

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE STRETCHED EARLOBE PIERCING AS SITE



by Paul King

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express appreciation for the guidance from Matthew Kennedy, Joshua Craze, Laurence Cohen, Arpita Roy, and Justin Underhill. He offers his deepest gratitude to the research participants for their generosity of time and trust.

ABSTRACT

“Sweet Gauges!” is an ethnography of the stretched earlobe piercing as a site of investigation. Often, social scientists attempt to assign “fixed identities.” These are inscribed onto individuals within designated social groups in a way that seeks to support the scientists’ theoretical claims. Research of body modification practices often inductively simplifies an entire range of corporeal processes into an over-generalized in-group signifier. I wish to elucidate a more comprehensive perspective of the individual from a more focused site of the body. What are the ideas that stretched earlobes communicate about one’s identity? How successful are these transmissions within and outside one’s social groups? Most importantly, how do intended communications and their corresponding interpretations change over time? This paper explores the subtleties and the complexities of the changing significations of stretched earlobe piercing for individuals, especially when positioned with self-identified social groups, authority figures, and random strangers. It finds that over time individuals with stretched ears transition through various and sometimes overlapping social roles and social groups. In-depth interviews revealed varied and complex experiences with unique insights into understandings of selfhood, agency, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, many of which are divergent from categorical tropes of “self-mutilation.”

Keywords: body piercing, stretched earlobes, enlarged earlobes, gauged earlobes, gauges, body modification, modern primitives, earlobe piercing, ear piercing, body art.

THE STRETCHED EARLOBE PIERCING AS SITE

Since the early 1990s, the phrase ‘body piercing’ has become widely known in Western popular culture. This term encompasses all forms of the mechanical process of perforating the skin’s surface to install jewelry. However, among people living in the United States, the earlobe is a unique piercing site. An examination of the history of pierced earlobes in the U.S. reveals it as a corporeal site embodied with changing ideas about naturalness, privilege, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class.

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the stretching of earlobe piercings. The physiology of an enlarged earlobe piercing resists seasonal fashion trends and behavioral normative shifts. Unlike the immediacy of piercing, sustained stretching cannot be impulsive. Stretching requires an enduring commitment of time, care, and often finances. Usually this process takes years to reach the exceptionally large sizes, those that allow for gazing through the earlobe.¹ With the larger stretched earlobes, to change one’s mind and reverse the process requires expensive surgery.

Often, social scientists attempt to assign “fixed identities.” These are inscribed onto individuals within designated social groups in a way that seeks to support the scientists’ theoretical claims. With few exceptions, social science research inductively simplifies an entire range of corporeal processes into an over-generalized, in-group signifier. However, from a diachronic perspective, individuals with stretched ears transition through various and sometimes overlapping social roles and social groups.

I interviewed 16 people for this paper. In total, I collected approximately 60 pages of transcript, which spanned 30 hours of conversation. I talked to friends, colleagues, and strangers. This sample includes diverse ethnicities from a spectrum of young and old, males, females, and one self-identified sexually indeterminate individual.

From a more focused site of the body, I wish to elucidate a more comprehensive perspective of the individual by asking several questions: What are the ideas that stretched earlobes communicate about one’s identity? How successful are these transmissions within and outside one’s social groups? Most importantly, how do intended communications and their corresponding interpretations change over time? This paper explores the

subtleties and complexities of the changing significations of the stretched earlobe piercing for individuals when positioned with self-identified social groups, authority figures, and random strangers.

THE AMERICAN PIERCED EARLOBE

This research emphasizes the variable of time. Symbolic meanings shift with time. To gain an understanding of the significance of the stretched earlobe piercing as a symbol for an individual, for an intended audience, and for an unintended audience, the symbol and the individual must be considered together within the historical context of relevant social norms of ear piercing, status, gender, and sexuality.

Today, for a vast majority of Americans, females with pierced ears are acceptable. Data vary widely; however, somewhere up to 80% of adult American females have had their ears pierced (Laumann et al., 2006). Since 1974, Inverness’ piercing stud guns have pierced 400 million earlobes (“Customer Service FAQs,” 2012). Inverness is just one of several major piercing gun manufacturers. Their statistics provide a sense of the prevalence of earlobe piercing today.

“I started stretching in 2003–2004. It mirrors like when I got my ears pierced when I was 15; it was something I saw happening, something I thought was attractive, and something I wanted to be a part of.”

However, the “normal” pierced earlobe has been subject to cycles of fluctuating acceptance. The most significant shift of social norms for pierced ears in the last 100 years began a few days prior to

June 2, 1953. Queen Elizabeth II had her ears pierced to wear the heirloom regalia during her coronation. This highly publicized affair was seminal in changing public opinion (Wruck, 1980, p. 193). In 1957, *Life* magazine ran an article on the new fad of ear piercing that had spread to America from the United Kingdom. Prior to this, females with earlobe piercings were negatively viewed through the prevailing dominant social norms as low class, sexually promiscuous, non-white, and foreign (Wruck, p. 84–90). However, by the 1960s, mainstream magazines such as *Time*, *ABCs of Beauty*, *Ladies’ Circle*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Glamour* enthusiastically encouraged women and girls to pierce their earlobes (Wruck, p. 192).

For Becky and Morgan, pierced ears signaled to the world that they were females. Neither of these two women knows each other, although both share a strikingly similar childhood story. At the age of nine (for Becky in 1994, and for Morgan in 1983), they experienced responses of gender confusion from strangers. They had

¹ [Download](#) Chart 1 for a categorization of stretched earlobe sizes.



received short haircuts, preferred to wear pants, and had not yet developed the secondary sexual characteristics of puberty. Morgan's gender-ambiguous first name added to strangers' confusion. Both of their mothers decided having the young girls' ears pierced would clarify for all that their children were not little boys. For Morgan, the piercing was a sweet victory. Morgan had wanted to get her ears pierced previously, but her mom had forbidden it until she was in high school. For Morgan's family, the social pressure to have their child accurately and clearly signal gender normalcy took priority over their values and ideas of age appropriateness for this feminine, sensuous display. For Becky, the experience was somewhat traumatic: "I screamed and cried; the experience was awful... I didn't want to do it and was pushed into it."

For males, historical trends of acceptability and meaning have been markedly different. Dr. Samuel Steward(1990), author and professor-turned-tattooist, reports of only thugs and sailors with pierced ears, as well the subsection of homosexual men who fetishized and emulated these hyper-masculine males. Following the 1953 release of *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando, Steward marks a noticeable increase in homosexual men requesting tattoos

while wearing biker leather and a single earring (p. 92). During the 1960s, the incidence of males with pierced earlobes increased in marginalized groups such as homosexuals and bikers. However, in actual numbers, male earlobe piercing remained rare.

The initial challenges to the popular culture and the dominant social structures which defined the 1960s, strengthened and spread in the 1970s. The mainstream media started to take notice of males with pierced earlobes in the Gay liberation and Punk Rock movements. During the 1960s, East Coast Gays and West Coast Gays had opposite in-group signifiers for dominant and passive roles within sexual relations. Accessories such as bandanas, keys, and earrings worn on the left or right could mean a "top" or a "bottom" sexual role preference depending on locality. By the mid-1970s, most American Gay males agreed that a right ear piercing signified you were publicly "out." Some in the straight world started to say: "Left is right, right is wrong." By the early 1980s, males started to pierce both earlobes. This remained risky. A single lobe piercing on the "wrong" side, might be interpreted as "Gay," but having both ears pierced violated widely entrenched gendered visual cues. With the growing occurrence among high profile music and sport celebrities in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, a more general acceptance gradually built for both or either male lobes being pierced. Jody tells of his experience:

It was my 15th birthday; I had my left ear pierced, in the mall at Spenser's gifts, with a gun. It was a gold stud in my left ear. This was the mid to late 80s [1988]. At that time, it was very important that I got my ear pierced because it was

what my peers were doing, but it wasn't peer pressure. It was a popular mythology that if you got your left ear pierced you'd not be seen as a homosexual. My dad had his left ear pierced. My desire to have it done was more a reflection of the male kids I was hanging with and male celebrities like George Michaels and Prince. I had both ears pierced by like 3 years later; it was the early 90s. The right ear was definitely after I moved out of the house, after turning 18. It was a statement for me, part of my coming out process, and certainly from that it was how I expressed my sexuality, because I knew I'd be identified as gay.

Jody's story implies a more personal definition of peer pressure, which probably is similar to coercion. However, social norms and role models clearly influence his choices.

When the earlobe piercing is contextualized with personal experiences and historical writings, broader understandings begin to take shape. The sociologist Victoria Pitts (2003) has recognized that "instead of one truth of the body or of ontology, there are competing truths that are productions of time, place, space, geography, and culture" (p. 28).

EXPANDING HOLES

Stretching is the most common method for the enlargement of the healed channel of scar tissue or fistula known as a "piercing." Stretching is a gradual process. Depending on the method, the tissue's condition, and the individual's preference, stretching up one size in the established category can take seconds or days.² Allowing for the ear piercing to heal and produce more skin cells generally takes several months. It can take many months, or even years, to get to a size that registers with an on-

² [Download](#) Chart 1 for an example of the established size categories.

looker's gaze as outside of the ordinary.³ Drawing from Roy Baumeister's and P.L. Callero's earlier works, the sociologist Lisiunia Romanienko (2011) distinguishes piercings that are exposed and readily available to the public gaze, such as the enlarged earlobe, as a "public self-symbolizer." The individual with a public self-symbolizing piercing asserts self-autonomy of his or her body while simultaneously opening oneself to unpredictable visual, verbal, and sometimes physical responses of approval or disapproval from others. In contrast, piercings as "private symbols" are covered by clothing, which allows the pierced individual some control in selecting who may know of and when another may gaze at the piercing (Romanienko, 2011, p. 5). My interview with Brian illustrates the dichotomy of private versus public self-symbolizers:

I pierced my lobes when I was 17 [1991], but they were not my first piercings...I'd seen magazines of tribal/traditional peoples. I was pushing my limits and piercing my genitals and nipples just to have the intense experience. In an area like Atlanta, [with] the moral majority, the Southern Bible belt, there is going to be people rebelling against that. I didn't do my lobes first because I lived in a town where I got shit for long hair already. I ended up getting more shit for having my hair long than pierced ears. I pierced my ears after I felt I had already undergone some rites of passage. Before I pierced my ears, I wasn't ready to talk about it publicly. Piercing was attractive in a sensual, not necessarily sexual way, and [in] a self-reliance [way], in terms of

what you need in your character to be able to step off that bridge, to stand in front of people and say this is who I am...

Even as a teenager, Brian's experience reveals a complex series of "who I am" explorations. Both private and public self-symbolizers work as part of a continuous process for testing ideas of the self and the self's place in society.

Brian studied magazines for alternatives to non-Western styles and significations of body adornment. Prior to the 1970s, public self-symbolizing piercings that were unconventional in size, in gender, or in quantity, were extremely rare. The "self-made freak" Rasmus Neilson, a circus sideshow performer, is one of the only known examples in American history. From the 1930s through the 1950s, Rasmus toured extensively with Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey circuses, and Ripley's Believe It or Not. His act included swinging 10-pound hammers from the rings through his distended earlobes. His act was seen by tens of thousands of people and influenced some of the earliest pioneers of the modern body piercing movement. In 1977, the periodical *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* (PFIQ) disseminated images of stretched earlobes to a broader, receptive audience. In one of the earliest issues, Fakir Musafar coined the phrase "Modern Primitive." Vale's and Juno's book *RE/Search Modern Primitives* (1989) coalesced a loose network of individuals exploring identity, spirituality, art, and sexuality through their bodies, into a bona fide movement. Musafar and other Modern Primitives describe their practices as reverent of other cultures and as an integrative narrative for

a self-determined aesthetic beauty and spirituality through engagement with and manipulation of the body. For many, Modern Primitivism is seen as an alternative to dominant norms of sacred naturalness and/or the intrinsic sinfulness of the body. Pitt (2003) notes some academics criticize Modern Primitives as privileged white Westerners, exoticizing and even symbolically colonizing the third world. Pitt and others contend: "Rather than establishing believable 'tribal' identities and communities, the gestures of modern primitivism call into question the fixity of identity as such" (p. 133).

Late 1993 marks the rise of the significantly enlarged earlobe piercing among non-indigenous peoples of the United States. It transitioned from an individual's action, as practiced by less than a dozen people, to a collective behavior, as practiced by thousands.⁴ Blake Perlingieri (2003) and Kristian White teamed together to open Nomad's in San Francisco. Nomad's was the first shop to specialize in enlarging earlobe pierc-



³ The objective is to apply pressure to the cells of the walls of the scar tissue. Under the proper amount of such stress, the tissue does not tear, but rather generates more cells. An analogous process occurs with weight gain or pregnancy.

⁴ In this case, significantly enlarged earlobe piercing means greater than ¾".



ings. They fostered relationships with local artisans to produce large earrings for a fledgling market. They displayed beautiful antique 'tribal' earrings and decorated the shop in traditional designs of Borneo. The idyllic ambiance was completed with exotic birds, plants, and reptiles. The Modern Primitive aesthetic wasn't a contrived marketing ploy but rather a genuine pursuit of passionate ideals. Kristian and Blake pioneered the practice of scalpel-ling the earlobe.⁵ Innovations in the enlargement process and the jewelry selection resulted in dramatic increases in the population of enlarged earlobe piercings in San Francisco (pp. 59-76).

The high visibility of stretched earlobes attracted the media and subsequently the local phenomenon went global. Back in the early 1980s, Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, performance artist, musician, and self-described "cultural engineer," was the first celebrity to have stretched his earlobe piercing. Most Americans

have been exposed to enlarged earlobe piercings by celebrities such as Travie McCoy, Davey Havoc, Lil Wayne, Brandon Boyd, Adam Lambert, and Chester Bennington, films such as *Apocalypto*, and chain stores such as Hot Topic, which sells stretched earlobe jewelry and supplies to the youth masses. In March of 2013, a YouTube search yielded over 1200 instructional videos of "How to Stretch Your Ear Piercing." As in the beginning, the professional body piercer displaying the latest developments in jewelry styles and demonstrating the anatomical possibilities of sizes is still the best advertisement for stretched ears. Jody from San Francisco shares: "I started stretching in 2003-2004. It mirrors like when I got my ears pierced when I was 15; it was something I saw happening, something I thought was attractive, and something I wanted to be a part of."

LOCATING SYMBOL

Some ideas of self can be expressed quite clearly in non-verbal symbolism. Abigail exemplifies such a readily apparent communication, "The bicycles engraved on my ear-plugs represent [that] I agree with the green movement, sustainability, and it's my main mode of transport." In 2012, most of her San Franciscan co-habitants could probably deduce this message. In contrast, Becky's expressions and reflections of identity are more complex to decipher:

There was a lot of soul searching on the journey of stretching my ears, "Who am I? Do I want to go past the point of no return?" I didn't want to cut myself off from other options; but stretching my ears, the commitment helped to solidify and support my resolve.

Over the years I was stretching, I would ask myself, "Who am I, What am I? What do I want to do with my life?" Looking in the mirror, after $\frac{5}{8}$ inch, I saw myself as a person with stretched ears and I'm continuing as a person with stretched ears... my overall journey will end at the person I really am.

Examination of Becky's statements reveals an alignment with Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) symbolic self-completion theory. Romanienko's (2011) asserts that in symbolic self-completion theory, "individuals strive emphatically toward their identity goals, which often requires the use of symbols to most comprehensively construct the intended self one aspires to present" (pg. 3). The importance and complexity of how Becky situates herself in society and of how she is situated by society shapes her symbolic image production. Currently, Becky's earlobe sizes are holding at $1\frac{1}{16}$ ".

Weston situates his stretched earlobes within his identity as an indigent ethnic minority even though the relative size of his lobe piercings puts him outside the current practices of his group:

I was born into Caddo, so it's just how it is. It's not a chosen community. I'm just tattooed and pierced; I didn't stretch my ears to be part of a group. I'm not "Mod Prim" [Modern Primitive] or "Bod Mod" [Body Modification community]. I don't want to be associated with that. Stretching was the impetus for my aunts to tell me the stories of the Caddo's body art history. The Osage people had a sign language and for the Caddo they would have the bent index finger horizontally move back

⁵ "Scalpel-ling" enlarges the earlobe piercing instantaneously up many gauge sizes by incision with a knife. Although implementation of the scalpel-ling method spread among body modification practitioners as a way to reduce stretching time and jewelry cost, it remains legally, medically, and socially controversial even within modified communities.

and forth in front of the septum, symbolizing the Caddo's pierced septum and thus a sign for the entire tribe. At the annual powwow, the elders would say, "Hey, you look like an old timer." I started stretching because I liked the look of the jewelry. And today it's the same. The bigger jewelry is more decorative and detailed with better designs. The meaning of my stretched ears hasn't evolved into anything, just like any other ear piercings, maybe that's because I've had my ears pierced my whole life.

Weston adeptly reconciles his identification with the past traditions of his people while enjoying the current aesthetics of non-traditional sizes and jewelry designs. Weston goes on to share a proud memory of his father's protection of the family's traditional practices against an institutional authority:

When I was in school, they tried to make me take them out. My dad went to school, wearing his turquoise studs and won! He told them it was our peoples' way. Then we, me and my brother, were cool."

From a very young age, a female named "Danny," realized that earlobe piercing was an act of asserting herself and demonstrating agency:

I remember the first pierced earlobes I saw on one of my mom's biker friends. I was about 6 years old. I probably saw them earlier, but this was the age when I realized they did that to themselves. They WANTED it, and I like it and I want it too. I've been a fatty since birth, and had issues early on, "you mean you can control what you look like? You can have a say in it?"

Danny's awareness of her weight difference at such a young age reveals the social mechanisms at work by which the individual internalizes social pressures to conform to norms of beauty and self-worth. For

Danny, earlobe piercing and the subsequent stretching may demonstrate adaptive behaviors of psychological healing and self-esteem building.

By 15 years old, Christian's earlobe piercings were stretched to ½". He discusses his exuberant process of exploring meditative traditions and the interconnectivity of the mind-body relationship:

I developed an interest in the Tibetan culture, emotionally and religiously. I honestly think then is when everything became more sentimental and serious. I was a freakin' hippie. I was practicing and learning about different religions; spirituality became a huge influence. At 17, it became an obsession overall to see what the human body could willingly withstand, you know, how the Tibetan monks would go out into the snow and embracing physical challenges during meditation. To make a long story short, I just stretched the hell out of them.

ENGAGING OTHERS

Whether self-reported or academically studied, interpretations of what is being communicated can be highly subjective. For this paper, I am most concerned with self-reported evaluations of the individual's public self-symbolizing when considered with intended as well as unintended observers. According to the ideas of Pitts (2003) what is at stake for those who stretch their ears resides in Alberto Melucci's concept of the "power of naming" (1996). In her book *Mutilating the Body*, the academic Kim Hewitt defends her choice of naming all forms of body piercing as "self-mutilation" in order to situate, compare, and contrast this practice with eating disorders and Non-Suicidal Self Injuries (NSSI), such as cutting and head-banging. (She does not name acts such as weightlifting, dieting, or teeth straightening as "self-mutilation.") In contrast,

the psychiatrist Armando Favazza (2011) reserves the label of "self-mutilation" for "self-injury involving a major, significant body part such as enucleation of an eye or limb amputation" (p. 71). Naming matters; the opinions of the general public and of the policy makers are influenced through taxonomic associations particularly when asserted by persons in positions of authority and expertise. When we resist the urge to reduce complex behaviors and associations into discreet categories, we avoid the construction of artificially fixed identities and, in this case, pathologized behaviors.

Thao's family history shares the ongoing tensions between in-group beliefs and the normative social policies set by dominant institutions:

My grandfather had approximately 00ga earlobes. Traditionally, stretched ears are a sign of age, status, and wisdom. His father [Thao's paternal great grandfather] took out his own earrings when he worked for the US government, and then put them back in. My uncle took them out when he was the tribal sheriff, then put them back in afterwards. Two other uncles had stretched lobes.





My great uncle went to a US government boarding school and couldn't speak the native language and didn't have stretched earlobes. My other great uncle, the other one's brother, went to boarding school too, but had an illness, and went deaf. My deaf uncle got pierced after boarding school and engaged in other rituals. The family believes this was because since he was deaf he couldn't hear the school's teachings.

Thaoe receives positive and negative responses from unintended observers. He shares a memorable interaction that asserts his ideas of class, ethnicity, sovereignty, and authenticity:

"I was with a friend on the subway and a yuppie lady said, 'Oh I've been to Africa where people actually do that.' I told her, 'You're standing on my ancestors' land and WE did this too.'"

As a single young adult living in San Francisco, Thaoe's intersecting communities are complex. He has a Spanish last name and self-identifies as a tattooist, artist, and musician. Those who don't know his story may never consider the richness and uniqueness of his belief associations with his stretched earlobes. Thaoe recognizes that living and working in the city affords him greater access to jewelry choice. The old people still living on the reservation will react in

awe, "...because they don't have shit."

Becky's story discusses the complexity of family members', intended observers', and unintended observers' reactions that correlate to the continuum of size:

I remember ALWAYS getting compliments until I hit 5/8", comments like, "I really like your size, it's not too big." My mom was SO funny, "Oh that's perfect! That's the perfect size, you don't need to go ANY bigger!" [Laughter] Now today, "Are your ears BIGGER?" or "Why are you going bigger?" Dad never was a fan, but they're supportive of me, of course they wish I'd been a doctor. [Laughter] Up until 5/8", I'd get compliments from the general public, from everyone, but past that, only from people in the industry, or compliments just about the jewelry or the dedication [to stretching], but not as often and not about how beautiful my ears were.

Becky's experience reflects a distinct size at which she noticed a change in observers' reactions. However, descriptions such as "large," "small," "noticeable," or "too big," are all relative to an observer's exposure and knowledge of stretched ears, aesthetic preference, and relationship to the individual with stretched earlobes.

After stretching too fast, Christian offers a cautionary tale of physical and emotional harm:

I had some complications... People were doing lobe repairs, but it just wasn't an option. I went to two different surgeons; a Fort Collins' doctor said, "No" to fixing them, so I flew back home to LA, and that surgeon also said, "No." My career goal at the time was to become a medical doctor and at the time I felt a little bit pressured, by my career goal,

the doctors, and my family to remove them [his 2" stretched earlobes]. I know medical doctors that are fully sleeved [tattooed] and could be in the O.R., but I, with my ears stretched, couldn't be? It's almost like social conformity has a dress code. I was told by numerous surgeons that I couldn't have stretched earlobes in the O.R. I distinctly remember a plastic surgeon had a half hour consultation with me about it; he was even from Africa! I think Kenya? He was calm and even-toned but very offensive. At 23, I had my ears reconstructed by a plastic surgeon in Pasadena. I cried in the car after the operation. A piece of me was gone, that's how it felt. It's weird how you mourn over that [*he pulls his reconstructed ear*] but I paid someone to cut off a piece of that [*he points to his adominoplasty*].... Everyone was very shocked after the operation, some even mentioned they liked the old me, even to this day. Most of my interactions are with people without stretched ears.

There is little doubt that the surgeons were doing what they thought was best for Christian. Christian's medical condition may be incomprehensible to these surgeons who exclusively construct normative ideals of Western beauty. Therefore his desires to keep his stretched earlobes were dismissed with encumbered medical categorizations such as "self-inflicted, cosmetic, and elective."

Christian's case appears indicative of a more general problem, in which doctors confuse their morality for beneficence and override a patient's autonomy. As more people stretch their earlobes, more people will seek earlobe reconstructions resulting from physical problems such as structural tears, infections, and scars or personal choices such as social

pressures, career decisions, and aesthetic preferences. The topic of earlobe reconstruction entails difficult questions of economics, access, and ethics. Professional body modifiers offer an affordable option for people who don't have health care or money, or have health care but want a procedure that's not covered because it is medically defined as "elective surgery." Body modifiers charge approximately \$400 while surgeons can charge \$4000 and up. The procedure supplements the income for body modifiers who are generally at the lower end of middle-class earnings.

So far my research suggests that procedural outcomes are usually better when performed by the body modifiers than by plastic surgeons. These better outcomes correlate with elite body modifiers that are highly networked, specialized, and experienced with this particular procedure.

But what about the ethics of performing what could be considered "plastic surgery" outside the legally sanctioned medical field? What of the ethical consequences of my investigating this activity? Bringing an apparently adaptive system of underground services under scrutiny could have far-reaching repercussions for practitioners trying to make a living, for clients trying to access affordable alternatives, and for my professional and personal relationships.

CONSIDERING CHANGE

To form more durable understandings of human behaviors, this research must consider the effects of time. Humans change. The impulse and the act of piercing the earlobe can transpire in moments. In fact, most people can leave the jewelry out for months or even years at a time and the hole will remain open, without consideration or action. But the physiology of the stretched earlobe is different. The moment jewelry is removed, the process

of shrinking starts. For many, this appears glacially slow, taking days or weeks to "lose a stretch" and to have to go down in size. But for others this process starts to happen in hours or even in minutes. Over time, innumerable variables shift: finances, style preferences, jobs, relationships, responsibilities, hobbies, and social groups, so what choices factor in keeping stretched earlobes? Melody's long relationship with her stretched earlobes traces such life changes and her corresponding choices to stretch or not:

[In 1990] When I got to 4 gauge, I stopped because I didn't think I could go any bigger and have it look right.... At that time, people were JUST starting to do crazy body modifications; some looked awesome while others seemed ugly and deforming. As a piercer, I was really aware that some people were modifying their bodies for aesthetics and others were modifying without that regard. I was 4 gauge for years and years. I stopped being a piercer and got another career entirely. Going into a more professional, straight job, I wanted to maintain my individuality in a way. It's funny, at work, I see myself edgy as compared with my colleagues and clients. And they see me as edgy, because of my ears... even though I tone it down. Even though at the same time from 1990 to 2012, body modification has become commonplace, and now I'm TOTAL-ly tame compared to some people. I get questions like... "Didn't that hurt?" It hasn't gone away, it's such a funny question. I understand the question isn't really "does that hurt," but rather, "even though it does hurt, why did you subject yourself to that pain? Help me to understand." In addition to maintaining my individual style

and it being an aesthetic decision, as I've gotten older, I feel I've been pigeonholed and disregarded. As a woman who is almost 50, I've disappeared in some ways. So the stretched ears, in some way, counter balance that, if not for anybody else, then for me. I've had a LOT of body modification over the years, and then undone a lot over the next years, and this bout or period of changing things on my body has been very much about grounding and solidifying my own identity... my ears seem to be a way, to make a statement about who I am while at the same time balancing the confines of how I need to look as a professional, to be taken seriously and treated respectfully.

My lifestyle has been punk rock, radical lesbian, SM, Mod Prim, radically political and Queer; it's been a LOT of different things that [were] far, FAR outside the norm and to a great extent I don't practice that anymore but it's still a part of me an integral part of that.

It's almost as if age trumps everything else.

For Thaoe, the custom of stretched earlobes sustains his connection to his grandfather, to his identity as Native American and to his reservation. His traditions teach him the importance of an evolving relationship one should have with enlarged earlobe piercings:



Stretching is a time thing; when plugs fall out you go up. I'm guessing I was 8 gauge by junior high. The stretching is not forced; it happens with time. It's natural. There is no stopping stretching until you die, unless they stay at a certain size. You should never push it; they're the size they're supposed to be. If there is a problem, then maybe you need to go down in size, think about what's going on in your life, and reflect on your mental state. It's time to slow down, time to think and reflect.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This ethnography of people's self-reported stories unfolds diverse experiences, ethnicities, communities, and motivations, all of which inform and evolve the choices to stretch and to have enlarged earlobe piercings. As a research tool, ethnography allows for depth, dimension, variation, and personalization within a research cohort that shares commonalities, such as persons with stretched earlobe piercings.

From the stretched earlobe as a locus of study, interviewees revealed varied and complex experiences. These unique insights diverge from categorical generalizations that attempt to aggregate all body modification outside the current social norm as "self-mutilation". For example, Weston and Thaoe shared their evolving indigenous understandings of stretched earlobe traditions. For Abigail and Jody, the stretched earlobe signified a classic sociological understanding of ingroup affiliation. Jody, Becky, and Morgan each presented the pierced and stretched earlobe as a demonstration of selfhood; however, each original ear piercing was initiated by external pressures of gender inscription. Brian reflected back on a younger self with sophisticated understandings of his personal explorations of earlobe modification within his particular social landscape of place and time. Danny's earlobe piercing and the subsequent stretching appeared to be a successful ongoing reinforcement of psychological healing and self-esteem building. Christian revealed his emotional pain from being pressured into an unwanted surgical removal of stretched earlobe tissue presented as imperative to conform to a prevalent moral bias within the medical field. Melody eloquently examined her shifting relationship to her stretched earlobes, transformed by her growing age and increasing socioeconomic status.

Seeking out alternative narratives to a chosen hypothesis may be a more holistic approach to studying difficult social systems and psychological behaviors. Including the richness of diversity may give balance to otherwise reductive and essentialized research conclusions.

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