

## **TRANSIENT BODIES, PLIABLE FLESH: CULTURE, STRATIFICATION, AND BODY MODIFICATION**

**Abstract:** Body modification practices have become increasingly common in contemporary American society. In 2005 alone approximately 3.5 million individuals underwent some type of cosmetic surgical procedure. Similarly, it is estimated that twenty-four percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 50 years-old have tattoos, while fourteen percent have body piercings. Drawing upon Shilling's (1993) notion of the "body project" which suggests that within capitalist, consumer society, the body has become an object to be worked at as a means of accomplishing individual identity, this research endeavors to understand how and why individuals navigate the cultural norms and ideals pertaining to physical (aesthetic) appearance in relation to their own sense of personal identity. I explore more specifically the structural, socio-demographic, and ideological differences and similarities between individuals who engage in socially transgressive practices (tattooing, body piercing) and those who engage in socially sanctioned and increasingly legitimate practices (cosmetic surgery). These questions, and the comparative analyses I undertake, both cross-cut and are rooted in broader sociological concerns regarding questions about the body, social stratification, cultural conformity, and deviance. First, using TextAnalyst, I analyze mainstream media accounts of both cosmetic surgery as well as body piercing and tattooing. This provides a backdrop for understanding modification practices are understood and received within the broader society. Second, I conducted in-depth interviews with members of two specific populations: respondents who have modified their bodies through tattooing/piercing and those who have done so through cosmetic surgery. These qualitative chapters speak to the role of the body and its manipulation within consumer culture, the decreasing stigma attached to all types of modification, and the stratification and status-oriented processes evident among people who engage in modification. Moreover, my results highlight how: (1) traditional associations between modification and social class status have become somewhat less salient over time; (2) gendered expectations, while less constraining and overt, figure prominently in how individuals choose to engage in their respective body projects and respond to the projects of others; (3) social connections often directly influence whether or not one decides to engage in modification practices; and (4) processes traditionally associated with the lower-class, such as tattooing, have diffused throughout the population more quickly than those more associated with, and legitimated within, upper-class stratum.