


2004

Investigating Changing Moral Boundaries through Tattooing

Nikolas L. Proehl
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur>

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Proehl, Nikolas L. (2004) "Investigating Changing Moral Boundaries through Tattooing," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 4, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1165>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol4/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

INVESTIGATING CHANGING MORAL BOUNDARIES THROUGH TATTOOING Nikolas L.

Proehl (Sociology)

Tom Schmid, Faculty Mentor (Sociology & Corrections)

This study examines undergoing tattooing as a basis for understanding moral passage. Moral passage occurs when a social act undergoes a transformation from an undesirable or deviant act, to one that is generally tolerated or accepted by the greater society. Interviews were conducted with individuals who have undergone tattooing, and their experiences and encounters with others in social settings were documented and analyzed. Results indicate that while individuals often undergo tattooing because of their attraction to its deviant connotations, many of these same individuals do not identify themselves as deviant. At the same time, persons with tattoos typically find toleration and even encouragement from others, but many remain hesitant to reveal the presence of their tattoos in certain social situations. These and other findings indicate that the moral boundaries of tattooing vary along familial, subcultural, situational, and other dimensions; and those individuals with tattoos therefore find themselves in interactions on both the conventional and the deviant sides of these moral boundaries; and that these interactions can themselves work to alter the moral boundaries.

Tattooing As A Model of Changing Moral Boundaries

Introduction

We are currently experiencing a transition in our culture of unknown magnitude (Lin, 2002). Certain objects have taken new significance as measuring sticks of this cultural shift. One of these is the tattoo. No longer the mark of deviance, tattoos have quietly made the transition into mainstream culture (Millner & Eichold, 2001; Lin, 2002; Coe, 1993). But how far has this transition progressed? Associations with criminal activity still persist, and research has attempted to document correlations of tattooing with criminal psychopathological traits (Manuel, 2002; Taylor, 1974). Adolescent tattooing is a growing concern, with research suggesting that adolescent tattooing is indicative of future deviant behavior (Carrol, 2002; Houghton, 1996). This is an assertion that has been challenged by Frederick & Bradley (2000). The lack of knowledge over health risks associated with tattooing has also been studied but suggested that those concerns may be unfounded (Millner & Eichold, 2001; Greif, 1999). Other research suggests that tattooing is an act of identity construction (Carrol, 2002; Millner & Eichold, 2001; Drews, et al., 2000; Greif, 1999; Coe, 1993). If one looks to the media for answers, conflicts become evident. Certain publications have fully embraced tattooing, offering advice on matters of design and placement. Others still protest tattoos, taking what might be considered a more traditional stance. This paper will attempt to document the current level of acceptance regarding tattoos. It examines the issue from the perspective of several individuals who currently have tattoos and a small number who do not.

Background

Tattoos have been documented throughout history. Early societies used tattoos as adornments and as religious symbols (Greif, 1999; Sanders, 1988). The hearth of tattooing is believed to be the Middle East region (Sanders, 1988). Tattooing spread from this area to the Pacific Rim region around 2000 BC. It flourished there, and continues to do so today (Sanders, 1989). Western tattooing practices have been restricted throughout history because of Christian beliefs against body alteration. It was only with the voyages of Cook in the 18th century that tattooing was introduced to the western world (Greif, 1999; Sanders, 1988). It was through these voyages that we get the term tattoo, derived from the Tahitian word "ta-tu". When examples of tattooing were brought back to the West in the form of Tahitian natives, they were regarded as objects of curiosity and put on display for members of the aristocracy. This began a fad of tattooing among the ruling classes, a trend that spread into the United States in the last half of the 19th century (Greif, 1999; Sanders, 1988). The early 20th Century saw radical shifts in the acceptance of tattooing (Sanders, 1988). No longer considered a fashionable fad among the elite, tattoos became associated with deviance, possessed only by unsavory characters such as circus performers, sailors, and criminals (Manuel, 2002; Millner, 2001; Sanders, 1988). Tattooing came to carry stigmatic associations (Goffman, 1963). This was again reinforced by the acceptance of tattooing among biker gangs in the 1950's - 60's (Sanders, 1988). In the late 1960's, tattooing started to go through a cultural renaissance. No longer practiced by individuals practicing outside the commercial structure, younger artists with a background in fine arts and design emerged onto the tattooing scene (Sanders, 1988). This continued until the 1990's, when an explosion of tattooing in mainstream culture, particularly among middle-class youth, began to emerge (Lin, 2002; Irwin, 2001). A moral passage was experienced, when people who had traditionally opposed tattooing began to see it as a more acceptable practice (Gusfield, 1967; Irwin, 2001). Efforts were made by tattoo artists to connect the practice with fine arts, and to display tattoos as legitimate artistic works

(Sanders, 1988). This has propelled tattooing to the state as it exists today.

Methods

Data for this paper was collected as part of an undergraduate social observation class at my local university, and then as part of subsequent independent research. Some data from other members of the class will be used, and so noted. The university is located in a small city, population about 50,000 when classes are in session. There are also two other colleges in the city a small private college, and a vocational college. It is important to note that there are three tattoo parlors located within the city. Data was collected by interpretive methods, with an emphasis placed on formal interviews (Berg, 2001). Some data was collected by informal observations. All data was collected between August of 2002 through March of 2004. Institutional Review Board approval was granted. My role consisted of finding individuals who possessed tattoos, with emphasis placed on individuals who had only one tattoo, preferably not immediately visible. This required interaction with many individuals, whereupon I learned if they or their friends had a tattoo, and if so, would be possible to talk with them about tattooing. Arrangements were then made for the interview to take place. Some individuals approached chose not to participate in the study. I had the advantage of working in a local tavern, and was able to examine a large sample of the local student population, as well as the numerous other individuals who did not attend college. I conducted formal interviews whenever possible. Some of the individuals I interviewed I knew previously, some of whom I worked with. The interviews were usually conducted at my workplace, but some were also conducted at my home and at the university. All informants agreed to be audio recorded. Recordings were then subsequently transcribed and erased. All informants' names have been removed or altered. The total number interviewed was eighteen (18), including three individuals who did not have any tattoos. A template interview schedule was used for all interviews; deviations from this template were normal. The schedule was divided roughly into four sections. The first section focused on how the informant acquired the tattoo, including the motivations for the action. The second section focused on perceptions of others' reactions the informant encountered in random situations. Questions included how the individual handled interactions resulting from the tattoo, and if interactions were typically positive or negative. The third section focused on the perception of reactions from the individual's intimate relationships (i.e. family, friends, partners). This included questions about the effect receiving a tattoo had on intimate relationships. The fourth section focused on the individual's perception of tattooing, including reactions to other's tattoos, what the individual considers an inappropriate tattoo, and how accepted the individual perceives tattooing. From this, my problem became centered on three central questions: What are the dimensions of moral boundaries regarding tattoos, how do people with tattoos experience these boundaries, and how do people with tattoos influence these boundaries?

Theory

Central to this study is the research of Katherine Irwin. In her work, she introduces the idea of tattoos existing in a moral climate, and states that acceptance of tattooing in society is conflicted. This conflict is a result of deviant attractions and aversions (Irwin, 2003). The attraction lies in the way tattoos represent a certain freedom from the constraints of family, friends, even society at large. It also marks that individual as part of a counter-cultural group. It is considered an act of rebellion and also of identity-building. But this is also the source of aversion. Because of associations with tattooing as an act of deviance, first-time tattooees often feared negative reactions from important figures in that person's life. Concerns about future employment were also evident (Irwin, 2003). Associations with tattooing as a lower-class activity could also be a point of

hesitation among more affluent people (Irwin, 2001). Irwin's work also takes into account theory of moral passage (Gusfield, 1967) in which, she offers two explanations of how and why moral passage may occur. The first is through the action of moral entrepreneurs. These are typically organized groups who actively work to change societal perceptions of actions than can be considered deviant. A variety of methods are used, including mass media, public rallies, and legislative lobbying. The other explanation she gives is cultural diffusion. Cultural diffusion occurs when members of a society come into contact with cultural practices of another society, and subsequently transplant those practices to their native society. This framework may also be broadened to include the spread of a particular practice from one social world to another all within the larger society. Key to this process are several legitimating processes. These legitimating processes are used to settle the competition between attractions and aversion of deviance. Four techniques were presented:

1. Using mainstream motivations to explain their reasons for getting tattoos.
2. Making a commitment to conventional behavior.
3. Justifying tattoos verbally.
4. Selecting designs that were conventional in aesthetics

This is the conceptual framework which I have chosen to work within and build upon. Theoretical models of account giving (Scott & Lyman, 1968) and techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) also play an important role in this research. My study does differ from Irwin's; I undertook my research after Irwin and drew from a more diverse population sample. I therefore hope that my efforts will result in a more complete idea of where the boundaries of moral passage regarding tattoos currently are.

Research & Data

The first problem I will address regards the dimensions of the moral boundaries. As mentioned, the boundaries of what is acceptable regarding tattoos is currently in a state of passage. This is a result of wildly differing opinions of tattoos and who should have them among various social groups. Irwin states that tattooing has moved into the mainstream via middle-class youth. I accept this, but must acknowledge that this transition has not been fully realized. There still exist associations of tattooing with deviance. One individual I interviewed noted that his tattoo, a two-part piece on his back, was not warmly received by his family. He had not told his family he had gotten a tattoo, and when it was uncovered for the first time in their presence at a family gathering, they all expressed considerable displeasure. One individual stated that when she got her tattoo, she was also the target of negative reactions:

Q: What were your parents' reactions?

A: Um, not good. After they quit spazing about it, they would just, every time they saw it, they be like 'you got something on your back', like, 'do you need a shower or what'. Real, real pain in the ass.

However, this contrasted the statements given by two of my informants:

Q: What about your mom. What did she think?

A: ...She just goes what's on your back, I said a tattoo. She goes oh when did you get that done, I was like a year ago...and she really didn't say much after that. She would announce it at family functions, like look what J- did, but it was more of a joke.

Q: How did your family react?

A: Well, they don't know about the third [tattoo] yet, but the first two, they didn't say much. My mom said later she was glad it wasn't ugly...now I think she really didn't mind it.

These were perhaps the most common reactions I encountered. Parents at first would be

either curious, perhaps slightly displeased, but would ultimately accept the tattoo. This would suggest that family members are willing to accommodate deviant actions, as long as that deviant action does not cross other boundaries that exist in society. Examples of such acceptable deviant actions would be underage smoking and drinking.

AGE

Age also plays a small role in tattooing. Many states place restrictions on minors getting a tattoo, some more strictly than others. In Minnesota, the law states that no person under the age of 18 can get a tattoo, even with a parent present. This is a recent change from a law that allowed for tattoos if the minor was accompanied by a parent. Much of the concern regarding minors getting tattoos deals with the possible health risks, particularly when the tattoo is a “street” tattoo; that is, a tattoo done by an amateur artist. Laws in surrounding states differ. This is an indication of a boundary line, albeit one that has regional variations.

With regards to sex, a developing trend I noticed in my research was that women were getting tattoos more than men. This represents a significant change from long-held views that women shouldn't get tattoos, and those that do represent extreme deviant behaviors, often associated with sexual practices. It seemed that women were getting tattoos as expressions of identity, or as simple adornment. Attitudes about the deviant nature regarding women and tattooing was observed to be changing:

[To a 39 year old woman]

Q: Why do you think it's more acceptable for women to get tattoos now?

A: Ah, the attitudes have changed, there's no longer - when I was younger, there weren't no female artists to speak of, I don't remember any, um, and if there were they were missing teeth and had TB and you didn't want them touching you in the first place...they were just so gross, so, um, used up, I guess...now you can go, and, um, you feel safe, like you're not doing something that's, ah, you know, dirty. Wrong, I guess.

[To a 23 year old woman]

Q: Why do you think so many women are getting tattoos?

A: Well, you kinda have to, I mean, you go out and see all these girls, and they got [tattoos], and you're like 'that's so cute', and then you see the guys, and they like them, so you want one too...It's totally not like a dirty thing. It's like getting a new pair of jeans.

The last statement given suggests that tattoos are so common and accepted, that they can be likened to a fashion accessory. Men tended to get larger, more visible pieces, a trend that may stem from greater acceptance in regards to men getting highly visible tattoos. This may be a result of individuals associating tattooing as a masculine practice, with lingering historical perceptions.

DESIGN & PLACEMENT

The placement and design were significant factors that affected the decision to get a tattoo, and the reactions of people who observed it. If the tattoo was in an area that was not immediately visible and small in size, then reactions generally were positive. However, if the tattoo was on “public skin” or was very large, reactions tended to be less positive. Most first-time tattooees chose to get tattoos in places that were not immediately visible, but could be uncovered in public if the individual was wearing certain clothing. This indicates one dimension of the boundary. If people are willing to show their tattoos in certain situations, but not others, then we are beginning to establish what is acceptable and what is not. Typical situations that the tattoo would not be displayed would be church, family functions, weddings, etc. Formal events in a person's life were viewed as being unacceptable to display tattoos.

The tattoo design also represents a boundary. Certain symbols are looked at less favorably than others, especially crude, homemade designs that were done by an untrained artist. Also, meaningless designs were looked on with much disfavor, as nearly all of my informants suggested

that a tattoo must have personal meaning or it is “no good”. Allowances for personal tastes and placement were given, as long as it was viewed as an expression of that person’s identity. However, all of my informants said that offensive symbols that emphasized racial hate were never acceptable. Expletives were also mentioned as being inappropriate, but some allowance was given for individual freedom. However, it was evident that these would be the type of people to avoid:

Q: What would you consider to be inappropriate for a tattoo?

A: Fuck You. Having like fuck you on your forehead, I guess. Or maybe something racial...I guess anywhere else on their body is fine[,] somewhere that can be covered up, but if its somewhere that can never be covered up most of the time, then I think that’s something a little too, ah, that would be, I don’t know, distasteful. Something that affects other people because of the way they feel, or, breaking their freedoms.

Q: Why would you avoid [a person with an expletive tattoo]?

A: Because you know they got problems. I mean, if you’re going to put that on you where people can see it, um, you’re not normal...basically you’re fucked up.

BOUNDARY EXPERIENCES

How these boundaries dimensions are experienced is the next issue. A cursory review of popular media found it to be generally accepting of tattoos, sometimes even providing advice and guidance on getting a tattoo. Two types of tattoos that are not accepted are the gang and prison tattoos. To the mainstream society, these are marks of deviance and criminal association. Examples in the media of these types of tattoos are usually stories or articles on how to have them removed, most often in the context of ex-gang members. Assumptions made by the psychiatric community about the presence of tattoos, especially in regard to criminal types, reinforce the assumption that tattoos are possessed only by deviant, dangerous individuals. These conflicting views lead to a very mixed picture of tattooing, which is ultimately sorted out by the family.

Anticipated family reactions are perhaps the greatest influence on a young individual considering a tattoo. These reactions are based on formative values learned during the socialization process. Many of my informants were aware of their parent’s views on tattoos, and acted toward their anticipated reactions in various ways:

Q: How did you tell them about it?

A: Um, I just did it.

Q: How?

A: Um, I just went home that, the next weekend, and told them I got a tattoo. I wanted them to know then that way they couldn’t flip out if they caught me later.

Q: Did they flip out?

A: Um, well, no, I mean, a little, but I think they were glad I was honest about it, um, instead of covering it up like my sister.

One girl helped maintain a mutual façade with her parents that her tattoos were fake. The parents were so willing to believe that this was true that after a year the truth still had not been fully disclosed. When it was finally revealed that they were not fake, acceptance came only after a protracted amount of time. She had a good idea where the source of denial came from:

Q: Why would they think it was fake?

A: Because they weren’t really sure that I would put something like that on my body. Something permanent.

Q: Where do you think that disapproval comes from?

A: Um, probably just, basically[,] they don’t have any. Their era never had lots of tattoos except with a lot of bad people, bad asses, you know. People they stereotyped like that. Stereotyped their daughter who defamed natural beauty, you know, tattoos mess that all up. Tattoos, you know...they’re business people, and business people don’t have big fat tattoos all over their arms, or anything. They think it’s going to hurt getting a job...

Another girl openly told her parents:

Q: What did your family think about it?

A: Ah, pretty much the same reaction like when you dye your hair and everything else, like oh what did you do that for...they asked if I would regret it, and I was like NO, so they pretty much dropped it.

Her example is one of parental permissiveness, in the context that her parents saw it as just another trend of youth. One example from the class was particularly revealing of the changing acceptance. Two sisters had gotten tattoos, one at age 18, and another at age 29. The sister who had gotten her tattoo done at 18 was chastised by her parents, and told that it was unacceptable. When the other got her tattoo at 29, several years after the first sister, her parents reacted favorably, and wanted to know the details about it. This marked change in attitude demonstrated various dimensions of acceptance. Age was certainly one factor; a tattoo at age 18 was unacceptable, but one at 29 was. Also, the difference in time elapsed could have also contributed. Another way that reactions were swayed was through the first tattoo paving the way for later acceptance. It is quite likely that if the sister who was 18 had not got a tattoo, the sister at 29 would have experienced some disapproval. This moral influence is what propels change in the boundaries.

SOCIAL CONCERNS

Future employment also influenced decisions regarding tattoos. Some informants showed considerable concern about the possibility of a visible tattoo preventing them from obtaining professional employment:

Q: Why did you get it placed there?

A: Because of my job I want to get, like, I can't have anything like that, or they'll probably not hire me, so I wanted it hidden.

Q: What about other people seeing it, like your parents?

A: Oh, my parents really wouldn't care...

The informants who did not aspire to professional jobs did not share the same concern:

Q: When you decided where your tattoo was to be placed, did you think about future jobs?

A: Yeah, a little bit, well, not really a future job, 'cause anywhere I work, it's not gonna matter, I don't think, hopefully.

This would suggest that tattoos are still not accepted in the professional world, but other areas of employment offer no discrimination. This may force people who want tattoos and professional jobs to conceal them, fostering a sort of "hidden danger", which invokes a sort of romance that many could find appealing. This undercover rebellion could also become central to an individual's identity.

Religion is another realm that is considered to show very little acceptance for tattoos. Traditional Christian doctrine prohibits tattoos, claiming that they violate the handiwork of God. This was reinforced by many informants as being an area where showing a tattoo would be inappropriate:

A: ...Like, certain situations you don't want a tattoo showing.

Q: What kinds of situations?

A: Ah, like church, or interviews for a job...

Q: What about church, why wouldn't you want it seen in church?

A: Um[,] well some people have different perceptions of tattoos and the people that have them, like older people think that you're a type of person if you have a tattoo, and even though I'm not that person, I don't want to be looked at as the way they perceive people with tattoos. I guess I wouldn't be...like it wouldn't be

totally covered up at church so people couldn't see it, but I wouldn't want it on my arm or have them like all the way down my arm or anything like that. I think it's kind of tacky to do something like that in church. People usually aren't showing many tattoos when they go to church.

Because one does not find tattoos in church on a regular basis, people who go to church frequently may react with some suspicion or fear when they encounter a tattooed person. This maintains a boundary that has existed for a very long time, and is not likely to change anytime soon. The church is the primary institution that protects traditional values. When the church does alter its own stance, it is usually long after the rest of society has already done so.

REBELLION & IDENTITY

My own experiences with a skater punk group a few years ago showed how central tattooing can be to maintain group identity. Many of the members of this group had multiple tattoos, and several members had an identical tattoo that, for them, had significant meaning. Because this was a way for the members to connect with one another, they were at times prominently displayed to non-members. When I first became acquainted with the group, it was made clear to me having tattoos was part of the lifestyle that they lived. It set them socially apart from others, a fact that they reveled in. Use of tattoos to set oneself apart from society at large is one of ways in which deviance is projected, even protected. Because "normal" people do not get tattoos, this helps to establish the boundary and perpetuate tattooing as an act of rebellion, suited only for those with an individualistic streak. Consider this statement by an informant, age 55, who did not possess a tattoo:

Q: When you see someone with a tattoo, what's the first impression that comes to mind?

A: Ah, rebellious, ah[,] wanting to make a point, wanting to be an individual, wanting to set themselves apart. I mean, a tattoo is like permanent clothes, and if you look at how people dress, people dress to their personality.

However, despite the efforts of individuals and groups like the one I encountered, tattooing is quickly losing its status as a mark of rebellion. Two examples from interviews show this:

Q: Do you consider yourself a rebel for getting a tattoo?

A: ...It was something I did on a whim, so quick, I think it was just more of a fun thing to do, I never really thought I was being a badass or anything.

Q: Would you consider yourself a rebel for getting a tattoo?

A: No, not really. I think rebels are the people that jump out of ten-story buildings, and, like, you know, burn down stuff, or, that do stuff against everybody else, but that's not tattoos.

These contrasting views of tattooing being a rebellious or deviant act help to further complicate where the moral boundary of tattooing lies.

REACTIONS

The moral boundaries of tattooing can best be examined through the reactions of others exposed to tattoos. Many thought the reactions of others were positive; only a few negative reactions were experienced. Most often the negative reactions came from the family, while almost none came from peer groups. Peers were often curious about the tattoo, wanting to see it, wanting to know what the experience was like:

Q: What were people's reactions?

A: A lot of people were surprised that I got one, because I had always said that I wouldn't get one, so they were probably a little surprised. Ah, my friend got one like a week after, after I got one.

Q: Was it because you got one?

A: Yeah. Well, she probably never thought of it either, but she saw that I had it, and she got it on the same spot on her back, so she must have thought it looked good.

Q: Have any strangers reacted negatively to it?

A: No, not really. Well, 'cause the only people that have really said anything were like, can I see that, it looks cool. That's it.

Q: How do strangers react to [the tattoo]?

A: Well, when I worked at the bar, and somebody saw it, like a customer or whatever, they would always want to see it, and to know about it... It got to be annoying sometimes, like, you just wanted people not to say anything...

The abundance of positive reactions expressed compared to the lack of negative ones suggests that tattooing among peer groups is very acceptable. It is only when encounters outside the group disclose a tattoo does any conflict generally start to develop. This can be along romantic relationships lines:

Q: Have any of your tattoos affected any of your relationships?

A: Badly, once. One of my ex-boyfriends, his parents, very, very against tattooing, and he was kind of afraid to have me meet them, afraid they'd see my tattoo...I mean he was even skeptical about dating me, because he didn't like girls with tattoos...

Q: Did he tell you this before you were dating?

A: After. Because he said they were dirty, or ugly, or something, I don't know...

This example illustrates how lingering notions of tattoo dangers and deviance can be handed down through the family, and how they affect interactions.

Although there is a gap in perception between members of my generation and those of preceding generations, lingering elements still remain, often in the most surprising places. But the momentum has shifted toward greater acceptance by the younger generation today. This generational gap is something that older people are becoming increasingly aware of:

Q: Now in [town] they have a tattoo parlor that advertises on both radio and TV. Do you think this influences people perceptions?

A: Well, I think the perception, again, is a generational thing. My perception of tattoos...is still basically the same as when I was growing up, it just [was] something you don't do. Where, the generations, younger generations, your generation, looks at them totally different, without the negative connotations that were associated with tattoos when I was growing up.

Q: How do you think it got from underground to more mainstream?

A: ...I think it kind of just filtered down, and um, it started to lose its edge... I think it's the duty of every generation to shock the previous one, you know, but now it's not shock, it just sorta, um, I don't want to say normal, but it kinda is...

Because perception are so different among the generations, full mainstream acceptance may be inevitable as my generation succeeds previous generations. The role of time as an influence on moral boundaries should not be overlooked.

INFLUENCING BOUNDARIES

Now we must consider how people with tattoos influence the boundaries of acceptability. I found examples of all four of the techniques introduced earlier, and other possibilities were also revealed. One possibility was not based on legitimization, but rather on total denial of acceptance. It was rebellion without the rebel. Some of the people I talked to conveyed the feeling that they did not care if others knew they had a tattoo, accepted that tattoo, or even accepted them. This suggested that they were so comfortable with themselves and their tattoos that they no longer

needed to justify its existence. They felt tattoos had a place in this society, and that people should always accept them and the fact that they had a tattoo, even if it might be inappropriate to show the tattoo in certain situations. This was contrasted by data which suggested that, no matter how strong or convincing the argument for getting a tattoo, personal moral boundaries were such that a person could never convince these people that tattooing was acceptable under any circumstance. Other data showed that using any technique to justify tattoos would be completely unnecessary because the practice was accepted without question. These people were not involved in a deviant social world, but were rather conventional in almost every sense. Their acceptance indicates how far the progression of tattoo acceptability has come. While it is still a morally contentious issue, the greater portion of society seems to accept them. Conflict only results from the two polar opposite sides of the issue, those who are unconvincingly opposed, and those for whom tattooing is a passion and a way of life.

There were two primary means of influencing moral boundaries that were found. The first consisted of acting, then receiving accommodations. These people would get tattoos and then present them; their efforts would be rewarded and accepted. This was very common, as very few people did not receive any sort of accommodation for getting a tattoo. Typically, they would be most rewarded by peers, followed by family, and then strangers. The other primary means involved legitimizing the tattoo through interaction using one or more of the methods presented above. They would also incorporate selectively displaying their tattoo, so that in certain situations where a tattoo might be unacceptable, it was simply not revealed. Also, the meaning of these tattoos usually was not fully revealed, ensuring that personal boundaries remained intact:

Q: Do you tell people the meanings behind your tattoos?

A: Only if they ask.

Q: How detailed do you get?

A: Very basic, because I know they won't get the true, deep meaning of each one. Each one has a true deep meaning which I don't think I've told anyone...I'm very basic. Just what they can figure out by looking at it, basically. Because some people look much more deeply into it, and it's not really even that, not even close.

Q: Do you tell people what it means?

A: No.

Q: Why not?

A: 'Cause it's kinda personal.

Q: Do you ever tell people the meanings of your tattoos?

A: Not usually, um, I usually don't because they won't understand why my reasons were what they were. I mean, everybody has their own reasons, you know, for doing what they do, and I don't, like, I don't care what their reasons are, like they shouldn't care about mine.

These reactions serve to limit the level of interpretation that other might engage in. Most often this is a result of fearing misunderstanding about their tattoos. The meanings that people had given their tattoos varied considerably. Some tattoos were done in memorial of certain people. They served as a permanent reminder of that person and the impact they had on that individual's life. These people were often the most reluctant to share the meanings, which may have been out of respect or fear of misunderstanding. Some tattoos had been placed in affirmation of personal religious beliefs; my own tattoo falls into this category. It has become an important reminder of who I am and what I believe in. When the meaning of tattoos is explained, people that might not have accepted the tattoo become persuaded otherwise. One example from class involved a young man who had a tattoo of the World Trade Center with the numbers "9-11" placed underneath. It was in memorial of both the event, but more personally, a friend that he lost as a result. His parents, who had been very strongly opposed to tattooing, fully accepted this tattoo based on the very profound meaning it had for this individual.

Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from my research and that of the class. The first is that the moral boundaries of tattooing are expanding, due to the efforts of moral entrepreneurs, cultural diffusion, and also individuals who disregard what others might think. It is people with one tattoo, who usually would not be considered the type to get a tattoo, that are pushing the boundaries the most. These are the people who influence their peers. This influence forms a chain reaction in which all members of the peer group eventually undergo tattooing. But we also need to know why those boundaries are changing so rapidly along certain dimensions. Is it a result of a permissive attitude that dominates our society, or is it something else? Are tattoos transcending their former associations with deviance? This may not be completely correct, but as we have seen, tattooing has become more acceptable, less deviant. People are getting tattoos as expressions of identity, as memorial objects, or simply as adornment. The last reason places tattoos near other, very conventional, forms of adornment, such as makeup and jewelry, with the notable exception that tattoos are permanent.

We also have a better idea of how a moral passage occurs. Tattooing is not an organized movement, has almost no political support, but its changing role in our society leads us to believe that the individual, one-on-one interactions are the most effective as persuading others that tattooing is no longer just for criminals, bikers, and “bad people”. This is what Irwin suggested, and it is what was found. This is noteworthy, because it gives us a model for understanding why these changes are able to take place. We have been given a tool to help understand why smoking is no longer acceptable, why premarital co-habitation is on the rise, and why same-sex marriage is - but isn't - legal. The interactions that occur in the course of daily life, at the water cooler, at happy hour, at the dinner table, are the interactions that help to determine what is accepted and what will be acceptable. This is not to conclude that the efforts of organized groups and political lobbies are no longer relevant; indeed, their efforts are equally as important. They make the headlines that promote the discussions. But they are also the “others”; their world only marginally touches the world in which the dinner table sits. The individual, micro-level interactions between father (or mother) and daughter revolving around her new tattoo may influence those individuals, as well as all who interact with them as much, if not more, as the law prohibiting minors from receiving a tattoo.

It is also important to note that while it was observed that the moral boundaries of tattooing are changing, there are very strong disparities of what is morally justifiable that emerge along various dimensions. This allows for many different interpretations of existing moral boundaries to simultaneously exist. Because these interactions are occurring in a society that is so multi-faceted, with many deeply held beliefs concerning morality, the potential for conflict arises. Attention needs to be focused on key dimensions along which conflict is likely to arise if understanding of moral boundaries is to become unbiased by spatial and cultural differences.

Research Possibilities

This topic presents many research possibilities. More attention needs to be given to the efforts of individuals who influence their friends and family into getting a tattoo. This is where the boundary is changing the fastest, and although it is impossible to pinpoint the location of that boundary at any given time, a rough approximation can be discerned. One line of inquiry that should be focused on is if the popular media, with particular emphasis on youth media, is helping to accelerate the moral passage of tattoos within our culture. The media can be such an overwhelming

force in our society that its influence must never be underestimated. It would also be useful to gauge the reaction of youth to this media. If many young people are buying the view the media is selling, then the presence of the media in the lives of youth may become more influential than even parents. Focusing such thoughts on tattoos would help to more accurately gauge the level of influence that the media has. More attention also needs to be given to the people who don't have tattoos, with emphasis placed on the older generation and their reactions to the passage of tattoos. The three interviews done of this nature offered perspectives that were unique and a wealth of information. Also, efforts must be made to include an even larger sample population in further study. While the sample that was obtained proved adequate, it must be framed within the geographical area in which it was located. The data amassed would be much different if the setting of the study were in Boston, Massachusetts or New Orleans, Louisiana. A more diverse geographical sampling would do much to resolve any regional differences that may arise regarding tattoos and morality. Focusing on individuals who have several tattoos, and contrasting that with data obtained from individuals who have only one tattoo would also delineate many boundaries.

References

- Berg, Bruce L.** 2001 *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Long Beach: Allyn and Bacon
- Blumer, Herbert** 1969. *Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Carrol, Lynne and Roxanne Anderson.** 2002. "Body Piercing, Tattooing, Self-Esteem, and Body Investment in Adolescent Girls." *Adolescence* 37:627-637
- Coe, Kathryn, et al.** 1993. "Tattoos and Male Alliances." *Human Nature*. 4:199-204
- Drews, David; Carlee Allison and Jessica Probst.** 2000. "Behavioral and Self-Concept Differences in Tattooed and Non-Tattooed College Students." *Psychological Reports* 86:475-481
- Frederick, Christina and Kristy Bradley.** 2000. "A Different Kind of Normal? Psychological and Motivational Characteristics of Young Adult Tattooers and Body Piercers." *North American Journal of Psychology*. 2:379-391
- Greif, Judith; Walter Hewitt and Myrna Armstrong.** 1999. "Tattooing and Body Piercing: Body Art Practices Among College Students." *Clinical Nursing Research*. 8:368-385
- Goffman, Erving.** 1963. *Stigma* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall
- Gusfield, Joseph R.** 1967. "Moral Passage: The Symbolic Process in Public Designations of Deviance." *Social Problems* 15:175-88
- Houghton, Stephen, et al.** 1996. "Amateur Tattooing Practices and Beliefs Among High School Adolescents." *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 19:420-425
- Irwin, Katherine.** 2001. "Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction." *Symbolic Interaction* 24:49-73
- Irwin, Katherine.** 2003. "Saints and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Positive and Negative Deviants." *Sociological Spectrum*. 23:27-57
- Mary Kosut.** 2000. "Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity, and Society." *Visual Sociology*. 15:79-100
- Lin, Yang.** 2002. "Age, Sex, Education, Religion, and Perception of Tattoos." *Psychological Reports* 90:654-658
- Manuel, Laura and Paul Retzlaff.** 2002. "Psychopathology and Tattooing Among Prisoners." *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology* 46:522-531
- Millner, Vaughn and Bernard Eichold** 2001. "Body Piercing and Tattooing Perspectives." *Clinical Nursing Research* 10:424-441
- Phillips, Susan A.** 2001. "Gallo's Body: Decoration and Damnation in the life of a Chicano Gang Member
- Sanders, Clinton R.** 1988. "Marks of Mischief: Becoming and Being Tattooed." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 16:395-432
- Sanders, Clinton R.** 1989 *Customizing the Body: The Culture and Art of Tattooing*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press
- Scott, Marvin B. and Stanford M Lyman.** 1968. "Accounts." *American Sociological Review* 33:46-62
- Sykes, Gresham M. and David Matza** 1957. "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency." *American Sociological Review* 22:664-70
- Taylor, A. J.** 1974. "Criminal Tattoos." *International Review of Applied Psychology*. 23:121-130