Body Piercing in the West: a Sociological Inquiry.

A research report by Susan Holtham.

The term body piercing is fairly self evident. It refers to the piercing of the body with a hollow gauge needle and the installation of surgical grade steel (or gold, titanium, surgical plastic) jewellery into the tongue, nipples, nostril, naval, lips, labia, eyebrow, ear cartilage, ear lobe, ear tragus, perineum, penis, scrotum, septum, clitoral hood and clitoris proper.

In the last decade a surge of popular interest and involvement in the permanent body modification practices of piercing and tattooing has been evident in the industrialised West (Rubin 1988, Paine 1994). This 'popular interest' manifests itself as numerous articles in popular magazines (eg. Betts 1994), as 'special features' on local current affairs television, in radio documentaries, as the theme of large-scale photographic exhibitions (see Manne 1993) and as articles in newspapers such as The Age (see Masterton 1994, Blake 1994 - among many others) which have helped to disseminate a basic knowledge and awareness of these modification practices to a larger more mainstream population. Creating a knowledge and an interest in Melbourne which has in the last five years shifted piercing out of the backrooms of adult bookstores and into heavily patronised, high-technology shop-front studios.

This research derived its impetus from the observation that what has been a highly stigmatised practice repugnant to mainstream Western society now seems to be gaining in popularity and momentum. (Although this is not intended as an analysis of the processes by which marginalised practices are co-opted into popular culture per se.) What fascinates me is what I perceive to be a new and emerging physical sensibility among the citizens of the developed nations.

Specifically, what it is about the lived experiences of modern people which leads increasing numbers of them to seek out and participate in practices long considered the domain of primitive societies.

Literature Review:
The exotic ritual practices and body ornamentation of the world's 'tribal peoples' have traditionally been the domain of cultural and social anthropology, generating and sustaining a huge body of research (eg. Stocking 1968, Blacking 1977). The focus of such attention has always been on traditional non-western societies; 'primatives', simultaneously naked and adorned, alternatively cutting and scarring the body and piercing the face. From studies of Tiv scarification to Mayan tongue piercing, anthropological inquiry is largely descriptive, couching explanations for primitive body modification practices in terms of its function and role in tribal societies (Polhemus 1978:149-173).

Rubin (1988) claims that his academic anthology Marks of Civilisation is the first systematic, cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary exploration of body modification and adornment. Marks of Civilisation purports to be global in scope, however it pays scant attention to the contemporary Western body modification practices of body piercing, focusing instead on tribal cicatrisation and tattooing.
Popular anthropological texts which feature Euro-American subjects such as Virel's (1979) Decorated Man and Robinson's (1988) Body Packaging compound this trend by portraying primitive body modification and Western adornment practices in providing scopic pleasures for a populist audience. Two recent ethnographic studies on tattooing and body piercing in contemporary America have explicitly attempted to redress this balance. Based on years of in-depth field work both Myers (1992) and Sanders (1988) are concerned with their subjects' motivation and rationale for becoming pierced and tattooed. Sanders became extensively tattooed in the seven years he spent engaged in field research. He interviewed and surveyed tattooed people and emphasises the tattoo as both a mark of disaffiliation from conventional society and as a symbolic affirmation of personal identity (Sanders 1988:395).

Myer's participant observation in ritualised SadoMasochistic group 'piercing parties' over a two year period led him to conclude that such practices fulfilled a universal human function in providing a 'rite of passage as a cultural drama' as well as providing the means by which members could proclaim their various social affinities. Myers devised eight categories to contain his subjects' rationale for their involvement in body modification practices. He describes his subjects as 'sane, successful people' in an effort to counter both the emphasis in medical and psychological literature on aberrant psychology and self-mutilation and the repugnance mainstream society feels toward his subjects' interests in the body.

Myers' conclusions are limited by the nature of his sample population and are couched in cross-cultural, trans-historical and ultimately functionalist explanations for Euro-American body modification practices. Such non-local and non contextual explanations for what appears to be a relatively recent and also increasingly popular and divergent practice in the West are ultimately unsatisfying and necessitate the examination of broader approaches to the body in sociology.

The Body in Social Theory:
Shilling (1993) describes classical sociology as being 'disembodied' because it maintains and accepts the mind/body dichotomy. In focusing on the mind as that which defines humans as social beings, classical sociology has tended to ignore the 'embodiedness' of its human subjects (1993:8). Shilling describes the body as thus having had an 'absent presence' in sociology, nurturing and informing much of its enquiry yet neglected as an object of analysis (1993:10). The traditional focus in sociology on collectivities and a fear of supporting work based on biological essentialism has contributed to the disciplines inability to adequately account for the physical body in social space (Scott and Morgan 1993:2,14).

Two broad paradigms can be identified in sociological literature pertaining to the body. The first, Shilling describes as the 'social-constructionist paradigm' (1993:10). Two theorists dominate here. Goffman (1959) focuses on social life as a shared set of bodily gestures and idioms whereas Foucault (1980) conceptualises the body in social life as the site of multiple and contesting discourses.

Social constructionist views of the body tell us about how society has 'invaded', 'shaped', 'classified' and made the body meaningful; the body is named as a theoretical space, yet this space tends to remain undertheorized.
Social constructionism thus reduces the human body to social forces (Shilling 1993:198).

The second paradigm is described by Shilling (1993) as 'naturalistic' or 'reductionist'. Here the tendency is to reduce the complexities of social life to an unchanging pre-social body which forms the biological basis for social relationships and inequalities; social categories are thus reified as natural phenomena. Naturalistic views both underestimate and overestimate the importance of the biological body to society by assuming that social phenomena can be seen as direct and unmediated products of the body and failing to perceive that social inequalities can themselves become embodied (1993:199).

Neither reductionist nor constructionist paradigms are able to adequately account for what appears to be an increase in body modification practices in the West as body piercing seems to be a social act inscribed upon a biological phenomenon.

Thus the theoretical framework adopted for this research will be the work of Chris Shilling. Shilling is attempting to create a third paradigm he describes as a 'foundationalist' view of the body. Shilling argues that the human body is most profitably conceptualised as an unfinished biological phenomena which is taken up and transformed as a result of participation in society (1993:12).

What emerges from the literature review as crucial to this research is the need to contextualize the practice of body piercing within its location and place in history. Previous research has erroneously concluded that body-piercing serves universal functions by comparing and conflating piercing practices from pre and post industrialised countries as 'remarkably similar' (Myers 1992:16).

What seems evident is that in traditional societies, ritual body modification practices connect people and their bodies to the reproduction of long established social positions whereas in the industrialised West body piercing seems to serve the function of individuating the self from society. The work of Giddens (1991) and Turner (1991) on modernity and self-identity is invaluable in understanding this paradox. Turner identifies and highlights four broad historical factors in the West he argues contribute to the rise of the body as a 'self-reflexive project for modern people' in the period of time he conceptualises as 'high modernity' (1991:19-22). Giddens uses such concepts as 'lifestyle' to describe the 'integrated set of practices chosen by individuals to give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity' (1991:81).

Giddens (1991) argues that as the dominant discourses of religion, family duties and hard work lose currency at the close of the twentieth century, modern people are attempting to construct a 'narrative of self' upon all that seems to remain solid and tangible: their physical bodies (1991:225). Considered in this context an upsurge in hitherto 'primitive' body modification practices among modern people can be aligned with the dominant discourses and pre-occupations of mainstream society in physical health and fitness.

Where Giddens and Turner provide a broad historical and theoretical context with which to account for the rise of body piercing in the West, Rubin, a social anthropologist, documents in loving detail the rise in popularity and the evolution of tattooing in the West. While not concerned with body-piercing per se the trajectory is arguably similar. Rubin (1994) contends that the 'tattoo renaissance' in the West was bought about by the professionalization of the
practice; with increasing access to high quality tattoo resources hitherto excluded groups of the middle class and women became involved, helping to lessen the stigma on tattooing, thus broadening its appeal (1994:233).

A common and enduring theme throughout much of the literature is the impact piercing the body has on both an individual's self identity and feelings of group affiliation. Sanders (1988) writes of tattoos providing 'social cues' between people, and of his subjects marking themselves with 'indelible symbols of what they see themselves to be (1988:426)'. Paine (1994) echoes this sentiment with his analysis of body piercing as part of the fashion system. Paine argues that piercing provides the means for an individual to 'attempt to forge a genuine mode of self-exploration which does not rely on the current authenticating narratives of fashion (1994:14)'. There are two important reasons for this research. The first is that it will attempt to fill a gap in the literature. Despite an exponential increase in recent sociological writing on human embodiment and various body modification and adornment practices specifically (eg. body building: Mansfield 1993, tattooing: Sanders 1988, 'style': Faurchou 1988) there is a paucity of literature pertaining specifically to body piercing practices in Western countries.

Secondly, the medium of the human body has a unique capacity as the focal point for the integration of extremely individual and at the same time extremely collective levels of experience (Polhemus 1978:27). This study may then serve as a vehicle for furthering an understanding of how objective and subjective, individual and collective experiences are integrated in everyday reality. These data may thus yield valuable insights into the increasingly individual 'life-worlds' of contemporary citizens of the West. They may also contribute to a project which is gaining momentum in sociology (see Featherstone et al, 1991, Scott and Morgan 1993): attempting to provide the theoretical apparatus to adequately 'account' for the body in the social world. In order to avoid repeating Myers' (1992) ethnographic 'thick description' of body modification practices in contemporary America this research has identifiably different theoretical objectives. This study moves beyond Myers' research parameters in an effort to contextualize what appears to be an upswing in body modification practices in the West. Specifically asking: why at this moment in history are the modern people of the industrialised nations indulging in body modification practices formally the domain of the world's primitive peoples?

Method:
This research builds on a fairly recent trend in Sociology, where the study of marginalised communities and/or practices is initiated and undertaken by members of those same communities (eg. the work of lesbian and gay theorists of the seventies which has since given way to research endeavours by those representing a plurality of sexualities). Following Paine (1994), Rubin (1988), Vale and Juno (1988), Sanders (1988) and Myers (1992) I write about body piercing from an 'insiders' perspective. As someone who has been involved in piercing and tattooing from a young age I cannot claim critical distance from either my subject or my informants. However, Fetterman (1989) argues that every researcher begins with biases and preconceived notions of how people think and act, and to mitigate the negative effects of bias the ethnographer must first make specific biases explicit (1989:11). This is my
particular bias: I don't perceive piercing, scarring or tattooing the body to be an abhorrent or mutilating practice. Despite a gradual and observable shift into the mainstream, body piercing still has residual connotations of deviance. Thus access to valid data may be difficult or impossible for an 'outsider', as the relatively short time frame of this study precludes the groundwork necessary to establish trust and rapport between the 'outsider-researcher' and the population under study (Fetterman 1989:18).

This research has been designed with my position in mind and attendant ready access to a group of 'piercees'. The data gathering instruments will generate data which can be qualitatively analysed. Although a quantifiable demographic profile of 'piercees' would be invaluable, any attempt to glean reliable data about an individual's status as a mainstream or as a marginalised person would probably be considered too invasive.

After Sanders (1988), I have a two pronged approach to data gathering: in-depth interviewing and a short written questionnaire. These research instruments were chosen both for their expediency and for their fundamental role in generating qualitative primary data. The time constraints of this project mean that it is not an ethnography per se, but an ethnographically styled report. I am hoping to maintain however, the emphasis in ethnographic research on preserving and detailing the 'emic' ('natives' perspective) of my informants in tandem with the etic - grounded theory. Ethnography - the art and science of describing a group or culture - has been selected as the mode of this research because its inductive, holistic nature allows for multiple interpretations of reality and alternative readings of data (Fetterman 1989:12).

The Interviews:
I conducted and recorded in-depth interviews with three people currently working as body piercers in Melbourne. At the beginning of the interviewing process I had little idea of what information I needed to elicit, and thus the first two interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Using the inductive approach I hoped the data from my interviewees would aid in the generation of a theory, or number of theories about body piercings move from the marginalised to the popular. The three piercers interviewed were nominated as the 'key informants' in this research, as they are the facilitators of the practice and thus the 'gatekeepers of knowledge'. Fetterman (1989) contends that key informants are able to provide a 'macro' picture of the culture or practice under study and can thus help synthesise the researcher's observations (1989:50).

The sample was thus 'purposive'. I hoped the face-to-face interviews would provide the kind of valuable non-verbal cues and denotative information impossible to glean from the written surveys. As well as establishing the required trust and friendship I needed to have access to the walk-in clientele at a local body piercing studio for surveying purposes.

The Written Survey:
The written survey was designed to hold interest and be 'user friendly'. Questions were grouped under the headings 'past', 'present' and 'future' in a ploy to make respondents feel as if they were documenting an aspect of the narrative of their lives. The data I wanted to elicit formed the 'micro-picture' - explicitly individual experiences of being pierced. The questions are all open ended and designed to glean information about personal identity and group
affiliation without actually stating my specific interest. It is hoped that data
from the interviews with the piercers can be 'triangulated' with the data from
the surveys of the piercees in an effort to test the quality of both sources of
information.
Respondents were primarily the customers of a local body piercing studio.
The sampling method was snowball in tandem with a purposive one. These
methods were necessary because the 'piercing population' are impossible to
quantify, often indiscernible from the larger population, and rarely 'capturable'
in any one locale. An individual was deemed suitable for participation in this
project if they had one or more non-mainstream piercings in their body.
The key variable was the piercing itself, the definition of a 'non- mainstream'
piercing was operationalized as any piercing other than one or more small
unstretched ear-lobe piercings.

The Cyber Survey:
'Posted' by modem to a talk group on the World Wide Web called
Rec.arts.bodyart the 'cyber survey' was a copy of the ink and paper survey
with an altered introduction proclaiming my status as an insider in the
practice. This was essential in order to allay the inevitable suspicion about my
motives and interests in the piercing practices of 'Rabiters' (regular
contributors to the talk group) as a novice 'poster' to what is a fairly tight and
active group. The sampling method was a thus a 'voluntary' one; replies were
requested to be sent to my private E-mail address.
There were problems in the data arising from my research design. My written
survey didn't elicit enough detail or the type of information I was hoping for to
be able to extrapolate ideas about group and personal identity from. The
'purposive' sampling method was problematic as was the wording and
circumspect nature of the survey questions, some of which may have seemed
ludicrous to my respondents - eighty-five per cent of who had visible facial
piercings - such as 'who knows about your piercings?' and 'who doesn't know'.

Results:
The Interviews:
I came to regard the three piercers as 'exemplars' of the practice, in that they
each embodied the practice of piercing as a profound lived experience - as a
life-style. Bill and George (and Louise to a lesser extent) are visibly heavily
pierced. In their roles as proprietors of the two professional piercing studios in
Melbourne they act as facilitators of the practice; the environments they have
created both sets the tone and guides the experience for their clients.
Bill has extensive experience with the original Californian piercing
conglomerate 'Gauntlet' who claim to have originated and customised the
practice (a move from the primitive to the modern) in the States and who now
export their jewellery and piercing knowledge world-wide. Bill claims that
piercing is 'huge' in the U.S. but that as a fashion it is already on the decline.
Louise has a differing emphasis on her personal interest in body piercing than
do Bill and George. Louise first became pierced in the context of a
commitment ceremony with a lover, and says she enjoys her piercings
because they're sexually stimulating and make her feel positive about her
body as well as providing pleasure for herself and those around her.
Whereas Bill de-emphasises the sexual aspect of body piercing and says his
involvement is to do with 'the mapping of his own history and personal
evolution'. The many piercings and tattoos he wears having a 'synergistic
effect on his life’, facilitating an 'alternative spirituality'. Bill and George emphasise what they call the 'tribal aesthetic' in both their own bodies and in their piercing studio in an effort to 'honour the tribal roots of body piercing'. George's interest in piercing stems from what he describes as 'the desire to experience his mind and body on different levels and thus become more self-aware.'

Louise describes the demand for professional piercing services in Melbourne as having 'gone through the roof' in the last three years. Her business began as a two hour service on a Saturday afternoon above a gay male adult bookstore in 1990 and has since expanded to two studios in Melbourne and Sydney, with six piercing staff working full-time six days a week. Louise credits the phenomenal rise in interest in body piercing to a range of factors. Predominantly the increased visibility of piercing having a kind of 'flow-on' effect as new people become aware of the options available to them to augment their bodies. Louise also performs many piercings as part of commitment ceremonies and ritual acts of submission or attachment. She also senses in her clientele a general move toward 'reclaiming their bodies and taking pleasure in the look and feel of the piercing'. The three interviewees all credit the rise of interest in body piercing in part to do with a general disaffection with the governing narratives of our lives. Specifically, Louise thinks many of her clients are 'on the search, searching for meaning, and for feelings of belonging to something larger than themselves that isn't religious'.

All three informants spoke of having pierced 'all types of people, of all ages from every profession'. Louise claims that customers are no longer of a predictable 'type', however her customers are predominantly interested in facial piercings. George says the majority of his customers are under twenty-five and interested in the 'socially acceptable' piercings of the naval and nostril.

The Survey: Eighteen men and fifteen women completed and returned the written questionnaire, N=33. Eight of these came by E-mail. The majority of returned 'cyber surveys' were from the U.S. Mean age of respondents was twenty-five, range in ages was twelve to sixty-five.

What I was attempting to elicit with the surveys was a comprehensive and holistic picture of how piercing figured in my respondents' lives. Many themes emerged from piercees' answers to the all important 'what motivates you to do it?' question, which echo some of the findings of Myer (1992) and Sanders (1988) as well as the insights of the 'exemplars' of the piercing world: the piercers. (See table 2 for a statistical breakdown of respondents' reasons for becoming pierced).

1. Respondents' relationship to their body.

All but five respondents reported feeling their body had 'changed' after having being pierced. This usually entailed a change in their feelings about their bodies and themselves; eg. 'it made me feel I could do anything', 'I feel more attractive and self-aware', 'invisible piercings give me an inner confidence'. Other respondents wrote of their piercing practices having to do with issues of control over their bodies. Two women write:
'I really like the way my body looks a lot better now. I have been a heavy person all my life and my body felt out of my control. Body modification is totally within my control'.

'I do not have a spectacular body, my husband quite rightly calls me a telephone pole with lumps. I think that my (nipple and clitoral hood) rings add to my being a woman'.

Another young woman writes of how she uses piercing:

(It's been) done at times when I felt like I needed to ground myself. Sometimes I feel like I'm not in my body - that's when its time. Also, my clitoral hood pierce has meant that my vagina is no longer a taboo area for me.'

2. Sexual enhancement:
Piercing the body to heighten the experience of sex is a common theme which fuels popular interest in the practice and is often the way in which piercing services are 'sold' to the public. In this sample group sexual enhancement was the second most frequent rationale given for piercing the body.

One American women in her sixties writes:

'In forty-three plus years I have become a woman who is prone to waken her husband in the small hours and initiate the dance that leaves us both exhausted and at peace with our world. Would I be so demanding without my rings? Don't hold your breath waiting for me to remove them to find out'.

This survey only attracted two (of thirty-three) respondents who were interested in piercing as part of sado-masochistic body play.

3. Symbolic power.
Some respondents imbued private acts of piercing with symbolic power capable of reclaiming previous experiences of powerlessness. One twenty-eight year old woman frames her decision to recently have her nostril pierced as a response to her experience of becoming a mother at eighteen:

'the experience of being a young mother is in part why I chose to get my nose done....I felt trapped by others' expectations, the piercing was a way of pushing through my own desires to deal with in myself the power of the systems that be...and my desire to refuse to conform.'

Another young American woman writes that her piercings...

seem to take place after an unpleasant event... I guess as my way of getting some pleasure out of the situation. The first tongue piercing marked six months after having been raped and symbolized my inability to speak about the event.'
4. Ritual purposes and significant events.
For others body piercing served the function of indelibly marking in the flesh significant events in their lives. In the words of one man:

'Each time I was pierced it was to mark the profound moments in my life. My first fuck, the first death of a close friend, mental well-health.

Another heavily pierced respondent spoke of his most significant piercing experience to be his two heavy gauge guiche (perineum) piercings performed as his partner was in labour the night their son was born. Another couple pierced each other's navels on their second anniversary.

5. Enjoying the process, liking the look: aesthetics and pleasure.
Thirty-seven percent of the reasons given for becoming pierced were to do with enjoying the process and liking the look. Respondents spoke of the 'thrill' and 'rush' of the actual moment of the piercing as well as enjoying playing with the healed pierce and adorning their bodies with jewellery.

6. Tribalism:
Only one young woman couched her interest in piercing in its primitive and tribal origins:

'People with body piercings represent a strength - tribal... a symbol of going through an experience and surviving...the piercing is a physical manifestation of it.'

7. Non-conformity.
Many respondents were conscious of their desire to rebel against the mainstream and aware of the power of visible piercings to shock and disturb those they encountered. One man wrote of the reaction to his tongue pierce:

'a couple of people have screamed, one man passed out when he saw it'.

Others write of friends' and strangers' disbelief at the size of their stretched ear-lobe holes and the courtesy they show aged relatives by disguising their body modifications when visiting. When asked if they thought they were perceived differently by friends or strangers after becoming pierced the majority of respondents replied yes -and no. One man sums up neatly:

Those that know me see it as entirely in character. Strangers do perceive me differently, or I imagine they do, from the amount of time they spend talking to my eyebrow.

The majority of respondents were interested in other body modification practices, many planned to become tattooed (if they weren't already) and some were curious about cutting and branding. All but three of those surveyed considered their acquired piercings to be permanent, having made 'a commitment to them'. Which suggests that piercing the body is not simply a fashion destined to be discarded by the mainstream as its popularity wanes but something more enduring and integral to these respondents' perceptions of self.
Few respondents' wrote about piercing in terms of group affiliation or belonging. Although from my 'hanging around' at a local piercing studio it was apparent that people were arriving with relatively large crowds of their peers to either be supported through their experience or to be pierced as a group. (Such as the four young police cadets who rocked into Nomad one Saturday asking for a group discount on four navel piercings).

An examination of which parts of the body are being chosen for piercing may offer insights into this phenomenon (see table 1). A staggering eighty-five percent of respondents were wearing (all or some of) their non-mainstream piercings in their faces or ears. One in four of those surveyed also had a navel pierce - usually worn to be 'shown off' - which suggests that respondents' piercing practices are - consciously or unconsciously - to do with the projection of a 'self' which requires an audience of some kind.

**Discussion:**

The completed surveys reveal a major flaw in my methodology. The majority of respondents had very little to write about their personal experiences of piercing, this was probably due in part to the fact that they were approached by me (in the manner of a purposive sample) to participate in my research, and often had little time to consider the questions or little interest in the process. I managed to elicit far richer data from the cyber survey, as those who volunteered to participate in my research were much more interested and had information they were keen to share.

The sampling method meant that respondents were skewed toward those who were either visibly pierced, or newly pierced, or were friends of Bill and George and keen to hang out and be seen in a groovy shop-front piercing studio. Which has implications for the demographic of this sample, away from the 'quietly pierced' or the 'long-time pierced' toward the predominantly young, 'hip' and visibly pierced.

Also, seven of the thirteen questions allowed (but didn't encourage) simple yes or no answers; which I unfortunately received in abundance. (The two 'pilot questionaries' were filled out very adequately by people known to me and thus I didn't anticipate this problem).

Thus the survey data collected can be said to have problems of poor validity. The survey instrument was unable to elicit either the depth or type of information required (with some very notable exceptions). Questions I hoped would reveal information about community affiliation (are the people you know interested in piercing too?, are your piercings visible or shown off?) were a total wash-out. Also, less than half of survey respondents reported having had any significant experiences around piercing.

This research would have benefited greatly by a modified written survey containing questions specifically asking for an individual's social affiliations as well as asking how their piercing practices impacted on their personal identity. Each question would need to contain various probes for detailed explanations. To shape further research (as Myers did with his participant observation at SM piercing parties) into a study of those for whom piercing was a significant part of their lives and personal make-up, the most successful sampling style is the 'volunteer' method. With surveys either left on a studio counter to be filled in and returned at a respondent's leisure or a request for respondents such as posting to a talk group on the World Wide Web. Upon collection of the
written data, those with the most eloquent, interesting or divergent responses could be approached with a request for a face-to-face interview.

Crucial to the analysis of qualitative ethnographic research is the process of 'triangulation' - comparing and contrasting different sources and modes of gathered information to test for possible third variables and alternative 'explanations'.

The body piercers, Louise, George and Bill, all bought to their personal involvement in becoming pierced the desire for intense physical states upon which they could build and experience some kind of heightened awareness. For Louise this was bound up with her sexuality; the practice embedded her into a sexual community interested in sex as body play and consensual 'performance'.

George and Bill couch their piercing practices in terms of a 'lifestyle', or more importantly as part of what they regard as a movement toward what has been described as 'modern primitivism' - the harking back to something more 'basic' and fundamental in human nature: pain, ritual, a concern with the processes of the body and exploration of different levels of consciousness and physical experience. (See Juno and Vale's excellent non-academic ethnographic anthology Modern Primitives.) It is upon this common interest in adorning and modifying the body that small affiliational communities - or tribes - of 'modern primitives' have developed in the wealthy, industrialised Western nations.

Very few in this sample group of piercees (N=33) couched their personal interest in piercing in the terms of either sexualized body-play (as distinct from general sexual enhancement) or as part of what Bill described as a movement toward the 'retribalization of the planet'. What has emerged from the survey instrument (however flawed) which is beneficial for my research question is the lack of significance many of those surveyed bring to their involvement in what has been until very recently a highly inaccessible and stigmatised practice. However, the experiences of the piercers may be seen as the foregrounding or the making explicit and conscious of what could be the larger more generalised and 'subterranean' mood of their clients.

Body piercing in the West has moved out of its places of inception - away from the invitation-only SM piercing parties, the bikers' conventions, the private referral-only gay male piercing service - firmly into the domain of the popular. It has metamorphosed into an affordable, regulated, competitive and visible service industry. But why now, as we approach the millennium, are growing numbers of affluent, modern people choosing to undergo painful body adornment and modification practices which may appear to others to be lifted straight from the pages of National Geographic?

Turner (1991), Giddens (1991) and Shilling (1993) document the historic factors they claim are responsible for the meteoric rise in emphasis and attention given to the body in modern social systems. Significant to this research is Shillings' (1993, after Giddens 1991) description of how people in modern developed societies attempt to build and sustain a self identity. Shilling argues that the erosion of grand religious and scientific narratives in the latter half of this century has undermined traditional meaning systems, stimulating in modern people a heightened reflexivity about life, meaning and death (1993:2). The decline of those frameworks which tended to support existential and ontological securities residing outside of the individual and the massive rise of the body in consumer culture as the bearer of symbolic value.
has meant that modern people place an increasing importance on the body as constitutive of the self (Shilling 1993:3). Thus the modern individual's sense of self identity is reflexively understood in terms of their own embodied biography; the self and the body have become reflexively organised projects, arranged and performed against the backdrop of a complex plurality of choices (Shilling 1993:4,181). Shilling argues that in the affluent West the tendency is for the body to be seen as a malleable entity which is 'unfinished' and always 'becoming'.

As 'the self' has been conflated with the appearances of the surfaces of the body then adorning the body can be assumed to occupy an increasingly important role in an individual's identity (1993:5). Considered in this way the 'taking up' of body piercing in the West by growing numbers of modern people can be seen as part of this highly reflexive process of inscribing the surfaces of the body in order to delineate and project some kind of visible, tangible identity.

As human embodiment is at the very centre of nature / culture and biology / society divisions then taking the body seriously in sociology can be seen as central to widening the scope of the discipline (Shilling 1993:29). Further study of the body within the popular could usefully attend to themes of personal identity construction; specifically how particular embodied practices orient individuals in their lives and how those practices enter into the construction of social relations. An intriguing avenue of research has been suggested by Shilling (1993) who contends that the emphasis many individuals' place on their bodies as constitutive of the self can be seen as an attempt to retain some form of power in an increasingly complex world and thus serves as a retreat from the 'world-building' activity that is imperative to meaningful participation in social systems (1993:182).

**Conclusion**

The relationship between the piercing practices of traditional societies and modern individuals is paradoxical. In traditional societies piercing practices serve to enculturate and socialise the otherwise 'mute' body, whereas in the West piercing the body is a much more deliberative and reflexive process, often bound up with an individual's desire to separate the self from society. What seems doubly paradoxical is that as Western people appropriate, customise and participate in hitherto tribal practices in response to what is described as 'a loss of governing narratives', those same tribal people are giving up their interest in inscribing their own bodies as their governing narratives are subsumed by Western ideals of progress, technology and consumption (Rubin 1988:15).

What seems evident is that while trends and patterns in piercees' rationale and motivation for becoming (and continuing to become) pierced are demonstrable, piercing the body is a practice upon which individuals bring a range of desires and multifarious meanings. From committing to a partner to 'liking the look' to wanting to reclaim an experience or 'piss off' one's parents to mapping one's journey through life to extending and intensifying orgasm. The practice itself has only residual connotations of meaning which are steadily being eroded as it moves into the mainstream. As the denotative power of the practice fractures and becomes diffuse piercing the body can serve only as an experience. In this age of simulacrum piercing the body
serves as an authentic experience, one that cannot be simulated, one which is yours and yours alone to embue with meaning as you require.

References:

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