
Body Tattooing And Symbolic Interactionism

Sanders and Vail (2009) state that archaeological evidence shows that during the late Stone Age, body tattooing was already being practiced by people. In our time today, tattooing and body piercing have become increasingly prevalent in popular culture for the last 30 years (Featherstone; Sweetman, as cited on Carroll & Anderson, 2002). In fact, there is not a day that goes by that one does not see a person with a body tattoo. But despite the fact that such act was already being practiced thousands of years ago and more and more people get tattoos nowadays, tattooing is still often seen as a negative behavior (Martin & Dula, 2010). Such stereotypes about people with tattoos include dropping out or being unsuccessful in school, coming from a broken family, having a rough and unhappy childhood, rarely going to church, being bad at decision-making, obtaining body tattoos while drunk, and being an easy victim of peer pressure (Armstrong; Roberts & Ryan; Owen & Kochraditi, as cited in Martin & Dula, 2010). In addition, people with tattoos are viewed as impulsive and irresponsible, and are associated with psychiatric disturbances, when it comes in literature.

This paper aims to discuss the different meanings and reasons behind an individual's tattoo with the use of symbolic interactionism. According to Blumer (as cited in Denzin, 1992), symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. In other words, it focuses on the several meanings that people give to certain objects, people, and interactions, and the corresponding behaviors reflecting those meanings. Those who have body tattoos do not share the same reason why they obtained them. For example, the dominant purpose of tattooing in all tribe societies was to denote the bearer's social identity or status (Sanders & Vail, 2009). It is also believed that the painful process in tattooing is a part of the rite of passage to adulthood. People who have undergone the said ritual could then demonstrate their bravery to the other members of the tribe. A perfect example to this would be the Kayan women in Borneo. They were given leg and arm tattoos which often portrays traditional stylized dog designs. It is significant for them to cover the arm below the elbow because an undecorated arm, for them, is a sign of cowardice, or the inability to endure pain.

Meanwhile, body tattooing can also be a way to search for oneself. A person's physical appearance affects his or her self-definition, identity, and interaction with others (Cooley; Stone; Zurcher, as cited in Sanders & Vail, 2009). Moreover, Martin (as cited in Carroll & Anderson, 2002) identifies adolescence as a stage wherein body modification becomes particularly appealing as adolescents struggle for identity and control over their changing behavior. In a study conducted by Armstrong and McConnell (as cited in Carroll & Anderson, 2002), they found that tattooing was motivated by the desire to showcase a specific image to others and to enhance self-concept. Meanwhile, in Armstrong et al.'s (as cited in Carroll & Anderson, 2002), it was found that most of the individuals who went to a dermatology to have their tattoos removed said that they impulsively obtained their tattoos, in which they related this decision to a search for self-identity.

In another study, Grief, Hewit, and Armstrong (as cited in Carroll & Anderson, 2002) state that 73% of their sample were tattooed while 51% had body piercings, and the motivation for both piercing and tattooing among the sample was self expression. However, not everyone agrees to

the interpretation that was mentioned earlier. For example, Craik (as cited in Carroll & Anderson, 2002) assume that body piercings and tattoos are only for fashion purposes. Moreover, Sweetman (as cited in Carroll & Anderson, 2002) noted in his interviews with tattooed and pierced body that they see their body art as decorative accessories. It is like their body is the canvas while the tattoos are paintings, and the piercings are decorative pieces that are part of their artwork.

Meanwhile, some disagree with the interpretation that body piercings and tattoos help increase positive feelings when it comes to self-worth and body image. An example would be Kuniandy (as cited in Carroll & Anderson), wherein she explored self-esteem among high school students who had body piercings and/or tattoos and those who had not. She then concluded that such forms of body modification are not really related with positive self-esteem.

Overall, body tattooing used to be required for some tribes back then. Nowadays, it is mainly for self expression and for fashion purposes. In conclusion, it is evident that there are numerous meanings and reasons behind even the smallest of things.