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thesis entitled

SECRET INK:
UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN TATTOO PRACTICES

presented by

DEREK JOHN ROBERTS

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

M.A. degree in Sociology

Major Professor's Signature

11/25/08

Date

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Sociology

2008

ABSTRACT

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By

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Over the past twenty years, there has been a significant increase in the number of Americans with tattoos. The majority of this growth can be attributed to an increasing acceptability of tattoos among younger individuals and, increasingly, the middle class. Not only has who gets tattooed changed, but the reasons for participating in this behavior have also changed. Nonetheless, tattoos remain non-normative for the majority of American society—a fact known to new tattooees. I argue that the expansion of tattoos can best be understood in terms of cohort replacement theory. Moreover, in combining this with a dramaturgical analysis, I will ultimately show how people with tattoos, as well as those considering tattoos, manage the impression of their tattoos while negotiating mainstream culture.

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in tattoos began early, as I distinctly remember a conversation with a childhood friend about the topic around the age of ten that dealt with the tattoos I would be getting as an adult. At the time, tattoos were a way for me to represent things such as nationality and where I grew up. My friend and I were both children of working class parents and lived in working class neighborhoods. It is hard to pinpoint the actual motivation for this interest; the burgeoning hip hop culture and the many men in our area that were bold enough to permanently alter their skin for the love of our much maligned city most likely influenced and fueled my passion.

I had been socialized to see tattoos as abnormal, which seems to be the case for a majority of American society. Still, estimates on the number of Westerners with tattoos generally range from one in ten to one in five (Kosut 2006; Stirn et al 2006). Despite the fact that millions have been inked, tattoo culture remains a distinct subculture. The existence of a tattoo culture, however, does not mean that all people who have been tattooed belong to the culture. There is, indeed, a difference between people who have tattoos and tattooed people (Bell 1999). People who have tattoos usually have one or maybe a couple tattoos strategically placed on areas of their bodies that are easily hidden. Tattooed people, on the other hand, get ink that is visible to others. Bold tattoos on lower arms, hands and/or necks are common for tattooed people. To be a tattooed person, one must be committed to their tattoos, which may include labels such as "freak" from coworkers, friends and family. Tattooed people readily and regularly display their tattoos to the world-- to cover one's tattoos would be to deny one's true self. Though the number

of people who have tattoos has boomed, I argue that the number of tattooed people remains relatively small.

The aim of this article is to better understand how and why people with tattoos—who have no desire to be associated with the "freak show" that is tattoo culture (Bell 1999:56)— negotiate their status as tattooees and transition through mainstream society. Considering the vast expansion of tattoos in America and the rest of the West since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Rosenblatt 1997:300), the reluctance of sociologists to investigate tattoos is noteworthy. Only recently has this become an issue of sociological inquiry, putting the discipline well behind anthropology. While there has been a dramatic shift in the attitudes and arguments put forth by academics concerning tattoos since the recent tattoo boom began to unfold, by no means are the old attitudes disappearing from the literature:

> [D]espite... path-breaking analyses of tattooing as a contextual and negotiated signifier of identity, sociological statements on the cultural use of tattoos in North America ultimately (re)produce a conceptualization of the practice as contra-normative. The symbiotic relationship between tattooing and illegal behaviour (or otherwise unconventional lifestyles) still dominates in sociological research. Sociologists prefer to study the subversive subcultural uses of tattooing. (Atkinson 2004:127)

This quote exposes the academic schism that has formed around this phenomenon. On the one side, researchers portray tattoos negatively by focusing on deviance and mental disorders. On the other, scholars view tattoos as positively contributing to identity formation and fashion.

Even more important than the ideological split within the academic community is the one forming within society. For many young Westerners, the tattoo has taken on a decidedly different meaning than for previous generations. The tattoo has "undergone

dramatic redefinition" (Irwin 2001:50) and has shifted from a form of deviance to an acceptable form of expression-- at least as far as the youth are concerned. One contributing factor of this youthful shift is the media, which legitimates tattoos by positively portraying the tattooed "lionized public figures" (Kosut 2006:1038) that many young people admire, such as actors, musicians and athletes. At the same time, however, the media is critical of average people with tattoos. I argue that this mixed message 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 public. By applying the theory of cohort replacement (Ryder 1965; Firebaugh 1989), I will attempt to explain this societal transition. Moreover, in combining this with a dramaturgical analysis (Goffman 1959; 1967), I will ultimately show how people with tattoos, as well as those considering tattoos, manage the impression of their tattoos while negotiating mainstream culture.

Background

Inked bodies have existed in geographically diverse societies throughout history, but tattoos have long been considered taboo in Western societies such as the US (Sanders 1989). Though tattoos were a fad among Europe's aristocrats, sailors and soldiers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they became unacceptable by the 1920s, leading to academic research framing tattoos as deviant or symbolic of mental health disorders (Ferguson-Rayport et al 1955; Post 1966; Sanders 1989; Steward 1990). Not only were tattoos linked with deviance, it was argued that the physical act of getting a tattoo would absolutely cause future deviance (Post 1966; Steward 1990). Some recent articles (Carroll & Anderson 2002; Brooks et al 2003; Stirn et al 2006; Wohlrab et al

2007) still seek to convince readers of a link between tattoos and both mental health problems and (sexual) deviance.

Given this history of negative attitudes, it might come as a bit of a surprise that the number of people with tattoos has been on the rise, and it is the middle class that is at the heart of the "mainstreaming of tattoo" (Kosut 2006:1045). There are numerous explanations for the recent embracing of tattoos among this group. Some scholars have argued that tattoos can be viewed as tools of self completion and permanent reminders of one's true identity in an ever changing world (Rosenblatt 1997; Carroll & Anderson 2002; Langman 2003). According to Shannon Bell (1999:57), to get a tattoo is "to live in truth for eternity." In an era when one's professional or marital identity might very readily change with the ebbs and flows of life, the ability of tattoos to serve as an unchangeable reminder of the true self makes them highly desirable.

For many other scholars, the media has played the pivotal roll in the spread of tattoo. According to Mary Kosut (2006:1043), one explanation for the recent rise in the acceptability of tattoos is that current media portrayals often separate the art of tattoo from its working class roots: "popular print discourses have contributed to the erasure of early images and meanings of tattoo by recreating tattoo as a middle-class cultural practice with inherent aesthetic value." Demello (1995:42) echoed this sentiment when she argued that the media has made tattoos more acceptable by:

> first focusing their articles around a select group of middle-class individuals, most of whom have relatively small, inoffensive tattoos; by second, denying all of those who do not fit this category the right to be represented, except as the absent unit of comparison; and third, by centering the discussion around ideas which are very popular outside of the tattoo community.

According to Demello, the media often purposefully ignore those who were tattooed for the old reasons, such as drunkenness or machismo. Instead, she has argued that the media now focus on things such as the amount of preparation or financial resources needed for a good tattoo. By portraying tattoos as a serious investment as opposed to an intoxicated spur of the moment waste of money, the media have made it so that tattoos "can be appreciated and understood even by the non-tattoo wearing, middle-class public" (ibid).

Critiquing Claims of Mainstream Acceptance

Even though tattoos have been adopted by many middle class Americans, there is still a question about the role of tattoos in American culture (Demello 1995). The old way of looking at tattoos (i.e., socially and criminally deviant) maintains its hold for many in this society. The pairing of the rapid expansion of tattoos against this old way of thinking has resulted in "the creation of a sort of cultural war... over the definitions and meanings of tattoos in society" (Irwin 2001:54). One's personal orientation towards tattoos aside, the key issue at hand becomes whether or not America as a whole now accepts tattoos. Many believe that tattoos have become so widespread as to be considered mainstream (Demello 1995; Deschesnes et al 2006b; Kosut 2006), but is this the case? I argue it is not.

Americans are often cautioned about the ramifications for going too far with tattoos. A recent edition of one popular magazine contains an advertisement for a tattoo removal cream. In the ad, a young lady describes how a tattoo on her back, which was visible in her wedding dress, started a family feud that ultimately led to her divorce. The ad asserts that tattoos are now merely skin-deep mistakes and that tattooed readers should "let them see you, not your tattoo." Similarly, another popular magazine article reported

that: "in the past few years, the garish body-art trend has taken on an increasingly negative connotation as it has become a signifying mark of street gangs and prison inmates" (Sayre 2007:56). By labeling tattoos as garish, outlandish and having negative connotations, the author suggests that tattoos are still deviant. Moreover, the author warns that many potential employers, including the US Marines and numerous police forces, find tattoos to be unprofessional.

Examples of negative portrayals of tattoos abound throughout other popular media outlets, as well. One example of tattoos being presented as unprofessional can be found in a popular sitcom about a working class couple. During one episode, the main male character met a married couple at his local gym. Both the husband and wife were tattooed. When the main character introduced the tattooees to his wife, the tattooed couple began talking about their tattoos. After the tattooed woman asked the main character's wife if she had any tattoos, the wife responded: "Tattoos? No. I have a job, sooo..." The message is unmistakable: respectable people do not get tattooed. Representations such as this indicate that there is no way to know what will become of the tattoo fad's trajectory. Assumptions of future normalization should be received with skepticism (Kosut 2006).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It should be noted that I am a tattooed person and that I had already spent many hours in a variety of tattoo shops prior to starting this research, which prevented me from beginning the process completely void of any prior assumptions. Nonetheless, I attempted to enter the field with an unassuming agenda. I began collecting data with a few ideas of where the data might lead, but I was not committed to any single research question. Indeed, what I first thought might be an interesting study on tattoo artists ultimately turned into a project about first time tattooees as well as other people with tattoos.

Just as I did not enter the field with a particular question in mind, I also did not have any single theoretical framework in place until I began writing. Although scholars following the interpretivist tradition may be better equipped to analyze data from the onset, the temptation to mold data to a given theory can be overwhelming. Utilizing one's favorite theory to interpret a set of data can be a meaningful scholarly exercise, but I would argue that the ultimate goal of any research should be to allow the data to speak for itself (Jorgensen 1989; Wainwright 1997). Although abstaining from theorizing until the latter days of this research project may have made it a more difficult and lengthy task, it ultimately helped me to compile a theoretical approach that *best* explains what was taking place in the shop and how this relates to American society at large.

One theory that helps to explain the growing number of tattoos among middle class individuals and the new way of perceiving tattoos is cohort replacement. Cohort replacement theorists explain social change by focusing on differences between younger and older (birth year) cohorts. Cohort replacement theory cannot explain all methods of

social change, such as change that sweeps across all age ranges in a society (Firebaugh 1989). On the contrary, cohort replacement theory explains social change that occurs via "intercohort differentiation" (Ryder 1965:853). In other words, cohort replacement is only appropriate when clear and sizeable differences in perceived acceptability of and participation in a given behavior exist between cohorts. Furthermore, it is the newer cohorts that increasingly challenge existing norms and push for social change. Over time, each new cohort becomes more and more accepting of the given behavior until society's norm has been effectively changed for all members of society. The cohort effect differs from the mellowing effect that comes with age. Regarding tattoos, the growing acceptance of tattoos does not reflect a "change in the opinions of individuals," but a change in "population *membership*" (Firebaugh 1989:243). Those presently in the older cohorts did not think positively about tattoos when they were younger only to grow out of any fascination with tattoos as they matured. Rather, the vast majority of members currently comprising the older cohorts have always been opposed to tattooing (Sanders 1989; Kosut 2006). For the purpose of this article younger cohorts will include individuals under thirty years of age, middle-aged cohorts will include ages thirty to fifty-four and older cohorts will consist of anybody older than fifty-five.

Tattoos seem to be crossing class boundaries and gaining acceptance among younger cohorts. At the same time, however, the eldest members of society possessing the majority of power are considered to be anti-tattoo and this contradiction ultimately influences the manner in which new tattooees are tattooed. Therefore, a discussion of contemporary tattoo practices should attempt to go beyond an analysis of cohort replacement and attempt to explain the manner in which young tattooees negotiate this

conflict. I will use dramaturgy in my attempt to explain how young tattooees transition through mainstream society. According to Erving Goffman (1959), social interactions can best be understood by using a dramaturgical approach. Just as an actor portrays a certain character to his audience, so too does an individual play a role when interacting with others. The dramaturgical "front" put forth by an individual is meant to protect his best interest, which is ultimately to:

> control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. (ibid.:3-4)

Applied to the issue at hand, this statement suggests that the hidden location of one's tattoos ultimately allows him to influence how others perceive him. One of the "many motives for trying to control the impression they receive" (ibid.:15) among new tattooees that I will discuss below is their career.

The process of impression management, whereby people with tattoos regularly prevent others from discovering their stigmatized tattoos, calls into question the tattoo's relationship with the tattooee's identity. Tattoos are often deeply intertwined with one's identity, but there is a fine distinction between tattoos serving as an expression of one's identity and tattoos helping to form one's identity. I argue that tattooed people could fall into both categories, but that people with tattoos, such as those included in this study, most likely fall into the former category. For example, a tattooee may get a small flag of his/her home country on a deltoid. While this is an expression of national identity, the tattoo itself does not automatically influence how others (or oneself) perceive the individual, especially if the tattooee takes strides to prevent others from becoming aware

of the tattoo. In the words of Goffman (1964), people with tattoos "pass" as normal members of society by keeping secret the existence of their stigma, or tattoo. Therefore, the ink does not affect one's social identity.

METHODS

I conducted research for this project in a medium sized, midwestern city. Following the recommendations of previous tattoo researchers (Deschesnes et al 2006a), I decided that it would be most beneficial to become a participant observer. Since most of the subjects entered the shop only once or twice while I was in the field and our interactions were fairly brief, I became what Gold (1958:221) termed an "observer-as-participant." As an observer-as-participant, there is greater access to a larger pool of potential subjects. Participant observation also presents the opportunity to learn about previously unthought of, albeit highly relevant, issues (Whyte 1955). However, the somewhat brief nature of the interaction increases the chances of misunderstanding clients. In order to minimize this, it was important to combine the method of informal conversations with observations (Berg 2007). Gaining entrée was an admittedly easy task, for I already had a relationship with a local tattoo shop, where I was offered a job as a receptionist. The shop is close to a large university, and although a large percentage of the shop's clientele are university students, it also draws customers from the surrounding areas. Clients regularly travelled nearly 100 miles to visit the shop. This can be attributed to the shop's highly skilled artists who are well respected in their field. The shop's emphasis on sanitation and professionalism is also an important feature that distinguishes it from other alternatives.

During the five months of data collection, I worked an average of ten to fifteen hours per week. Working at the front counter enabled me to listen to many conversations between tattooees and their friends. Moreover, I was able to probe deeper by engaging tattoo clients in informal conversations as they waited for their tattoo appointments. On average, these informal conversations (N = 34) lasted fifteen minutes. The conversations

were drawn from a convenience sample, because my receptionist duties precluded me from being able to spend any length of time with potentially relevant clients during extremely busy periods. However, I was able to observe and record noteworthy events during these busy moments.

I quickly noticed that my fellow employees were rather uncomfortable with me taking notes in the open, leading to regular conversations on the topic. One afternoon, one of the piercers asked me with suspicion: "You gunna write all sorts of interesting, dirty things about us today?" Moreover, I was regularly told which things I should or should not include in my study. One counter person did not hesitate to tell me that it was foolish to look at things such as whether or not clients bring moral support with them. Given this level of concern, I decided that I should make every attempt to minimize my researcher status. In an attempt to "avoid detracting from or interfering with the ordinary relations and goings-on in the field" (Emerson et al 1995:22), the conversations with clients were neither recorded nor written at the time they took place. Rather, I was in the habit of jotting down notes when nobody was around, while I was running an errand, or when I was in the bathroom. Whereas the selections that are included in this article may differ slightly from the actual conversations, the general spirit and point of each conversation is effectively present.

I attempted to learn three key facts during each informal conversation. First, I wanted to know why the client did or did not bring somebody with them. Second, I asked what the client was getting tattooed and sought to understand any significance attached to the design. Third, I inquired about the reason for the particular size and location of the tattoo. Once I had obtained information about these points, I would simply let the

conversation run its course. Many conversations involved discussions about family members. Socioeconomic aspirations were also an important topic. In addition to providing me with data, these conversations more often than not had a calming effect on those traversing the tattoo culture.

DATA

As a tattooed person, I have spent many hours being tattooed in various shops without ever feeling the need to bring anybody along for moral support. I quickly realized this was not the norm. Early in my research I began to notice a common thread among customers: the vast majority brought friends or family along with them. Not only did the supporting individuals enter the shop with the tattooees, they typically stayed with the person getting the tattoo throughout the application process. This trend was especially common for first time tattooees.

During one month, forty eight individuals came in for tattoos while I was working. An additional thirty nine clients came in for tattoo consultations, though I only consider those individuals who actually received a tattoo during a given visit to be people who came in for tattoos. Tattoo consultations took multiple forms. First, some clients, especially those desiring larger and more intricate pieces, needed to make a thirty minute appointment with an artist. During this time, the artist would discuss the client's desires and options as well as draw a rough sketch of the tattoo. Second, some people came into the shop without a specific tattoo idea in mind. Rather, they often posed generic questions about the tattoo process and the shop's pricing methods. Finally, many potential tattooees walked into the shop without appointments but with specific designs in mind. When possible, these individuals were introduced to an artist who specializes in the type of tattoo the individual was interested in. Otherwise, shop personnel would take a copy of their design back to an artist who was working. The artist provided a time and price estimate that was then relayed to the client.

Among the forty eight tattooees, thirty two had at least one person accompany them. Eleven of the sixteen clients who came alone had previously been tattooed, many of them multiple times. There were also thirty nine tattoo consultations during this time period, thirteen of which came alone. It is interesting to note that the ratio (one third) of individuals coming alone and individuals coming with company was exactly the same for both people getting tattooed and people merely being consulted. I will later show how this calls into question clients' stated reasons for bringing moral support.

After noticing the tendency for tattooees to bring moral support, a term often invoked by clients and those accompanying them, I began to question tattooees about their reasons for doing so. One young client said that she simply needed somebody to talk to during the tattoo process. She claimed that the person was there in order to avoid boredom, though most of clients I spoke with said they brought others along because they felt uncomfortable entering the tattoo shop for the first time. Gina was a typical example of such clients:

> D: Did you have somebody with you for your first tattoo, too?
> G: Yeah, I came with a guy friend the first time.
> D: And why'd you come with him?
> G: He's got a lot of tattoos, he's got 'em everywhere. And I wanted somebody who'd been through it before to come with me because... I was intimidated!

Upon further inquiry, I found that there were two commonly stated reasons for the intimidation. First, many clients claimed that they were afraid of physical pain. Naomi came in with her sister-in-law and brother, as they were both previously tattooed and were good sources of moral support. When she entered the shop, she was obviously nervous and pacing. When I asked Naomi why she was so nervous, her sister-in-law jumped in and said "She's afraid of the pain." Naomi confirmed her fear of pain and later

added that this fear played a roll in the selection of a suitable place on her body for her tattoo: "Well I have a friend who has one on her neck and she said it didn't hurt at all so that's why I chose the neck." Even though Naomi said she chose the back of her neck because it would not hurt, she also stated that her career goal of being a lawyer demanded that she place the tattoo someplace where she could easily hide it. This led to questioning whether it was pain that was *the* reason for her nervousness and need for moral support. Other clients also altered their claims about fear of pain upon further questioning.

The other reason clients felt intimidated was a fear of the unknown. Most clients had little or no previous experience with the tattoo culture prior to entering the shop. Although they had seen tattooed athletes and celebrities on television and in movies, they had few live encounters with tattooed people; the shop often represented the first real opportunity to interact with tattooed people. In order to offset this unfamiliarity and discomfort, many clients brought people with tattoos for moral support. For example, Eugene brought his friend, Tom, because Tom "has a tattoo already and has been through it all already."

Although many clients, like Naomi, claimed that it was merely a fear of pain that caused them to bring friends and/or family, the data suggest that this is an insincere claim meant to save face. If it was really a fear of pain that led clients to bring moral support, then one would expect to find a clear distinction between the number of individuals who came in for tattoos with support and the number who came in for tattoo consultations with support. After all, if one is not getting a tattoo on a given day, there is little need to be concerned with physical pain. There would be no need for moral support. However, since clients were just as likely to bring support for a consultation as they were for an

actual tattoo, it is not likely that the clients were, in fact, afraid of pain. On the contrary, it is my contention that it was the fear of and lack of comfort with tattoo culture, as discussed by Eugene, that drove clients to bring support into the shop.

It is important to note that participants in my study primarily gave the same motivations for getting tattooed, such as fashion and identity formation, as the subjects found in the literature discussed above and that they rarely viewed their tattooing experience as inherently wrong or deviant. Most tattooees, especially young ones, truly felt that getting tattooed was a viable way to express one's identity. I argue, therefore, that the reason clients felt the need to bring moral support stems from their awareness of tattoo's low social standing. Even though they believed tattoos were acceptable for themselves and significant others, respondents expressed a belief that society as a whole still does not accept tattooed people and that being tattooed would likely lead to negative sanctions in the future, such as personal or professional discrimination. The same belief that led tattooees to bring moral support also influenced their decisions regarding the location of their tattoos. In order to help prevent future sanctions, tattooees chose locations that are typically unseen in public. Such fear of negative sanctions in response to tattoos is not unfounded; incidences of employer discrimination against tattooees have increased in recent years (Baldas 2005; Jones 2005) and public opinion often supports such discrimination (Mann 2005). Furthermore, media and career counselors regularly warn against getting tattoos in order to avoid such problems (Smith 2005; Vogel 2007). These facts support the notion that society is in a transitional period, wherein the older and more powerful cohorts continue to oppose the youthful tattoo trend. In response, clients felt the need to have a friend nearby, because they recognized that they were about

to cross the boundary of socially accepted behavior. Clients were keenly aware that negative reprisals are more likely to come from older members of society than from younger members. Generational differences regarding the acceptability of tattoos are explained below using cohort replacement theory, whereas the methods utilized by tattooees to negotiate social arenas dominated by older cohorts are framed in a dramaturgical discussion.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Cohort Replacement

If cohort replacement theory is an appropriate explanation of modern tattooing, then one would expect to find lower rates of tattooing among those over a certain age. Results of a 1989 poll indicated that 3% of the general population had at least one tattoo (Anderson 1992), while more recent studies have estimated the percentage of tattooed Americans to be between ten and twenty percent (Whelan 2001; Kosut 2006; Stirn et al 2006). Of those getting tattoos, the majority are younger, as this group is far more accepting of tattoos: "The rate of tattooing in the 1990s has been documented to be much higher in young people than among adults" (Schulz et al 2006:123). Therefore, these data support the "assumption of cohort theory that social transformations have greater impact on the young than on the old" (Firebaugh & Harley 1991:499).

The data collected during my time at the shop also support Schulz et al's (2006) claim that members of younger cohorts are tattooed at higher rates than those of older cohorts. Furthermore, my experiences in other shops and interactions with various artists suggest that this trend is more widespread than just in the Midwest. During the same month for which I provided numerical data above, sixty-seven clients under the age of thirty entered the shop for a tattoo or consultation. In comparison, only twenty people over thirty years old came to the shop for tattoos or consultations, eight of whom were between the ages of forty and fifty-four and two more who were fifty-five or older. While this is only one month's worth of observations, there seems to be a decline in the number of tattooees within the older cohort groups (ibid.).

In addition to these patterns, members of the older cohorts tend to come from groups that have long been stereotypically linked to tattoos, such as soldiers, convicts, and members of the working class. The majority of those over thirty who came into the shop would be considered working to lower middle class, which I determined based upon each client's profession and residence. Both of the senior citizens who came into the shop during the month I was observing were working class. The majority of clients in the middle-aged cohorts would also fall into this class, though there were some with at least middle class standing, such as a local TV news anchorman who got a small tattoo on his upper arm. Finally, the majority of young tattooees either came from the middle class or had middle class aspirations. This does not mean that young soldiers, convicts and working class individuals are no longer getting tattooed. Rather, they no longer have the same virtual monopoly on tattooing, as they did when current members of older cohorts were younger. This change in the class make-up of young tattooees suggests that cohort replacement is occurring.

Another fact that points to cohort replacement is the adherence to the old way of thinking about the behavior among members of older cohorts. For example, to fit with the cohort replacement perspective, older people should still associate tattoos with deviance. The fact that a member of the older cohort may participate in the non-normative behavior does not necessarily mean that they have changed their perception of the behavior or that they think the behavior should become normative. Betty entered the shop with her daughter, Maggie, and grandson, Joe. Although Betty had a tattoo, she still thought of it as deviant:

D: So what made you decide to get a tattoo?
B: Well, you know, it was our little walk on the wild side… I was sixty-seven when I had it done. My husband don't like it though.
D: Oh he doesn't? (smirking)
B: No, he thought it was gunna be smaller.
D: Oh, he knew about it ahead of time?
B: Yeah, but he thought it was only gunna be like this (shows me her right hand and makes a hole about the size of a half dollar.)
D: So he doesn't like it then?
B: (shrugs shoulders and pauses) No.

Betty thought of getting a tattoo as an act of deviance, and later told me that she would never have gotten the tattoo on her own or if she had to pay for it herself. She was tattooed with four other women, all of whom considered their tattoos to be their "walk on the wild side." Her husband's reaction was consistent with the notion that older individuals will see the act (and lasting symbol) as outside normal behavior.

Although her mom and dad both considered tattoos deviant, Maggie, who was in her upper thirties, liked larger tattoos. As Betty and I were speaking, Maggie interrupted us:

M: Hey, how much would this cost. Just like that. The whole thing. (She was pointing at a flash piece of a chalice tilted with wine splashing out from the top and a cross floating above it. There was a banner around it which read last call for alcohol.)
D: Oh, you'd have to ask Mikey about that (point to Mikey)
B: (scoots to the edge of the couch and leans forward in order to see what her daughter is talking about.) Oh you wouldn't get that!?
M: Sure I would.
B: That big!?!?
M:Yeah, on my back (points to the small of her back)
B: No, that's too much. That's crazy.

This interaction between Betty and Maggie provides a good example of cohort replacement, as it shows the different degrees to which members of various age groups have come to accept tattoos. Maggie's desires and actions show that she was "more likely than [her] elders to criticize the existing order" (Ryder 1965:850), which states that

tattoos are not normal. Not only did Maggie bring her son (who is a minor) to be tattooed, she was also interested in getting a tattoo that is approximately six inches by six inches. Even though it would be in a hidden location, her mother still thought the tattoo's size made it "too much." In Betty's eyes, it was one thing to get a small tattoo in a moment of weakness, but it was quite another to plan a large tattoo.

Marybeth is another woman over thirty with tattoos. Much like the subject of the popular magazine's article discussed above, Marybeth is a police officer. As was the case for each of her previous two tattoos, Marybeth brought moral support – her friend Justine, who was also a client of the shop:

> D: Is this your first tattoo?
> M: No, my third.
> D: Oh, ok. Where are the other ones?
> M: (pointing to the places on her body) One is on my lower back. And one is on my ankle. This one is going on my side.
> D: How come you brought somebody with you?
> M: Moral support.
> D: (leaning in attentively) And why did you need moral support?
> M: Well, you know it's scary.... And I guess I just wanted somebody there with me for something so permanent.
> J: (suddenly putting down her magazine and interjecting from the couch) I just need somebody to talk to me and hold my hand.
> D: So that's it? It's just that it's scary?
> M: (nods yes) And... well, it's not something you're supposed to do. So it's good to have somebody there.

Marybeth used tattoos to commemorate loved ones and express her identity, as shown by the fact that she was getting her children's names on her side. Yet even though she believed that tattoos can legitimately be used as a form of identity formation, she still felt that getting tattooed was a violation of social norms. As is expected following the cohort replacement theory, Marybeth's middle-agedness correlates to a more moderate version of social change. Whereas she was progressive in her use of tattoos as a form of identity

formation, she maintained the old notion that tattoos are inherently deviant. Her views on tattoos were solidified by her experience as a police officer:

> D: Do you tell people about your tattoos? At work?
> M: No. I mean if they ask I'll tell them. My family all knows.
> D: What kind of work do you do?
> M: (Pauses for approximately five seconds, looks at her friend and smiles nervously) Ummm… I'm a cop.
> D: I just read an article a few weeks back. A cop in California got a full sleeve done and then they decided tattoos weren't allowed. Palo Alto I think it was.
> M: Yeah, we're not allowed to show them. We can't offend people. If it offends somebody then that's not good.

Marybeth never criticized the fact that tattoos are still non-normative. On the contrary, she said that tattoos are deviant and accommodated others who feel that way by getting tattooed in unobjectionable locations. Not only has she complied with police regulations regarding visible tattoos, she also refrained from openly disclosing the fact that she has multiple tattoos.

The majority of new tattooees from the younger cohorts in both my shop and the general population are now middle class (Demello 1995; Kosut 2006). Charlie is in her mid twenties and attends graduate school. During our conversation, she made it clear that she did not consider tattoos deviant. Charlie is approximately ten years younger than Marybeth and her refusal to label tattoos as deviant showed that she is even one step further along the continuum of progressive social change. Nonetheless, her professional aspirations led her to choose a more discrete location: "I don't mind, but I may end up at a conservative place and I don't want to cut myself off already just because of a tattoo. So I'd like it either on my back or side." Charlie wished that tattoos could be more widely accepted, but was under the impression that such acceptance remains a long way off.

Current and previous rates of Americans with tattoos highlight the applicability of cohort replacement, which is strengthened by the increasing prevalence of middle class tattooees and a steady decrease of associating tattoos with deviance within each progressively younger cohort—regardless of one's own tattooed status (Armstrong et al 2002). The older cohorts, as exemplified by Betty, were overwhelmingly working class. Middle-aged cohorts, as exemplified by Marybeth, tended to be working class, though there was a definitive middle class presence emerging. Marybeth considered tattoos to be deviant, but her friend, Justine, did not. Finally, younger cohorts, as exemplified by Charlie, were majority middle class and hoped that tattoos could become more accepted. In contrast to Marybeth, who did not voice displeasure with the fact that tattoos are perceived negatively, Charlie and other members of younger cohorts were sure to quickly point out that they disagreed with the notion that tattoos are deviant. Young clients were well aware that tattoo's status has not changed for older cohorts. Nonetheless, they have become participants in the social transformation that now sees tattoos as worthy of mainstream, respected individuals. In order to both satisfy their desire for tattoos and accommodate older, more powerful cohorts, young clients took great care to make sure their tattoos would not be discovered by those who do not approve. The methods employed by the clients can best be explained through a dramaturgical analysis.

Dramaturgy

New tattooees were aware that they would eventually need to transition out of their youthful setting into one dominated by older individuals and that their tattoos would likely be received with some hostility. Irwin (2001) argued that new tattooees attempt to

make their tattoos seem legitimate to nontattooed people by emphasizing the middle class motivations for their tattoos. In other words, tattooees often feel pressured to give accounts of their tattoos to others in order to justify what is an otherwise "socially undesirable" act (Orbuch 1997: 457). While this specific shop's clientele were most commonly tattooed for reasons discussed by Irwin, such as the young college graduate who was tattooed with the school's mascot in celebration of graduation, I find it more meaningful to focus on the fact that the majority of new tattooees were tattooed in places that are rarely visible to others. After all, tattooees knew that if they interviewed for a professional job, and the interviewer was disapproving of tattoos in general, then it would matter very little whether they got the tattoo in honor of graduation, in remembrance of a lost loved one, or as an initiation into a street gang. Hence, clients entered the shop prepared to undergo the process of impression management.

An important time to be able to control others' perceptions, and one often mentioned by clients, is during a job interview. Clients expressed a fear that the interviewer, who will likely fall into one of the older cohorts, will maintain the traditional way of thinking about tattoos and discriminate against them if they have visible tattoos. Clients came into the shop hoping to be able to manage future impressions by getting their tattoos in discrete locations. Brittney was the sister of a tattoo artist, but said she hopes to become a French teacher after graduation. Although she and the rest of her family had wholly accepted her sister's many visible tattoos, Brittney only had tattoos on her back and ribs, because she didn't want to "jeopardize a chance at getting a teaching job in the tight economy." Even after I told her that I was able to get a job as a teacher after I was already a tattooed person, she remained skeptical, because she knew that

tattoos are not ideal for teachers. Goffman (1959) explained how this awareness of professional standards affects an individual's actions:

> If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards. When an inappropriate conduct is itself satisfying in some way, as is often the case, then one commonly finds it indulged in secretly; in this way the performer is able to forgo his cake and eat it too. (41)

Brittney found tattoos satisfying in the sense that "it looks good." Yet, she knew that teachers are expected to look and behave a certain way. Accordingly, she secretly indulged in tattoos by having her tattoos placed on parts of the body that could never be seen while working.

Valerie also picked a location that would not cause her to violate professional standards. While she initially wanted a tattoo in a visible location, she later decided against it after considering how it might affect her work:

> V: I wanted it on my neck at first but I decided to get it lower down on the top of my back. I can't have it to where it'll be showing.
> D: Why couldn't you have a tattoo showing?
> V: Well, I'm training to work in a hospital and I wear my hair up a lot. The hospital doesn't let you have tattoos that people can see, because people don't like them. People are offended by them. I mean, I'm not. But others are offended by them so I can't have it on my neck.

Valerie needed to be able to conceal her tattoo, because she knew that tattoos are "incompatible with the image of self" to the other (Goffman 1967:141) that she would have to maintain for hospital administrators. Accordingly, the entirety of Valerie's tattoo was located beneath the neckline.

By getting tattooed in hidden locations, tattooees can be confident that their tattoo will not prevent them from being seen as cultured or civilized during non-intimate interactions (Goffman 1967). Easily hidden areas of the body are particularly appealing

to people with tattoos, because they allow tattooees to pass as normal and prevent damage to their social identity (Goffman 1964). Lindsay, a client and university student with one tattoo, realized that having a tattoo is "still wrong" in the eyes of society. She took great care in selecting the location of her tattoo— a French translation of 'No Regrets' under her left breast that served as a reminder of the type of person she desires to be. While she felt comfortable showing her tattoo to close friends, she strategically placed the tattoo where nobody could see it without her permission so that her elder family members, as well as future employers and coworkers, would never have the opportunity to judge her negatively based upon her tattoo. Lindsay's story demonstrates Goffman's (1967) avoidance process: "The surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur" (15). People with tattoos who have white collar aspirations know that they will have to interact with nontattooed people who view tattoos negatively. Whereas they 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.

The majority of new tattooees received tattoos in places that could never be seen while wearing shorts and a t-shirt, let alone while dressed appropriately for a professional work environment. Many females were tattooed on their hip bone, beneath the waistline, or on the top of their foot. It has also become increasingly popular for both male and

female tattooees to be tattooed on their rib cage. Ironically, the locations where one can most easily hide a tattoo, such as the foot and rib cage, are also among the most painful. For this reason, most tattoo artists preferred not to do a first tattoo on these sensitive areas and shop personnel regularly suggested alternative bodily locations.

As I have already discussed, many clients claimed to be afraid of what they perceive to be the extremely painful tattoo process. If they were afraid of the pain, it would be logical to conclude that they would be willing to take the advice of the shop's employees and consider getting their first tattoo in a less painful place. One wonders then why the majority of first time clients refused to change their mind about the location of their tattoo. Based upon the oft repeated concerns about future employability and personal rejection, I argue that the tattooees were more concerned with the social stigma of having a more readily visible tattoo than the temporary physical pain experienced while getting the tattoo. The clients were aware of the status of tattoos and more willing to experience physical pain. For example, Brittney knowingly entered a very painful rib tattooing process in order to prevent future job discrimination. Her tattoo had to be broken into several sessions, due to the intense pain. In the words of Goffman (1967:14), such a client exhibits "a defensive orientation toward saving his own face". Clients were aware that they will need to be able to hide their tattoos in the future in order to maintain the image they wish to present to others-- especially elder people in positions of authority. The shop's artists were also aware of this, which led to the shop policy of refusing to tattoo minors in visible locations as well as refraining from tattooing hands until a client has significant body coverage.

Although there is currently a need for young individuals to undergo impression management, this may no longer be the case in the future if cohort replacement is, indeed, taking place. As each younger cohort becomes more accepting of tattoos and then transitions into positions of power, there should be less and less need for tattooees to save face by hiding their tattoos from those in power. On the other hand, if the same dramaturgical practices currently used by tattooees are still required in a few decades, when today's youth occupy positions of power, then cohort replacement theory could be deemed an inappropriate explanation of today's tattoo phenomenon. Herein lies the major weakness of cohort replacement theory: there is no way to know whether it is appropriate until several more cohorts emerge and that requires significant amounts of time. Future researchers will need to reexamine this issue and determine if I have been correct in suggesting cohort replacement theory.

CONCLUSION

The expanding popularity of tattoos seems to be based on the fact that these can serve various purposes for different individuals. Some use them as a fashion tool whereas others use them as a method of identity formation, such as commemorating a lost loved one or representing one's neighborhood. At the same time, society condemns tattooees for their permanent markings based on the idea that only deviants would do such a thing. Successful musicians, actors and athletes are regularly seen with visible tattoos and inspire many young tatttooees to join the ranks of the tattooed. Yet while tattooees from younger cohorts increasingly find tattoos normative, tattoos are in limbo-- neither fully damned nor fully lauded. Demello (1995) has argued that those promoting tattoos have won the cultural battle and gained tattoo's acceptance in the mainstream culture, but tattoo clients remain concerned about cultural rejection.

In this article I have argued that this state of confusion stems from the process of cohort replacement. By looking at how many people are getting tattooed from each cohort as well as the types of people who are becoming tattooed, I have shown that cohort replacement theory is helpful for understanding tattoo's changing role in American society. Following this theory, each cohort embraces the idea that tattoos are acceptable forms of expression and fashion to a greater degree than the previous cohort. Each younger cohort is also less likely to accept the norm against tattoos. Although the process of cohort replacement appears to be underway, the likelihood of becoming a tattooed person instead of a person with tattoos remains low for middle class individuals. Future researchers should continue to conduct analyses of mainstream tattooees in order to determine if cohort replacement theory is the best explanation of the current trend.

The seemingly contradictory situation in which tattoos are both mainstream and unacceptable contributes to clients' impression management. In an attempt to fill the sociological gap of qualitative analysis in tattoo research, I have shown that clients go to great lengths, including severe pain, to maintain a presentation of the self that is acceptable to society's powerful members. In addition to getting tattooed in discreet locations, many people with tattoos openly chastise tattooed people. James, a very well known and respected artist in the tattoo industry, told me how this relates to some of his clients:

> There is an old saying in the tattoo community: "the only difference between tattooed people and non tattooed people, is that, tattooed people don't care if you're *not* tattooed." Sadly, you even see this with minor tattooed folks. The middle age business woman decides to get the small rose ankle tattoo, and quickly makes fun the people who have sleeves or back pieces. "How could anyone get *that"*, she'll say.

What seems to be a contradiction at the societal level sometimes reveals itself to be hypocrisy at the individual level. The fact that millions of Americans continue to get tattooed has led some scholars to suggest tattoos are now mainstream. Yet, as I have argued, tattoos are not wholly accepted based on the accounts of those I talked to who were in the process of getting tattoos. As more and more people choose to express themselves through ink, the dramaturgical processes meant to maintain one's "dark secret" (Goffman 1959:141) will become increasingly harmful to tattooees and, in turn, the greater society. Should the cohort replacement concerning tattoos stall out, millions of Americans will be fated to live a life of "a special kind of alienation from self" (ibid.:236).

Were tattoos just another youthful fad that parents and elders disapproved of, discrimination against tattooees would not be as pressing an issue. However, tattoos are

more than a typical fad: "Even if the meanings of tattoos shift, and their present cultural currency declines or exhausts, most tattooed bodies will bear this ironic fad for the course of the life cycle" (Kosut 2006:1043). According to Kosut, over half of all adolescents have seriously considered getting a tattoo. There is a bleak future for today's youth should they get tattooed only to enter a workforce where two in five adults think simply having a tattoo justifies being denied employment and a majority of those who hire applicants are anti-tattoo (Jones 2005; Mann 2005). The combination of more highly skilled and highly educated Americans getting tattoos (Demello 1995; Greif et al 1999; Armstrong 2002) with increasing discrimination against tattooees (Baldas 2005; Smith 2005; Vogel 2007) is setting the table for a nation that forever disqualifies highly productive members solely based on pigmentation. Surely, this cannot lead to the betterment of our society; sociologists must pay more attention to the tattoo phenomenon in order to help avert such a problem in the future.

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