

A Historical Look at Tattooing as Socially Constructed Deviance

Alyssa Belcher
Sociology

The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: E. Bramlett

1. Body of Paper

Historically, tattoos have been associated with deviantly identified people and groups such as sailors, criminals, gang members, “savage races,” circus performers, and members of “biker gangs.”² As a result, the fashionable trend tattoos acquired in the late 20th century created a dramatic cultural shift. Seen as a visual representation of their deviant master statuses, tattoos have historically served to separate the deviants from the non-deviants within American culture. Though tattoos were once reserved for marginalized members of society, “individuals with tattoos are now commonly found among professional women, college students, professional athletes, and actors,” though the stigma attached is still contested.¹⁰ By comparing the popular perspective of tattooing in the 1950s and the 1990s - today, it is easy to see how tattooing is a socially constructed act of deviance presently in the middle of a cultural significance war.

In order to understand the revolutionary shift of tattooing in the 1990s, it is important to deconstruct the historical significance of tattooing. Tattoos are not a new form of body modification. All around the world, tattoos have been used for various status, social, or spiritual identifications and representative meanings. Tattoos have been used as symbols and physical representations in tribal rituals as well as used by the Greeks and Romans “to punish or identify people as property.”³ Unwaveringly associated with marginalized members of society, “tattooing was firmly positioned as the domain of those deemed socially undesirable.”²

In the early 19th century, upper class Europeans began getting small, concealable tattoos. But with the invention of the automatic tattoo machine, members of the lower class gained access to this previously “high-class” form of body modification and “tattoos became relatively more accessible and their popularity grew among the lower classes and those already labeled as social deviants, diminishing the interest of the fashionable elite.”² The changing accessibility to tattooing caused “social elites to distance themselves from and stigmatize the practice previously celebrated as an indicator of status and/or one’s knowledge of foreign cultures.”¹⁰

WWI and WWII saw a slight increase in the prevalence of tattooing among those in the various branches of the military. Though these people certainly held more prestige than the groups previously associated with tattooing, due to their status as military agents and their tattoo choices demonstrating military accomplishments and patriotic sentiments, tattooing still did not become the fad it is today. Evidently, the construction of the negative stigma on tattooing by the social elites dominated well into the late 20th century. Though tattoos began to become more popularized again in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, the real “tattoo renaissance” did not take off until the 1990s. The “tattoo renaissance,” as coined by Rubin,

encompasses a diversification and improvement of artistic styles, a new openness to experimenting with design, an increase in the amount of custom work performed, [and] a professionalization of standards and attention to sanitation of equipment. There was also a marked demographic shift that saw an increase in female clients, professionals, and those with more disposable income with greater interest in the compositional aesthetics of the tattoo².

Along with this tattoo renaissance, the “1990’s witnessed a revolution in fashions which included hairstyles and clothes, and [an] almost unlimited display of flesh, with body piercing and some artistic adornment with tattoos.”¹³

Arguably the various social movements that occurred in the generation prior to the youth in the 1990s combined with youthful rebellion, led to this rapid acceptance of tattooing among teens and college-aged students of the 1990s. As a result, tattoos began to acquire more meaning and significance to the '90s youth than had ever been known to previous generations. Also, the Internet and the widespread use of media led to the development of a tattoo-accepting subculture where youth had much more access to information about tattoos regarding options, images, care, and support that also countered the negative stigmas of that generation's parents. Despite this dramatic revolution in the 1990s, tattoos continued to hold and still hold considerable deviant stigma and individual personal worth degradation.

Understanding which groups have historically been associated with tattoos reveals how the stigma was justified. But in order to understand the continued prevalence of that stigma, the significance of skin-focused body modifications must be examined. Skin, according to anthropologists and other social and humanistic scientists, acts as a "visible way of defining individual identity and cultural difference."¹⁵ According to Schildkrout, "skin is a surface onto which anthropology and related disciplines have projected their understandings of the relationship between psyche and society, the commonalities and differences between cultures, and even the meaning of art."¹⁵ Given this understanding of the cultural importance of skin, it is easy to see why body modifications that permanently change the skin can be seen as extremely culturally relevant. Permanent skin marking "highlights an issue that has been central to anthropology since its inception: the question of boundaries between the individual and society, between societies, and between representations and experiences."¹⁵ Looking at the various and changing uses and meanings of tattooing along with the changing social and cultural perceptions of individuals with tattoos clearly demonstrates deviance as "temporally and spatially contextual."² Relevant theoretical models that explain deviance, such as Sutherland's differential association and Merton's anomie definitions, elucidate the importance and "influence of social group dynamics to explain the emergence and persistence of deviant as well as normative behavior."¹⁰

Just as the construction of tattooing as deviant is social, the motivation to participate in the tattooing subculture is social. Commonly, peer influence and family acceptance are strong influences to people who get their first tattoo. Much research has studied the motivations of would-be first time tattooers and almost all the research conclusively points towards social reasoning. Researchers have concluded, "tattoos are contributing factors to self- and peer-acceptance. Evidently they often are obtained in conjunction with the desire for peer recognition."¹⁰ Once an individual has a tattoo, they then belong to the tattoo subculture permanently (disregarding individuals who undergo laser tattoo removal). Unique to this form of deviance, is that after the first initial act of getting a tattoo, no behaviors are necessary to maintain status within that subculture. Koch states,

[while] seemingly common in the larger culture, individuals seek to acquire body art to express their need for uniqueness, even if that is simply a tattoo that differs in appearance from those of others. Claiming membership in a sub-culture is a constant struggle to differentiate oneself from the mainstream.¹⁰

There is a wide range of opinions on tattoos now, which makes the issue more complicated than it ever has been in history. Previously, tattoos were singularly associated with cultural deviants. Beginning in the 1990s, it became increasingly difficult to justify calling a person with a single tattoo a deviant. There are many issues involved in this particular case. Is the individual a person with tattoos or a tattooed person? As Roberts demonstrates, "[despite] the fact that millions have been tattooed, not all tattooed bodies are equal in American culture. There is, indeed, a difference between people who have tattoos and the tattooed people."¹⁰ Though semantic, this is a very important characteristic. Tattooed people are much more likely to identify with their tattoos and to publicly display their tattoos. Older, tattooed people, are much more possessive about their status and situation in the tattoo subculture. According to Koch, "[it] appears the old-school types want to remain distinct; their tattoos are, for them, signs of separation from the mainstream. They militantly differentiate themselves from those who take their body art into the boardrooms, classrooms, and sports arenas of Middle America."¹⁰ Though most people with tattoos do not view themselves as deviant, in fact they frequently must go through a value change or moral career change in order to see tattooing as acceptable and non-deviant before they can get one comfortably, perhaps the "old-school types"¹⁰ engaged and established the tattoo subculture deliberately identifying as deviant.

People with tattoos are much more likely to have fewer tattoos (many only one) and to have the tattoo(s) located in easily concealed places. This of course can call into question, when considering how much peer pressure and social influence is involved in the decision to get the first tattoo, what is the point of a tattoo that cannot be easily shared without concealment? People with tattoos and tattooed people all have tattoos but identify differently concerning their body adornment.

Some tattoo images and placements on the body still hold a significant amount of socially deviant meaning. Some people choose to get tattoos to remember a loved one who has died, a favorite quote they wish to identify with, an exaltation of their favorite or desired personality trait or characteristic, or some image that holds significant individual

meaning. Of course, this is not always the case and many people still get tattoos while drunk or otherwise under the influence of drugs or social pressure and later come to regret their tattoos or have a tattoo without any significant meaning. Face tattoos are still particularly reserved for specific social rather than individual meaning. Teardrops under the eyes signify a murder and large, decorative tattoos on the lower back, known as “tramp stamps,” are frequently connoted with promiscuity or sexual “liberation.”

Though deciding to get a tattoo is frequently socially motivated, the particular design and placement on the body is, for many people, a very personal matter. As stated above, most individuals in the tattoo subculture do not see having tattoos as a deviant act but rather as an expression of individuality and uniqueness from “normal” society as well as from other individuals in the tattoo subculture. As illustrated by many researchers, motivations for joining the tattoo subculture “include the desire for beauty, for distinction from others, for maintenance of one’s self-identity, for the need to test one’s threshold for pain and endurance, for group affiliation and endurance, and as a form of protest against parents and society.”^{4; 5} Despite these many intersecting reasons for considering a tattoo, “the primary persuading factor for obtaining tattoos seemed to be a personal attribution of the tattoos’ purpose and significance.”³ Regardless of personal significance, the negative stigma associated with tattoos is still prevalent. In order to participate in the tattoo subculture as well to “prevent damage to their social identity,” many people choose to get concealable tattoos¹⁰. This is particularly relevant to individuals who work in professional, management, or service careers due to the prevalence of potential clients who, either due to age, religion, or other personal beliefs, might be offended by the sight of a tattoo and its subsequent stigma. Although individuals with tattoos

cannot altogether avoid these interactions, they can avoid the threat of being perceived as unworthy of respected positions by getting tattooed in places that will not be visible during such interactions. Discrete tattoo locations can also prevent tattooees from being viewed negatively by disapproving family members. In order to enable this avoidance process and minimize future threats to their face, those who were merely traversing the tattoo culture were willing to undergo more intense pain.¹⁰

Research has demonstrated that most individuals with tattoos have experienced disapproval from family members for having a tattoo or have concealed the knowledge that they have a tattoo for fear of rejection or reprimand. Most research conducted on the increased popularity of tattooing among college students in the 1990s demonstrated parental disapproval. This is a direct example of the generational gap in opinions concerning body modification such as tattooing and piercing. However, individuals with tattoos “overwhelmingly report having close friends or family members who are also tattooed (90%).”² Some research “suggests that having friends or family who are tattooed will be positively associated with the respondent also being tattooed, indicating that the judgment and behavior of key reference groups often outweighs the general normative constraints and stigma associated with tattooing.”² This suggests that most young people in the 1990s engaging in tattooing were either influenced by their deviant parents a generation before them or the tattoo trend that passed through college campuses across the US. Individuals who reported peer influence and bonding as a result of tattooing but experienced parental disapproval, “[framed their] parents’ feelings [of tattoos as] resulting from their age... [And] indirectly stated that [their] parents were old, and out of date.”⁸

Regardless of how those individuals with tattoos feel about the acceptability and “normalness” of their actions, greater society still views tattoos as an act of deviance with incredible disapproval. For women in the 90s, however, engaging in tattooing became an act of feminine deviance against hegemonic gender roles and beauty standards. Historically, tattoos and other forms of body modification have been dominated by men and used as a continual external expression of masculinity. Within the tattoo renaissance, women began to claim their right in the action as well. Women increasingly “saw tattoos as a sign of liberation and freedom and became tattooed to construct a sense of self outside of conventional ideals of femininity and female beauty.”⁸ Even if the women getting tattoos got stereotypically feminine images, such as designs, flowers, and butterflies, by having a tattoo, these women were “considered those who “did not take shit,” and were forceful, resilient, and had control over their lives.”⁸ Intersecting with gender are the notions of age. According to Adams,

Gender and age are also used as foils to both contest and reinforce the notion of tattoos as transgressive, simultaneously constructing tattooing as a semi deviant display of independence and a fashionable accessory. That this type of representation is only employed when discussing tattooing and women suggests a deeply embedded gender frame that paradoxically characterizes tattooing as less normatively acceptable for women than men while extolling the number of women becoming tattooed, often in a highly sexualized manner.¹

With the “tattoo renaissance” in the 1990s, came a greater acceptance of tattooing as an acceptable form of body modification and self-expression among youth. Since the 1990s, tattooing has continuously become less and less stigmatized and more and more acceptable in various workplaces and cultural spaces. Once exclusively used to visually identify social deviants, people of all classes, genders, sexualities, and careers can be found sporting tattoos, both concealed and visible. The media, in particular, has glorified the “cool factor” of tattooing in celebrities, while adding to the confusion by criticizing the layperson with a tattoo. Tattoos are simultaneously defined as defiant identifiers and fashionable statements of individuality. For some people, tattooing has developed as a serious art form. Regardless, research and individual experiences have shown that the “message is unmistakable: respectable people do not get tattooed.”¹⁰ While youth in America many not see tattoos as deviant, even if they do not have one, the older community and the medical community have suggested tattoos are an “indicator of low self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, psychopathology and aggressive personality and impulsiveness, deviant sexualities and sexual orientations, or any variety of “underlying psychiatric conditions.”² Many medical professionals and healthcare providers strongly encourage dissuading young people from engaging in tattooing by proposing to deliberately expose youth to inflated statistical data concerning infections, allergic reactions, and scarring. Clearly, the stigma of tattooing has not been erased. Interestingly, many of the messages against tattooing are reminiscent of the myths purported by abstinence-only sex education “facts” such as the high rates of pregnancy that can result from sex even with condoms. Despite the cultural clashes between people with tattoos and tattooed people and the differences in generations, it is undeniable that tattooing has

‘undergone dramatic redefinition’ and has shifted from a form of deviance to an acceptable form of expression—at least as far as the youth are concerned ... The mixed message [surrounding tattoos, celebrities, stigma, and acceptability] contributes to the seemingly contradictory situation wherein individuals use tattoos for identity expression and formation, all the while keeping the existence of their tattoos secret from the general public¹⁰.

Understanding the theoretical deviance of tattooing requires a critique of the flaws and limitations of the research that has been done on tattooing. The teenagers and young adults of the 1990s who were the first in the tattoo trend were children of parents from another era with a very restrictive perspective on tattooing and piercing. Most of them acquired their first tattoos while in college. This demographic, regardless of tattooing, upbringing, or location, are much more likely to engage in “deviant” acts such as sexual experimentation, drug use, and alcohol consumption. The relevant research consistently shows that individuals with tattoos were more likely to engage in deviant behaviour but failed to acknowledge that college students regardless of body modification are more likely to engage in said deviant behaviors than other demographics. Also in need of examination is the type of deviant behavior examples that were used in these studies. Consideration of the social construction of deviance surrounding tattoos and other forms of body modification must also be applied to the social construction of other deviantly labeled behaviors. Pre-marital sex (as used in some studies as an example of deviant behavior) is considered deviant in many religious communities. If deviance is defined as violating social norms then it is beneficial to ask what norms are violated with each act of “deviance.” As previously noted by other researchers, “one of the primary flaws in much of the prior research on tattooing has been the use of psychiatric patients or prison inmates as a research population. Findings are then generalized to all tattooed people drawn from a target population ‘already diagnosed and labeled as psychopathological, or ... convicted of committing a crime.’”^{1:2}

Though the current data is relevant and well documented, it is important to note that it has now been 20 years after the majority of tattoo research was conducted and that tattoo acceptance and perspectives have changed and are continually evolving. It is also imperative to recognize that college-aged youth are most likely to engage in tattooing and have different perspectives than previous generations. In another ten years, it is expected that there will be updated research on tattooing in the 2000s that better captures the state-of-the-art than the research from the 1990s. Moreover, there is a discrepancy in the 1990’s research over the deviance of tattooing:

Finally, the mix of views on the question of whether or not tattoos are associated with deviance may simply reflect the fact that as a social movement, the “tattoo renaissance” has yet to fully play itself out. ... Thus, tattooing may best be viewed as a social phenomenon whose cultural meaning is in flux, with both positive and negative views discernable depending on which population subgroups are examined (Adams 2009). As a result, it remains an empirical question as to whether or not tattoos on adolescents were associated with deviance during the mid- to late 1990s when the current data were gathered and when the “tattoo renaissance” had yet to reach its peak.¹⁶

With the 1990s came a dramatic revision of the public's opinion on tattooing. Arguably this revision resulted from a conglomeration of rebellion and various social movements resulting from a new generation of youth indoctrinated by their social rights era parents. Shifting from an act of deviance reserved for marginalized members of society, youth began engaging in tattooing as a representative body art form. With this dramatic shift, came an astounding cultural clash between generations and conservatives wishing to retain the "purity" of the unmarked body and the youth viewing skin as a canvas to challenge hegemonic ideals and expectations through permanent body art. While tattoos continue to be viewed as deviant permanent body markers by some, it is clear that the "tattoo renaissance" has established this form of body modification as a way to publicly express permanent ideals and meanings through an integral and physical part of the self.

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