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The dilemmas of embodied symbolic representation: Regret in contemporary American tattoo narratives

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ABSTRACT

Numerous scholars have argued that we are currently in a post “tattoo renaissance” era wherein the practice has increasingly become a legitimate art form accepted by the American middle class. In order to facilitate this cultural transition, tattooed people legitimize their own tattoos through various narratives that ascribe deep semantic meaning to their images and words. Pulling from twenty-two in-depth interviews with tattoo removal clinicians, tattoo artists, people who regret at least one of their current tattoos, and people who have had their tattoos removed or altered, this paper contributes to the literature on the meaning and significance of tattoos in the lives of 21st century Americans. In particular, we aim to showcase that, in the current cultural context, wherein people feel a need to justify their tattoos with a level of profound symbolic meaning, tattoo regret abounds in a form distinct from that of previous generations. Drawing from a post-structuralist framework which understands tattoos as symbols, we discuss tattoo narratives as pervasive normative expectations and explore how people face potential dilemmas when they lack them, as well as when they subscribe static and absolute meanings to the words and images depicted in their body art. These narratives, and accordingly the tattoos themselves, become problematic as a result of the inability of tattoos to function beyond their capacity as symbolic representations. When people cannot reconcile or transcend the dynamic and relative nature of their tattoos’ symbolic meanings, they feel regretful and sometimes opt for tattoo cover-ups or removals.

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“For the first couple years, it was really cool. . .and then I started kind of ignoring it and not thinking about it. . .and then I really started to actively dislike it and not like it when people addressed it or made comments like, ‘Oh, you have a tramp stamp.’ And I did feel a little bit of embarrassment. . .and it is associated with a lower class girl. It’s very girly and that’s not anything I identify

with right now. . .that’s just not part of my identity.” – Sherry, 28

1. Introduction

Scholars (such as Hill, 1972; Rubin, 1988) have argued that tattoos have become a more legitimate art form accepted by the mainstream American middle class. To facilitate this cultural transition, tattooed members of the middle class have come to legitimize their own tattoos through various narratives that ascribe deep semantic meaning to their images and words. This use of narrative contrasts with the earlier tattoo parlor “flash” style,

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wherein marginalized and economically disadvantaged members of society picked from a limited number of generic designs available to them and rarely constructed meaningful narratives around the images they chose to have as tattoos.

Pulling from in-depth interviews with tattoo removal clinicians, tattoo artists, tattooed people who regret at least one of their current tattoos, and people who have had their tattoos removed or altered, this paper contributes to the existing literature on the meaning and significance of tattoos in the lives of Americans in the 21st century. We aim to showcase that, in the current cultural context, wherein many people feel a need to justify their tattoos with a level of profound symbolic meaning, tattoo regret abounds in a form quite distinct from that which previous generations of tattooed people experienced.

In contemporary American society, tattoo studios that employ artists, many of whom have been formally educated in the arts, to inscribe custom-designed images upon the bodies of their clientèle prevail over less prestigious tattoo parlors (DeMello, 2000; Sanders & Vail, 2008). As the practice of tattooing has become more commonly understood as a skilled trade and art form, and since it has lost much of its stigma, it is not only middle class people who feel the need to legitimate their tattoos through meaningful narratives but tattooed people from all socio-economic strata. This paper discusses tattoo narratives as a pervasive normative expectation and explores how people face potential dilemmas when they lack such narratives, as well as when they subscribe static and absolute meanings to the words and images depicted in their body art. These narratives, and accordingly the tattoos themselves, become problematic for tattooed individuals as a result of the inability of tattoos to function beyond their capacity as symbolic representations. From a post-structuralist framework, we assert that when people lack sufficient narratives or cannot reconcile or transcend the truly dynamic and relative nature of their tattoos' symbolic meanings, they feel regretful and sometimes opt for tattoo cover-ups where another image is tattooed over the current one to disguise it or removals in which laser procedures and topical medications eliminate or at least minimize the visibility of the tattoo.

A better understanding of the causes and forms of tattoo regret warrants sociological investigation, not only because tattoos are becoming increasingly widespread but because the phenomenon reveals how informal social control and judgments about socioeconomic status play out in the realm of popular culture and personal embodiment. Moreover, our study demonstrates the manner in which social stigmas and normative expectations wane in particularistic rather than monolithic ways.

2. The progression of scholarship on tattooing

For more than a century, anthropologists have considered the nature and meaning of non-Western tattooing practices (Barton, 1918; Hose & Shelford, 1906; Sinclair, 1908, 1909; Smeaton, 1937; Teit, 1930). While many of these works are undeniably ethnocentric, they frame the practice of tattooing as a cultural endeavor. In contrast, the

majority of academic scholarship on the subject of tattooed Westerners has classified the practice as outsider art that is pathological and anti-social, if not directly correlated to mental illness (Atkinson, 2004). In *Criminal Man*, Cesare Lombroso (1876/2006) carefully documents the tattoos of deceased convicts, considering them indicators of criminal propensity. As recently as 1990, psychiatrists have claimed that “any tattoo can be viewed as a warning sign that should alert the practicing physician to look for underlying psychiatric conditions” (Raspa & Cusack, 1990, p. 1483).

Since the 1960s, the practice of Western tattooing has undergone what is often referred to as the “tattoo renaissance” (Hill, 1972; Rubin, 1988), as tattooists have come to more commonly identify themselves as artists and increasingly legitimize their medium for expression through improved technical skill alongside innovative designs and techniques (Sanders & Vail, 2008). This renaissance also refers to the drastic expansion in clientèle; the group of tattooed individuals has grown from one primarily composed of male bikers, sailors, and convicts to include females and members of the middle and upper classes (Rubin, 1988).¹

DeMello (2000) theorizes that the meanings people give to their tattoos have changed over the last several decades largely as a result of a new class of people being tattooed and focuses on the change in tattoo meanings before and after the tattoo renaissance. Prior to the renaissance, tattoos were found mostly among the working classes and were seen as the spontaneous and irresponsible marks of ‘loose’ women, criminals, bikers, and other ‘social undesirables.’ However, after the renaissance, tattoos transitioned to become a more socially acceptable form of self-expression for the larger population.

By chronicling the increased acceptability of tattooing among the white American middle class, DeMello (2000) provides the best account of how much of this population seeks to justify their tattoos by engaging in a patterned discourse, which she calls “tattoo narratives.” These narratives legitimate and neutralize the stigma that remains from previous notions that tattooing was exclusively a lower class and/or deviant phenomenon. These narratives are the result of a new-found need for the middle class to legitimize the practice as one consistent with middle class values. Accordingly, artistry and spirituality are emphasized, and tattoos are framed as meaningful personal symbols that have been carefully thought through. These narratives are designed to deliberately counter the public image of tattoos as meaningless adornments put on thoughtlessly by members of the lower classes.² As such, the middle class norm of the tattoo narrative serves a boundary maintenance function wherein tattoos may be perceived as respectable and a legitimate artistic form of expression when and only when

¹ For a somewhat different take, see Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, and Owen's (2010) study that finds contemporary American college students with multiple tattoos to be more likely to engage in various forms of deviance.

² DeMello (2000) states that, traditionally, working class tattoos did have less personal meaning for their wearers. Custom tattooing is a relatively new phenomenon, and pre-renaissance tattooists would occasionally tattoo the same design on every customer regardless of their specific requests (p. 138).

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