a text that is unfolding physically before us, begging to be listened to.

Laird (1984) calls on social workers treating families confronted with loss and change to “invite (them) to consider how to mark and celebrate...transitions and symbolize the altered family system” (p.127). This study has gained a small insight into the potential of memorial tattoos to serve the marking and ritual needs of family members across all generations. Memorial tattooing has been uncovered as a practice that can help unify family and community systems following the loss of one of its members. As social workers, we can speak with our clients about this practice and encourage them to engage,

if not specifically in the acquisition of a memorial tattoo, then in meaningful ritual that recognizes the continuing relationship with the dead and gives it a forum for expression.

As the literature on continuing bonds has suggested, death of a loved one does not constitute the death of a relationship. As 93% of participants in this study acknowledged their tattoos to be symbols of the permanent presence of the dead in their ongoing lives, it is our responsibility as social workers sitting with bereaved clients to validate and inquire into the nature of these persisting relationships.

Finally, as one participant stated, the experience becoming tattooed in honor of a loved one made her “more open to people- to how people’s experiences shape their lives...and less judgmental of them.” Tattoos have often been constructed in the literature as markers of pathology and social deviance (Aizneman & Jensen, 2007; Birmingham, et al, 2006; Roberti & Storch, 2005). If instead, we can read them as symbols of a past that is intended for remembrance, then they provide us with a powerful tool for uncovering the histories and narratives of our tattooed clients.

### *Conclusions*

It is the conclusion of the study that memorial tattoos can be used adaptively in the process of expressing and honoring grief through ritual, particularly in the context of an experience of an untimely death. This study has shown how memorial tattoos function in helpful ways that provide structure to the grief experience, allow for access to emotion and the construction of meaning through symbols, and integrate community members into the severe experience of loss suffered by the bereaved. Memorial tattoos, therefore, qualify as embodying the three necessary qualities for effective grief ritual as identified in the literature- structure, symbolism and the inclusion of others. Furthermore,



memorial tattoos have been understood through this study as markers of transformation, as life affirming, and as illustrations of the permanence of a continuing relationship with the dead. These qualities suggest that memorial tattoos can be effective rituals in the facilitation of the burden of the bereaved who have the task of separating their identities from a past state of existence and transitioning toward a re-entry into life that incorporates the significant loss that has altered their realities forever. This process of *re-incorporation* of the grief experience into the world of the living is shown through this study to be served well by memorial tattoos due to their ability to simultaneously symbolize an ongoing connection to a loved one while at the same time acknowledging and announcing the reality of their death. Memorial tattoos mark change, give voice to a story about loss, and maintain relationships between the bereaved and their dead in a way that is grounded within a living community.

The strengths of this study include the emergence of consistent themes among participants across geographical and socioeconomic boundaries. This study is also strong in its inclusion of many different types of relationships between the bereaved and their dead, as well as a varied expanse of time since the death occurred and was honored with a memorial tattoo.

The limitations of this study include the lack of diversity among participants in terms of ethnicity and gender and the bias of the researcher due to her own grief experience. Further limitations include the status of participants as all being in some way eager to share their story, which may indicate that they already have skills that facilitate their adaptation to grief regardless of their tattoos. At the same time, the fact that some participants were articulating their grief experience through their tattoos and into

language for the first time through the interviews of this study can also be seen as a limitation because participants are being asked to engage in the potential function of the tattoo rather than to reflect upon it. However, this can also be seen as a strength, as the overwhelming majority of participants experienced the interview in a positive way.

Further research is needed to explore the function of memorial tattoos within communities of color- especially those that have been impacted by a significant amount of violent death. Anderson (1999) discusses an altered relationship with death and mortality for young people that grow up witnessing street violence and the impact it can have on their existential lives. Memorial tattoos within such communities could have different functions than what has been articulated in this study and requires further study. Additionally, further research is needed to capture the functions of memorial tattoos throughout the wearer's lifetime and during different stages across the lifespan. This study has begun to capture how the bereaved relate to their tattoos and their deceased loved ones in changed ways over time, but needs to be explored more explicitly. Furthermore, research investigating the role of physical pain in the memorial tattoo ritual, as well as research interested in the function of memorial tattoos for whole communities in grief, is recommended.

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## **Appendix A** ***Informed Consent Form***

December 19, 2008

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Eliza Schiffrin. I am conducting a study of the role of memorial tattoos in the grieving process for people who obtain them. This research study for my thesis is being conducted as part of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work and possible future presentations and publications.

Your participation is requested because you are over age 18, have at least one memorial tattoo, and have obtained the tattoo in honor of a person who constitutes a significant loss in your life. A significant loss, as defined for this study, is the loss of an immediate family member, partner, best friend, or equivalent (i.e. the death of a cousin could constitute a significant loss if the relationship with the cousin was experienced as an immediate family member, partner, or best friend). Out of concern for your experience with grief, participation in this study should not take place if the loss of your loved one occurred within the past 3 months, as the experience of grief may be too acute. If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experience surviving the death of a loved one, obtaining a memorial tattoo, and the meaning or meanings you have ascribed to this process. Also, I will ask you to provide demographic information about yourself.

A potential risk of participating in this study may be that some interview questions could trigger difficult thoughts and feelings. In case you feel the need for additional support after participating in this study, you will be given a list of resources for mental health services in your area.

You will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. However, you may benefit from knowing that you have contributed to the knowledge of grief processes and healing. It is my hope that this study will help social workers have a better understanding of people who have used a tattoo in the grieving process. You may also benefit from receiving the opportunity to share your experience, and to be a part of a group of voices who have dealt with significant loss.

The interview will be conducted face-to-face and will last for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. If face-to-face interviews are not possible to schedule, you may be interviewed over the phone. Interviews will be tape recorded with your consent, and tapes will be coded numerically to ensure your confidentiality. After three years have passed, tapes will be destroyed after the interviews have been transcribed. If I use a transcriber, he/she will sign a confidentiality pledge. Strict confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with federal regulation and the mandates of the social work



profession. Your identity will be protected, as names and identifying information will be changed in the reporting of the data. Your name will never be associated with the information you provide in the questionnaire or the interview. The data may be used in other education activities as well as in the preparation for my Master's thesis. Your confidentiality will be protected by coding the information and storing the data in a locked file for a minimum of three years and after three years it will be destroyed unless I continue to need it in which case it will be kept secured.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer specific questions and to withdraw from the study at any time before March 31, 2009. If you decide to withdraw, all materials pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. If you have additional questions about the study or wish to withdraw, please feel free to contact me at the contact information below. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, I encourage you to call me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Eliza Schiffrin  
Children's Hospital, Oakland  
747 52<sup>nd</sup> St.  
Oakland, CA 94607  
(347) XXX-XXXX  
elizaschiffrin@gmail.com

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

Please return this consent form to me prior to the interview to indicate your intention of participating in the study (I suggest that you keep a copy of this consent form for your records).

Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to having you as a participant in my study.

## **Appendix B**

### ***Interview Guide***

*“I’m going to ask you some preliminary demographic questions first and then go into the questions that will require more detailed answers. As I am asking about you and your loved one who has died, please stop me at any time if you need to take a break or if there is a question that is too difficult to answer.”*

#### **Demographics:**

Your age today:

Your age when you obtained your memorial tattoo:

Your age when you became bereaved:

# of tattoos you currently have:

My memorial tattoo was my \_\_ tattoo (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>...)

Location of memorial tattoo on my body:

Profession and Socioeconomic status:

Ethnicity/Cultural Identity:

Gender:

#### **Questions:**

1. Who did you get your memorial tattoo for and what was your relationship like with that person?
2. How did you initially respond to the death of your loved one?
3. What prompted you to get your memorial tattoo at the time that you did?
4. Describe in detail your tattoo and it’s symbolic significance.
5. Did you feel a connection to your loved one while you were getting your tattoo? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. What, if any, other rituals did you participate in after your loved one died?
7. How do the other rituals compare to the experience of getting a memorial tattoo?
8. What thoughts and/or feelings do you associate with your tattoo?
9. How has the tattoo been helpful in your grieving process?
10. How has the tattoo not been helpful in your grieving process?
11. What does your memorial tattoo intend to communicate and with whom?
12. What is your experience when people ask about your tattoo? What do you say?
13. Has your memorial tattoo impacted a change in your experience of the loss? If so, how?
14. Has getting this tattoo changed *you*? If so, how?
15. How do you think your deceased loved one would react to your tattoo?
16. What has it been like for you to sit through this interview?

**Appendix C**  
***Recruitment Letter***

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Eliza Schiffrin and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to explore the role of memorial tattoos (tattoos obtained in honor of a loved one who has died) in the process of grieving a death. This study is being conducted for the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, and may be used in possible future presentations or publications on the topic.

To participate in this study, a person must be over age 18, have at least one memorial tattoo, and have obtained the tattoo in honor of a person who constitutes a significant loss in their life. A significant loss, as defined by this study, is a loss of an immediate family member, partner, best friend, or equivalent (i.e. the death of a cousin could constitute a significant loss if the relationship with the cousin was experienced as an immediate family member or best friend).

If a person chooses to participate, they will be interviewed face to face at a mutually agreed upon time and place that is private and convenient for them. They also may be interviewed over the phone if a convenient face to face meeting time is not possible to schedule. The interviews should last between 45 minutes and one hour, and will be digitally recorded by an audio recorder. All interviews will be kept confidential and secured.

People choosing to participate will receive no financial benefit for their involvement in this study. However, they may benefit from knowing that they are contributing to knowledge about the process of grieving and the functions of tattoos in this process. They also may benefit from placing their voice within a community of people who have experienced significant loss and honored it with a tattoo.

Thank you for your assistance in helping me find participants for my study. Please contact me if you have any further questions or if you would like to refer someone for an interview.

Eliza Schiffrin  
Children's Hospital, Oakland  
747 52<sup>nd</sup> St.  
Oakland, CA 94607  
(347) XXX-XXXX  
[elizaschiffrin@gmail.com](mailto:elizaschiffrin@gmail.com)

**Appendix D**  
***Photographic Consent Form***

The undersigned does hereby authorize Eliza Schiffrin, in the completion of her Master's Thesis for Smith College School for Social Work, to photograph tattoos on their bodies that have been obtained in honor of a person who has died.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (please print)

The undersigned authorizes Eliza Schiffrin to permit the use and display of said photographs in any publication, multimedia production, or display in relation to the presentation of the research conducted in this project.

The undersigned releases and forever discharges Eliza Schiffrin and Smith College School for Social Work from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs / images, including but not limited to, any claims for invasion of privacy or defamation.

The undersigned have the right, however, to revoke their consent at any time before March 31, 2009, and, accordingly, all photographs pertaining to them will be destroyed.

Accepted and Agreed:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix E**  
***Referrals for Grief/Bereavement Counseling- SF Bay Area***

**Summit Medical Center**

Bereavement Support  
350 Hawthorne Ave. Oakland CA 94609  
510-869-6784  
Weekly bereavement support group. Sister Anne Simms

**Kaiser Permanente**

Oakland Medical Center Hospice Program  
280 West MacArthur Blvd. Oakland CA 94611  
510-596-6390 510-596-6771 fax  
Hospice services and bereavement support for Kaiser members and their families.  
Additional bereavement services are also provided by the Department of Psychiatry (510-596-1075).

**East Bay Center for Attitudinal Healing**

P. O. Box 1974-447 Berkeley CA 94707  
510-893-LOVE  
Support programs for children, adults, family members, and friends affected by grief or chronic/catastrophic illnesses. The center supplements traditional health care and sponsors a number of peer-facilitated support groups, educational workshops, and visits in the community. Based on the work of Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, the Center defines health as inner peace and healing as letting go of fear. Alternate address is 7 Van Sicklen Place., Oakland CA 94610.

**Grief Care Community**

3102 Telegraph Ave. Berkeley CA 94705  
510-540-0830  
Individual and group support for people who are grieving the death of a loved one. Groups start every eight weeks; call before attending. On-going grief, loss, and spirituality group meets weekly. Art Therapy Grief Group starts every eight weeks as well as individual art therapy available. Services available in German.

**Namaste**

P. O. Box 3680 Berkeley CA 94703  
510-547-7702 24-hour voice mail  
Emotional support peer counseling program for all persons in bereavement or with catastrophic or life-threatening illnesses. Individual peer counseling at home, in the hospital, or as arranged. Clients are matched with volunteers on a one-on-one basis to provide peer emotional support. Non-denominational program with no specific religious focus. The word Namaste is Sanskrit for "I honor the spirit within you." All services are free.

**Pacific Center for Human Growth**

2712 Telegraph Ave. Berkeley CA 94705 510-548-2192

Bereavement peer support for lesbians and gay men.

**Compassionate Friends San Francisco County Chapter**

22 Samoset St. San Francisco CA 94110

415-457-3123

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a self-help peer support organization for bereaved parents and siblings. There are hundreds of chapters world-wide. Local chapters meet to share experiences and offer support to parents who are going through the grief process. A chapter meeting is a safe place to talk about the trauma following the death of a child. Many chapters have separate meetings for surviving siblings. Free service, donations encouraged.

**Grief and Growing A Healing Weekend for Bereaved Individuals and Families**

131 Steuart Street # 460 San Francisco, CA 94105

415-543-2267 (Ann Gonski)

415-750-4197 (Rabbi Eric Weiss)

email: ann@tawonga.org email: eweiss@mzhf.org

The Grief and Growing Weekend provides support and a caring community for anyone who has lost a loved one. This annual two and a half day program is held in May at Camp Tawonga near Yosemite National Park. Professional grief specialists run workshops and facilitate support group discussions on a variety of grief-related topics. The weekend program also includes an arts and crafts program, ropes course, nature hikes, a healing service along the banks of the Tuolumne River, singing, creative writing and other activities. Grief and Growing is co-sponsored by Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Camp Taonga, Family Education Project of the Bureau of Jewish Education, Jewish Family and Children's Services and Sinai Memorial Chapel. To receive a brochure and registration information use contact information given above.

**Hospice By The Bay**

1540 Market Street, Suite 350 San Francisco CA 94102-6035

Admissions: (415) 526-5601 All hospice admissions (415) 927-2273 in Marin (415) 626-5900 in San Francisco (707) 935-7504 in Sonoma Web Site:

<http://www.hospicebythebay.org>

A non-profit hospice provider. Offers grief counseling services and bereavement support including an adult bereavement drop-in group, gay men's grief support, a grief and art workshop, adult loss of a parent, and moving meditation classes for caregivers. Sliding scale, Medicare, MediCal certified. JCAHO accredited. Hospice By The Bay was formerly known as Hospice of Marin. The coverage area for the organization includes Marin, San Francisco and Sonoma counties. The San Francisco office also provides coverage for Pacifica.

**Jewish Family and Children's Services Bereavement and Healing Program**

2150 Post Street San Francisco CA 94115 415-449-1200

Main agency number (ask for Bereavement Program) Web Site: <http://jfcs.org> Individual counseling and loss-specific individual and family bereavement groups for adults. Non-denominational. Sliding scale. This agency operates similar programs in the following cities: Palo Alto: 650-688-3030 San Rafael: 415-491-7960 Santa Rosa: 707-571-8131

**Mental Health Association of San Francisco**

1095 Market Street, Suite 408 San Francisco, CA 94104 415-241-2926

<http://www.mha-sf.org> Provides referrals to local mental health resources. Web site has a good directory of Bay Area resources for psychological support.

**Appendix F**  
***HSR Approval Letter***

March 4, 2009

Eliza Schiffrin

Dear Eliza,

Your revised documents have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are glad to give final approval to your study. I think you were wise to add the possibility of telephone interviews to increase the possibilities in recruitment.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Diana Fuery, Research Advisor