Using Dramaturgy to Better Understand Contemporary Western Tattoos

Abstract

Spurred on by increasing participation rates, scholarship on tattoos in Western societies has

increased noticeably in recent decades. Often focusing on members of the middle class,

scholars have assumed that the increasing number of people with tattoos is evidence of

mainstream acceptance. In the following article, I critically evaluate claims of tattoo's new

mainstream status. Rather than being embraced by the mainstream and power elite, studies

and legal proceedings show that tattoos and piercings are only tolerated to a certain degree. I

suggest that applying Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to contemporary tattoos

provides a more complete understand of tattoo's cultural location. It also allows the focus of

the discussion to move beyond the individual attributes and motivations of tattoo wearers and

onto the social interactions surrounding them. Moreover, a dramaturgical analysis of tattoos

shows the need to properly differentiate between tattoos that are always visible and those that

can be concealed. I end by offering a conceptualization of visible tattoos for future

sociological research.

The history of tattoos in Western cultures includes numerous social redefinitions that have often been influenced by the reigning *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age. Whereas ancient Romans used tattoos as a way of disgracing prisoners (van Dinter 2005), the position of tattoos changed in the Middle Ages, as exemplified by the Catholic Church's blessing of tattoos "that were worn to honor God" (Scheinfeld 2007, p. 363). Negative stereotypes associated with tattooees-- people who have been tattooed-- more recently re-emerged in the late nineteenth century after the invention of the electric tattoo machine made tattoos affordable for the working class, causing social elites to distance themselves from the practice they celebrated (Govenar 1982).

Tattooing is seemingly undergoing another transition (Appel et al. 2015; Heywood et al. 2012), as scholars and laypeople insist that they are "not just for bikers anymore" (DeMello 1995, p. 37). Societal shifts in recent decades have not only changed how we *view* the body; they have also changed what we may *do* to the body (Featherstone 1982; Lafrance 2009; Shilling 1993). Accordingly, many mainstream Westerners now see tattoos as meaningful symbols of self expression (Atkinson 2004; Irwin 2001). The increasing interest in tattooing across society has led to a significant growth in tattoo scholarship. Sociologists have been at the forefront of scholarship framing Western tattoos as something other than marks of deviance and psychosocial shortcomings. Atkinson (2004), for example, argued that tattoos are actually a way to conform to Western norms of beauty and self-restraint. By shifting the focus away from the often-flawed pathological concerns of (mental) health scholars attempting to link tattoos with (sexually) risky behavior, sociologists have been able to shed light on the practice's positive social aspects (Atkinson 2003; Strohecker 2011). Nevertheless, there is still a need for sociologists to develop tattoo scholarship further.

In this article, I propose some changes to the tattoo discussion. Perhaps the biggest change to be made is to more rigorously critique the notion that tattoos have gone

mainstream. To this end, I draw upon the dramaturgical perspective while I investigate existing empirical literature. Despite being widely used by sociologists from various specializations, this perspective has not garnered as much attention within tattoo scholarship. Using a dramaturgical approach to understand contemporary tattoos will help us focus on the social interactions surrounding tattoos, which is an important step in painting a more accurate picture of their acceptability within the mainstream. I also argue that sociologists should differentiate between tattoos that are always visible and those that can be concealed, as placement influences the social acceptability of one's tattoos. In order to do so effectively, scholars must first come to a consensus on what constitutes a visible tattoo. Drawing upon the work of Erving Goffman will expose the need for, and enable a better conceptualization of, visible body modification. I suggest that only tattoos on the hands, neck or face should be deemed visible tattoos, as they are the only ones that are (almost) always visible in social interactions typical of Western societies. Applying Goffman's dramaturgical metaphors to existing tattoo scholarship will ultimately help clarify the ambiguity that continues to surround tattoos.

All the world's a stage

The social position of tattoos can be better understood by looking at how tattoos are presented during social interactions. A dramaturgical approach provides such a framework for making sense of symbols and the way they shape, or are shaped by, public encounters. In his influential book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) developed the sociological approach based upon dramaturgy. Portraying life as a series of roles in various plays, Goffman argued that individuals, or actors, regularly occupy spaces across both the frontstage and backstage areas of life. The frontstage, or front region, is where

one must be on, where one must perform a social role that is not necessarily in tune with the truest essence of one's self. In contrast, the backstage is where one can let one's guard down.

In a utopian society, appearances might not matter and people could truly be free to just be themselves. Recognizing this was not the case, Goffman (1959) focused on the manner in which people try to present themselves in the best light possible: "When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part" (p. 242). Goffman's interest in impression management is important, as it pushes us to see that social interactions influence how individuals express themselves. As Lane (2014) showed, much of the tattoo literature has been hypersensitive to the motivations and decisions of individual tattooees, and there is a need to situate tattoos within the realm of social interaction. By accounting for interactions between tattooed individuals and the rest of society (tattooed or not), Goffman's dramaturgical perspective can help sociologists better understand the social position of contemporary tattoos.

The body has not been the primary area of concern for scholars utilizing the dramaturgical perspective, but the "dramaturgical body reveals" a "broad range of applications" (Waskul & Vannini 2006, p. 7) that have the potential for moving both body and tattoo scholarship forward. Crossley (1995) had already made this point about Goffman's larger body of work more than two decades ago. More recently, body scholars have recognized the benefit of Goffman's dramaturgical approach to analyzing problems of the body. Thompson (2013), for example, drew upon Goffman in his investigation of how individuals with Inflammatory Bowel Disease manage impressions while living with a discreditable, "failed body" (p. 28). Goffman's dramaturgical approach has helped body scholars differentiate between the self and the (socially flawed) body. Rather than the body being synonymous with the self, the dramaturgical body is an alterable prop that can be

shaped backstage to enable the successful management of impressions on the frontstage (Goffman 1959, p. 253). While body scholarship has increasingly applied Goffman's dramaturgical approach, few tattoo studies have done the same. This presents an important opportunity for tattoo scholarship, because following the lead of other body scholars can help tattoo scholars see that the shaping, or modifying, of one's body in the backstage is an important aspect of contemporary tattooing. As I will show, the decision where to place tattoos is an important backstage choice meant to avoid negative social repercussions.

The applicability of Goffman's work to the issue of tattoos may not have gained much traction to date, but it has not gone completely unnoticed by sociologists. Three articles of note have incorporated Goffman into their analytical frameworks, but they focused more on his other works than on dramaturgy. Sanders (1988) drew upon Goffman's (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* when discussing how social interactions surrounding tattoos were shaped by tattoo's status as a stigma symbol. Phelan and Hunt (1998) also used *Stigma* when they showed how gang members' tattoos play a role in giving off the desired identity as they pass through various stages of their moral careers. Roberts (2012) supplemented Goffman's dramaturgical work with *Interaction Ritual* (1967) when portraying concealable tattoos as preemptive attempts at saving face. Analyzing tattoos from a dramaturgical view will further emphasize the point that getting tattooed is more than an individual decision, for the "body is fashioned, crafted, negotiated, manipulated and largely in ritualized social and cultural conventions" (Waskul & Vannini 2006, p. 6). Since the body is a product of social interaction that is displayed on the frontstage in a manner designed to give the best impression according to cultural conventions, it is imperative that we understand the cultural value ascribed to tattoos in Western societies.

Does increased participation equal widespread acceptability?

I will now draw upon Goffman's dramaturgical approach as I examine research and legal decisions pertaining to tattoos in order to critique the idea that tattoos are an accepted part of the mainstream culture. Tattooed Westerners are still a minority, but the rapid increase in people engaging in tattoos has led some to suggest the only thing that remains deviant about tattoos is not having any (Irwin 2001). In the early 1990s, an estimated 3-5% of Americans had a tattoo (Varma & Lanigan 1999). A decade later, a Harris Poll estimated that 16% of Americans had a tattoo (Sever 2003). After a slight decline in participation rates between 2003 and 2008, the total percentage of adult Americans with at least one tattoo increased to 21% in 2012-- a 50% increase from 2008. Other Western nations have experienced similar growth over recent decades. The percentage of Germans with tattoos has climbed steadily from 9% in 2003 to 13% in 2014 (IfD-Allensbach 2014). In Great Britain, research has shown that 19% of adults now have tattoos (Jordan 2015). While overall rates of participation in body modification have increased, they are significantly higher among younger generations throughout the West. For example, Britons aged 25-39 are approximately three times more likely to have tattoos than those 60 and above (Jordan 2015). Similarly, Americans aged 25-39 are approximately three times as likely to be tattooed as those aged 50-64 (Braverman 2012). Nearly one quarter of Germans aged 16-29 have tattoos, which is two times and eight times higher than those aged 45-59 and 60 or above, respectively (IfD-Allensbach 2014). It is important to note the negative correlation between age and tattooing-- as age goes up, participation in tattooing goes down-- because this difference in tattooing across age groups influences many social interactions, especially since older cohorts tend to occupy more powerful positions in families, businesses, and other social institutions.

Scholars have pointed to increasing participation rates-- especially among the middle class-- to support the notion that body modification has gone mainstream. The commodification, or commercialization, of tattoos has also been used by scholars to

substantiate claims of mainstream acceptance. Kosut (2006), for example, suggested that the use of tattoos in advertisements is evidence of mainstream acceptance. In her discussion of middle class attempts to legitimize tattoos, Irwin (2001) noted that the media plays an important role in redefining the practice as acceptable to the mainstream.

While scholars have pushed the idea of tattoos becoming mainstream, there is research evidence to the contrary. Irwin's (2001) study demonstrated that "older definitions associating tattoos with dangerous outcasts continued to shroud this form of body modification" (p. 50). Moreover, tattooees are usually aware of this social stigma when they decide to modify their bodies (Roberts 2012). Irwin's (2001) investigation of middle class tattooees revealed that they tend to be afraid that a tattoo may damage social relationships, leading them to carefully select small, highly artistic designs for discreet body parts in order to avoid stigmatization. This allowed her participants to distinguish themselves from non-mainstream individuals and their tattoos, which were perceived as ugly and thuggish. This was most certainly a socially beneficial decision, as Burgess and Clark (2010) found that those with older style tattoos are more likely to be discriminated against than individuals with more contemporary designs. Such pre-emptive "reckoning with what can be seen" (Goffman 1959, p. 222) shows that Irwin's (2001) participants were exercising dramaturgical prudence by "preparing in advance for likely contingencies and exploiting the opportunities that remain" (Goffman 1959, p. 218). Since certain tattoo styles and body parts were considered to be off limits, Irwin's (2001) participants were pushed to select other options, or opportunities, for marking their bodies. The concerns over both placement and style should cause us to ask if tattoos are truly accepted. Indeed, the need for middle class individuals to actively legitimize tattoos (Irwin 2001) and practice pre-emptive stigma management-- that is, even as they are planning their tattoos-- indicates tattoos have yet to gain significant acceptance across society (Roberts 2012).

Despite the efforts of those tattooees seeking to reinterpret the meaning of tattoos, middle class concerns over the acceptability of their modifications are not unjustified. A small, but growing, body of literature addresses differences in perceptions between tattooees and their (potential) employers. While young people increasingly believe there is nothing inherently wrong about having tattoos, those who do the hiring and firing do not necessarily agree. Brallier et al. (2011) found that restaurant managers in South Carolina were more likely to hire applicants without tattoos over equally qualified applicants with arm tattoos-- even though they could be covered by long sleeves. According to Timming (2015), the prejudice of hiring mangers stems from their concern that customers will turn away at the sight of tattoos. Using the terms of dramaturgy, directors do not want actors displaying tattoos on the frontstage, because the audience may not find them befitting the defined (business) situation. Should an individual with tattoos be hired, they may find that workplace discrimination is not limited to management. Interestingly, Miller et al. (2009) found that even young individuals with their own concealable tattoos discriminate against co-workers with tattoos that aren't covered by business attire. Rather than casting these findings aside as an example of hypocrisy, we can employ the dramaturgical perspective to understand this social complexity. Goffman (1959) noted that "if performers are concerned with maintaining a line they will select as teammates those who can be trusted to perform properly" (p. 91). Since tattoos are often perceived as unprofessional, their appearance on the frontstage may not only discredit the individual actor, but the entire team of actors (i.e. employees), thereby resulting in the audience withdrawing their patronage. In order to avoid the potential damage to the entire team, the discreetly tattooed can discriminate against those with tattoos on display.

Not only do individuals and potential employers view the practice negatively, but courts have upheld workplace discrimination pertaining to tattoos (Bible 2010). State and

local governments have terminated employees on the basis of tattoos, such as a Kentucky Parks employee who was fired for not covering his US Navy tattoo (Roberts v Ward 2006). As with private corporations, the courts ruled that states have the right to enforce a dress code prohibiting body modifications. Such court cases are often complicated, but stated simply, employers typically have the legal power to sanction employees who will not (or cannot) conceal their tattoos while at work. Several other judgments from courts in the US and other Western nations have upheld workplace discrimination on the basis of this body modification (Bible 2010; Kelly 2014). For example, Germany's federal anti-discrimination law, *Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz*, does not generally protect people with tattoos and allows each state to decide if it will permit such discrimination (Bundesministerium 2006; Schmidt 2014). The United Kingdom's Equality Act specifically eliminates tattoos from the list of phenomena that are protected against discrimination, thereby permitting employers to reject or fire people who have them (Secretary of State 2010). These cases exemplify the limited extent to which body modifications have been embraced by society's most powerful institutions. The message is that tattoos are only fine so long as customers and co-workers do not have to look at them. In other words, employers have the right to force employees "to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products" (Goffman 1959, p. 48).

Aware of the discrediting nature that is still attached to tattoos, mainstream individuals tend to be tattooed discreetly, even if those discreet locations are particularly painful and not recommended for those having their first encounter with tattoo needles (Roberts 2012). The side ribs, for example, have become a popular location for mainstreamers getting their first tattoos. While the (young) mainstream individuals participating in body modification may be convinced that tattoos are viable forms of personal expression, they recognize that many (older members of society) in positions of power do not

share their views. Applying Goffman's (1959) approach, one sees that such individuals are aware of their discreditable status and that their choice of location and type of modification is intended to keep them from becoming discredited. Moreover, the preference for concealable locations shows that people with tattoos recognize the need to conceal that which does not meet cultural standards of physical appearance. It is important to note that Goffman accounts for the fact that the need to conceal something on the frontstage does not mean that it is without merit:

> When this 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. (1959, p. 41)

Even though they are socially undesirable in various frontstage settings (such as at work or during a first encounter with potential in-laws), scholars have shown that tattoos have a number of positive backstage effects for their wearers, including providing a more positive body image and greater sense of strength (Appel et al. 2015; Braverman 2012). These backstage benefits may even help improve one's frontstage performance, but it is still socially dangerous to openly declare the source of that strength. Accordingly, in order to gain satisfaction from a broadly inappropriate conduct, most tattooees carefully select the location of their modifications so that the tattoos may be denied on the frontstage when necessary.

Looking at the social aspects of tattoos through a dramaturgical lens has shown that tattoos are not truly accepted within the mainstream-- not even amongst mainstream tattoo wearers. The fact that people with tattoos wish to manage impressions by having discreet tattoos is a sociologically meaningful reality that calls for theoretical differentiation between frontstage and backstage tattoos. According to Turner (1999), tattoos that can be covered are merely "removable adornments" (p. 47). Just as one can remove a necklace at whim, so too do mainstream tattooees cover up their leg tattoos when socially advantageous. Contrariwise, a hand tattoo is an immutable expression of one's social loyalties. Not only does this

distinction explain the theoretical differences between people who have tattoos and tattooed people (Bell 1999), it also reflects the lived experiences of tattooees. Kang and Jones (2007), for example, found that "hardcore" tattoos, such as those on the face, "result in stronger stigmatization that can affect employability and social acceptability in ways that a small, easily hidden tattoo would not" (p. 46). Indeed, only those with tattooed "public skin"-- hands, neck, face-- are "unable to escape disdain and disregard" (Irwin 2003, pp. 37-38). Even large tattoos that are not located on public skin can be and are regularly covered in order to avoid negative repercussions. As Turner (1999) noted, there is something inherently different about a tattoo that cannot be denied. It is, therefore, surprising that tattoo scholarship has, in large part, failed to adequately conceptualize visible tattoos and differentiate between those that cannot be covered (i.e. denied) and those that can.

Clarifying visibility

If the placement of one's tattoos has a greater impact on social interactions than the size and number of one's tattoos, then it is imperative that sociologists reach a consensus on what constitutes a visible body modification. To date, the literature contains numerous, contradictory, and often vague understandings of visibility. Dickson et al. (2014) discussed the stigmatization of visible tattoos without ever saying what constitutes a visible modification. Laumann and Derick (2006) claimed that 89% of men and 48% of women with tattoos are visibly tattooed, but their definition of 'visible' included legs, arms, and feet-- all of which are readily and regularly covered in Western societies. Likewise, Armstrong et al. (2008) considered ankle and arm tattoos to be visible tattoos. Brallier et al. (2011) claimed to investigate discrimination against visibly tattoo applicants in the restaurant industry, but the images of people with (obviously fake) tattoos only revealed tattoos above the wrist on the arms.

Some scholars have considered coverage or quantity an important consideration in the significance of one's tattoos. McLeod's (2014) qualitative investigation of visibly and heavily tattooed professionals required participants to have 20% of their body covered by tattoos-- a proportion that could nearly be reached by a single back piece tattoo that would always be covered in a professional setting. In his sociological analysis of Portuguese youth, Ferreira (2014) considered individuals to be heavily tattooed if they had one-third of their body covered. Though this may be a more significant amount of coverage, it is a proportion that can be met without having a single mark visible during everyday social interactions. The 'Body Art Team' at Texas Tech University-- an interdisciplinary team that contains sociologists, but leans in favor of the aforementioned (mental) health perspectives on body modification-- considers the number of tattoos one has to be of greater interest. Koch et al. (2010), for example, asked college students if they had none, 1, 2-3, or 4+ tattoos. In addition to the number of tattoos on a woman's body, Thompson (2015) considers the size, design and location of a woman's tattoos when determining whether she is lightly or heavily tattooed. Despite her important contribution to understanding how women manage the impressions given off by their tattoos, I suggest she has incorrectly labeled forearm and leg tattoos as visible tattoos. As discussed by her own participants, such tattoos are regularly covered while on the frontstage "so they can fit into their social roles" (Thompson 2015, p. 112). In considering the appropriateness of such categories, sociologists should ask if having one tattoo on the throat represents a lesser commitment to tattooing (or if it is less socially significant) than having four microscopic tattoos on the thigh or even a large tattoo on one's side.

The sociologists discussed in this section have not acknowledged an important lesson from the literature reviewed in the preceding sections: namely, the size and number of one's tattoos is not as important for social interactions as whether or not one's tattoos are a

permanent fixture on the frontstage. Goffman (1959) wrote that one's frontstage "performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (p. 34). In other words, the fact that somebody participates in tattooing in the more permissive backstage settings (and the degree to which they do so) speaks less to the practice's social acceptability than whether or not those tattoos are part of frontstage performances. Since the empirical evidence discussed above shows the mere presence of tattoos on the frontstage is incompatible with situational definitions across the West, I argue that the visibility of tattoos is more sociologically significant than their size or number. After all, people are not fired for having 4 tattoos instead of 2, nor are they fired for having a 12 inch tattoo instead of a 3 inch tattoo; they are fired for having unconcealed tattoos on the frontstage.

Redirecting the focus towards that which is always visible will help tattoo scholarship more accurately reflect the role of tattoos in social interactions. Two sociologists who have recently argued for a conceptualization that appreciates the unique nature of visible body modifications are Thomas (2012) and Roberts (2015). Even though they knew they could face financial and social repercussions for their tattoos, the visibly modified people in Roberts' (2015) study chose to be tattooed in places that could not be denied on any frontstage. Applying Goffman's (1959) terminology to Roberts' study, we can see that his participants were renegades, who "take a moral stand, saying that it is better to be true to the ideals of the role than to be performers who falsely present themselves" (p. 165). Rather than being occasional expressions of the self, the tattoos of visibly tattooed renegades become an inseparable part of every frontstage and backstage self. In addition to acknowledging the sociological significance of visibility, it is important for the discipline to establish a common understanding of visibility. Since tattoos on the hands, neck or face are the only ones that are

(almost) always visible in social interactions typical of Western societies, they are the only ones that scholars should label visible tattoos.

Conclusion

Academics and other members of Western society are increasingly interested in tattoos. Scholars have pointed to the rising percentage of people with tattoos as an indicator of mainstream acceptance. Numbers alone, however, are not sufficient evidence. Millions of Westerners, for example, participate in adultery and underage binge drinking. Yet, sociologists do not argue that these are accepted practices within the mainstream. More important than numbers, scholars must consider the qualitative nature of Western body modification. Critically engaging with the notion of mainstream acceptance from a dramaturgical perspective shows that tattoos are still not truly accepted by the mainstream.

Sociologists have done much to shed light on the pro-social aspects of tattoos. In their vigor to debunk misguided health literature and move beyond a simplistic deviance perspective, however, sociologists have, in large part, overestimated the mainstreaming of tattoos. In this article, I have drawn upon Goffman's dramaturgical approach to paint a more accurate picture of tattooing's cultural position in contemporary Western societies. Though privileged by tattooed people, people with tattoos preemptively shy away from always-visible tattoos (even when they personally feel there is nothing inappropriate about them) and the negative repercussions facing their wearers. This shows that not all tattoos are equal, and there is a need to distinguish between visible and concealable tattoos. Despite claims of mainstream acceptance from some scholars and media, tattoos can still discredit frontstage performances. Erving Goffman's influential work on impression management provides a framework for understanding seemingly innocuous decisions pertaining to body modification, including where on the body to place tattoos.

A large proportion of recent tattoo scholarship investigates the use of tattoos by members of the middle class mainstream. Expanding the pool of research participants to include those at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder will help sociologists develop future research agendas in other areas of importance. As discussed by Lane (2014), one significant gap in the literature exists in the area of the production of culture. Since tattoo artists (i.e. producers of culture) are much more likely to be visibly tattooed individuals who fall outside the mainstream (Roberts 2015), they have been largely ignored. This will also make a needed contribution to the understanding of tattoos as symbols resulting from social interaction. Focusing on the individual characteristics of those participating in tattoo's numerical growth has caused some to consider tattoos in isolation. If future investigations of tattoos can recognize that "the dramaturgical body is embedded in social practices" (Waskul & Vannini 2006, p. 6), it may help sociologists properly locate tattoos within the social world. Finally, it is important to note that the current state of tattooing is not a static one. As the younger age groups who participate in tattooing continue to grow older and climb the social ladder, the dramaturgical practices surrounding tattoos may well change. Accordingly, there is a promising opening for future scholarship investigating frontstage interactions between people with tattoos and Gen Xers or Millennials in positions of power. Perhaps today's discreditable tattoo will move from dark secret to an acceptable prop.

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