

REPRESENTATIONS OF TATTOO AND PIERCING USE

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The present study has investigated several tattoo and piercing identity representations for their users, as well as prejudices related to them. We have interviewed 10 individuals with such ornaments. The results showed three different categories of representations for people with ornaments: aesthetic, predetermined design significance and permanent mark of a significant moment in life. Divergences in representations of these types of ornaments are responsible for generating prejudiced attitudes towards those who have them. Even facing discrimination and stigmatized character brought by ornaments, the interviewees reported they had not regret by opting for their use, which can be considered an identity factor, either personal or group.

Descriptors: Ego; Tattooing; Body Piercing; Prejudice.

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REPRESENTAÇÕES DO USO DE TATUAGEM E PIERCING

O presente estudo investigou diversas representações identitárias da tatuagem e do piercing para seus usuários, bem como os preconceitos relacionados a esses. Para isso, foram entrevistados 10 sujeitos portadores de tais adornos. Os resultados apontaram três diferentes categorias de representações para os portadores de adornos: complemento estético, significação pré-estabelecida do desenho e marca permanente de um momento significativo na vida. Divergências nas representações desses tipos de enfeites são responsáveis por gerar atitudes preconceituosas para com aqueles que os possuem. Mesmo frente à discriminação e ao caráter estigmatizado trazido pelos adornos, os entrevistados relataram não terem se arrependido por optar pelo seu uso, o que pode ser considerado um fator constituinte da identidade, seja essa pessoal ou grupal.

Descritores: Ego; Tatuagem; Piercing Corporal; Preconceito.

REPRESENTACIONES DEL USO DE TATUAJE Y PIERCING

El presente estudio investigó diversas representaciones de identidad a través del tatuaje y del piercing para sus usuarios, así como los conceptos relacionados a éstos. Para eso, fueron entrevistados 10 sujetos portadores de tales adornos. Los resultados apuntaron tres diferentes categorías de representaciones para los portadores de adornos: complemento estético, significación pre-establecida del dibujo y marca permanente de un momento significativo en la vida. Divergencias en las representaciones de estos tipos de adereces son responsables de generar actitudes prejuiciosas para con aquéllos que les poseen. Mismo frente a la discriminación y al carácter estigmatizado traído por los adornos, los entrevistados relataron no haber arrepentimiento por optaren por su uso, lo que puede ser considerado un factor constituyente de la identidad, sea esta personal o grupal.

Descriptores: Ego; Tatuaje; Perforación del Cuerpo; Prejuicio.

Introduction

The concept of identity emerges simultaneously in Anthropology and Psychology as different responses to human issues⁽¹⁾. The identity explains the personal sense and self-perception awareness, of an individual reality that makes every individual unique before their “selves”. The concept of identity is composed of several ideas, among them, that there are points of reference that do not change over time, which allows a relationship with others that make possible the recognition of oneself⁽²⁾. A theoretical parallel between identity and economics is based on the finding that both territories are structured with exchange relations⁽³⁾.

Identity, in this study, is considered, therefore, the permanent construction of a self-perception from the relations with other people. During this continuous

process, there are moments when changes occur intensely, confusing and distressing. In consumer societies, where everything is ephemeral and constantly changing/adapting, in accordance with the “liquid modernity” concept⁽⁴⁾, this occurs at a frightening speed, providing major identity crisis.

Individuality, in liquid modernity context, certifies that when we look at other people with disaffection or ignorance, we do not perceive the details, and, thus, we have the illusion to envision a coherent and unitary piece of art. “This piece of art we want to shape from the fragile circumstance of life is called ‘identity’”⁽⁴⁾.

Looking for an identity would be attempting to brake, to solidify the flow of our experience. It is trying to achieve harmony, logic and consistency impossible in our living,

it is what the author argues and concludes: We struggle to deny or at least to cover up the awesome fluidity just below the thin wrapping of the form; we try to avert our eyes from sights which they cannot pierce or take in. Yet far from slowing the flow, let alone stopping it, identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and again before they have time to cool and set⁽⁴⁾.

Within such transience, fluidity, the current consumer society, realize the fantasy of identity is linked to the “ability to ‘go shopping’ in the supermarket of identities”⁽⁴⁾ and fashion is a perfect instrument in this continuous process of creation and destruction of identities. But how the tattoo, apparently solid, firm, which theoretically would last “forever”, is part of this game? In the further interviews conducted in this study there will be clues to answer this question.

It is not known yet a culture in which the people has not graced the body in different ways for different reasons. Drawing, materials or objects that transform the body into a temporary or permanent piece of art, are symbolic languages and represent markers of identity, whether individual or social. If the impulse to create art is one of the signs that define the human being, the body may have been the first screen⁽⁵⁾.

The first tattoo literary record was in 1769. It was a report of the English navigator James Cook about what he saw when arriving in Tahiti, in Polynesia. Natives used a thin herringbone or bird bones to pierce the skin and inject a pigment made of coal and rust. The word tattoo, in Tahitian, means drawing on the skin⁽⁵⁾.

In Brazil, the precursor of modern tattoo was a Danish named Knud Harald Lukke Gegersen, in 1959. He made headlines in several newspapers, and, in 1975, the newspaper “O Globo” considered him the only one for a long time, until, gradually, there were followers⁽⁶⁾.

Body decoration in rituals is an expression of tradition and belief in several parts of the world. Photos of the Amazon Indians seen on display show how some tribes used to paint it black body boys to symbolize their death before rebirth as adults. In some regions of Africa, natural skin does not call the slightest attraction, this is why people often get tattoos done with cuts, controlling, with certain substances, the healing process of bruises to form prominence⁽⁷⁾.

Throughout history, tattoos have also been frequently associated with punishment and marginal behavior. In prisons around the world, if the prisoners tattooed themselves to distinguish their committed crimes and the factions they belong. Another example is the notorious Yakusa, Japanese mafia, in which its members have largely parts of their bodies’ tattooed as proof of courage and loyalty to the group⁽⁸⁾. It is worth noting, then, the relationship between the determination of a writing body and a uniqueness trace before the vision of the other⁽⁹⁾.

[...] the body, by being subsequently marked, *reflects a strategy of social confrontation increasingly* informed, aware and reflective about the potential transformative effects resulting from this same intervention⁽¹⁰⁾.

Like all attitudes, prejudice is a mixture of beliefs, emotions and predispositions to the action. One way

to simplify the world is by categorizing things. By categorizing people into groups, stereotypes are quite often created, which may contain a germ of truth, but still, they distort the perception of many people. When something is categorized, the margin for exclusion increases and, generally, the person who is different is segregated, generating prejudice⁽⁵⁾.

At this point the stigma appear: social attributes that an individual or group carry and whose values can be negative or pejorative. These attributes determine a destination of exclusion or social revendication perspective for the right to be treated well and to have equal opportunities. Stigma reveals that society has difficulties dealing with what is different. This difficulty is perpetuated through generations, which leads to the construction of a moral career for the stigmatized individual, i.e., his/her identity will incorporate these attributes corresponding to a negative social value. The identity visible attributes are important signals to start the long journey to discovery the other, but they are not enough⁽²⁾.

For the representations meanings, they are understood and constituted by social reality, being, therefore, explanatory and prescriptive. Closely articulated to scientific theories, the representations produce knowledge elaborated by science to a process of reframing, as they are negotiated and recreated in the heart of popular theories⁽¹¹⁾. One of the key elements of the theory of representations is the possible interconnection between cognition, affection and action in the process of representation⁽¹²⁾. It is also emphasized that the representations, in general, work as a system of reality interpretation, which rules the individuals relationships in their physical and social context and determines their behaviors, practices, guide their actions and social relations, direct them, constituting a universe of opinions and beliefs organized around a central meaning and in relation to a given object⁽¹³⁾.

Therefore, the objectives of this study was to verify tattoo and/or piercing representations in the identity of their users and the prejudices produced by such ornaments.

Method

The project of this study was examined and approved by the Ethics in Research Involving Human Subjects of the School of Nursing of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Protocol n° 0543/2005.

The approach of the participants to the survey occurred in a tattoo and/or piercing studio of a city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, in a stipulated period of 15 days, where, people seeking some kind of these ornaments, were invited to participate. Among those who accepted the invitation there were included, randomly, a number of 10, considered appropriate to the proposed objectives. Fulfilled this inclusion process, the participants signed a Consent Form and underwent a semi-structured interview, in one part there was a script with the participants general characteristics, and in another part there were seven questions that sought to contemplate the objectives of this study.

The script was tested with three people who sought the studio searching for the same ornaments, and did not participate of the final sample included for analysis. The test did not indicate any interviewers' difficulty, the researchers applied the questionnaires, made the interviews, and did not point any respondents' difficulty in answering them.

The interviews were individually, in an adequate room of the studio, and the answers were written by the researchers in the same time of the interview, then,

they were synthesized and analyzed according to the descriptive qualitative analysis ⁽⁶⁾. The results were presented for each of the questions, with excerpts from the participants' speeches, illustratively, followed by discussion.

Results and discussion

The Figure below shows the general characteristics of the study participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	Marital status
1	22	M	high school	trader	single
2	31	M	college	lawyer	married
3	23	M	college	tattoo artist	married
4	22	M	high school	unemployed	single
5	25	M	college	musician	single
6	21	F	high school	body piercing	single
7	27	F	college	dentist	married
8	21	F	high school	student	single
9	18	F	high school	unemployed	single
10	21	F	high school	unemployed	single

Figure 1 - General characteristics of the participants of the study

With respect to gender, the studied group was well balanced, and age has pointed to a young group with educational levels ranging from the second and third degrees. They had different occupations, including three unemployed, and most of them were single. These variations are of paramount importance, since it points to a heterogeneous group with great chances to be representative of a larger group of people looking for studios in search of ornament to modify in some way, the appearance of their bodies, and also a way to express an identity, since words and gestures cannot certainly be so authentic. Presumably, the ornament outperforms other forms of expression because of its firmness static can transmit a response to the other without offering any explanation.

Thus, using speech, but only because of the way chosen for data collection of this study, the interview, the initial question was: *Who are you?* The intention was to address the representation of the identity of the respondents, because constituting an identity involves defining who the person is, what his/her values are and what paths the person wants to follow ⁽¹⁴⁾. Or even, what positions will be taken forward to what society expects, what concepts the individual tries to polemize or harmonize. What is the illusion of identity that the person has accepted to himself/herself.

The feeling of having a personal identity occurs in two ways: perceiving as being the same, continuous in time and space, and realizing that others recognize this similarity and continuity ⁽¹⁵⁾. People have great difficulty in talking about the representations they make of themselves and how society sees them. Two respondents did not answer the question.

One answer was: "I am full of ornaments," expressed through a physical image a representation of identity. Here, it is proven escape of essence. The ornament assumes an essential role in the self-identification process that the subjects can no longer recognize themselves and even described them through other symbols, personality traits etc. It is noted that the fixed outer, paradoxically crystallized in ornaments linked to the occasion, now mixed of continuity, this delusional fixed outer assumes the role that the interior, now liquid, fluid, no longer supports⁽⁴⁾.

Another response category refers to the individual's relationship with society: "(...) easy to communicate, I have many friends and I like to party." "I love making friends (...)" "I am a person who loves to go out, make friends, but sometimes I feel like a fish out of water, but soon this feeling goes away." In these answers it is central the representation of friendship and fun as constituents of identity, common in the respondents' age group (18-31 years). It is interesting to observe in the speeches reaffirmation to the tendency to make friends, used to justify the moments of solitude, of non-identification.

The identification channel opened between the subject and his/her group, the tattooed people, at the same time that generates a socialization also causes differentiation regarding the people with no tattoos, causing prejudice in both sides.

"(...) level 4 of obsessive-compulsive disorder, "unlike most people, this interviewed used a psychiatric diagnosis as a way to differentiate himself. The fixed, crystallized in diagnostic and procedural methods, historically accepted and scientifically proven. Something solid that can serve as

the root of an identity that wanders through a misfit world, fluid. The diagnosis itself as an obsessive, compulsive search looking for a personality mark.

Most participants used adjectives to talk about identity: "I am an honest person, sensitive and with the soul of an artist." "I am a happy person". "I am a shy person (...)". "I am an honest citizen (...)". "I'm a working guy (...)". These clichés work very well as negation of stereotypes that generally come from prejudice.

In this category there was an answer that called much attention due to the fact that the representation of qualities described by the interviewed was not consistent with her image: "I am a very romantic person, very honest, I am very affectionate." C.Z.L. has many tattoos of skulls and demons, multiple piercings, he always dresses with black clothes with chains and spikes, passes an aggressive image that does not match her representation of identity. The false self-portraits refer to a world made of images, a depersonalization, a conception of identity as if it was a staging⁽¹⁷⁾. In the current consumer society, in the individualization process that occurs in a market whose shelves are the "true self" available for everyone, frequently, the simple act of choosing is already a value in itself, because the "action to choose is more important than what is chosen"⁽⁴⁾, that is why there is this gap between external figure and personality.

In the question number two there was the question: *Do you identify yourself with any group? Do you feel you belong to it?* The purpose was to verify the sense of belonging to some kind of group in extension to individual identity. Among the interviewed, four people said they did not identify themselves with any group. This category f response shows a group representation as something structured, referring to the conception of secondary groups, in which the relationships are formal, impersonal, segmental and instrumental. Within this vision, family, friends, colleagues and other close people are not considered groups.

Another class of answer refers to the plurality of groups. The interviewed have the representation of reference groups. There is no need to be a member of a group to value their standards. Groups to which people wanted to be part can influence their behavior as much as those groups they participate. "I identify myself with various groups, but I spend most of the time with the 'too crazy people'. Not always I feel I belong to it." "Actually I identify myself with various groups in society and I don't feel I belong to a particular one." "I identify myself with the self-employed professionals, but I am very eclectic in my relationships." "I am eclectic." "I am a person who has as many 'selves' as groups - I am somewhat different for each group. We become socialized through group experience. This is a position that is often predetermined. The individual just need to assume it⁽¹⁸⁾. Within this liquid modernity, the subject exchange positions as water fits a container⁽⁴⁾. A group is not enough for this character.

Two interviewed classified themselves into specific groups and expressed a sense of belonging to them: "I think the pothead... yes, I belong to this group." "I

identify myself with the underground movement, I feel belonging and active participant." Both answers are social representations of lifestyles that express a significant portion of their identities.

The third question tried to investigate the influence of the group on their "look". Through the question: *Do the people you identify yourself have your type of ornaments?* Only two interviewed said they do not. In an intermediate category four participants answered affirmatively: "Some of them do. Even those people who do not have them help me to choose mine." Some of them do and some do not." "Some of them, it is very difficult to get unanimity if you relate to a very large range of people." "Not all people with whom I identify myself have tattoos."

In the fourth question, *In what moment of your life did you choose to have a tattoo and/or piercing?*, five of the interviewed used chronological representations to describe the decision moment: "(...) When I was twenty I decided to have a piercing because if I wanted to I could take it off (...)" "As an adult, with twenty-three years old." "During adolescence." "(...) when I was twelve (...)" "Twelve years ago I made the first one" (This interviewed has twenty-five years).

Among those who used chronological description, most of them reported adolescence as a period in which people undergo physical and psychological changes that strongly contribute in the establishment of their identities. The construction of personal identity is considered the most important task of adolescence, the crucial step in the transformation him/her into a productive and mature adult⁽¹⁴⁾, this teenager is exposed to life situations for which he/she is not always ready or think he/she is able to face⁽¹⁹⁾.

In one response an action was used that symbolized the moment: "After I started working with ornaments." One last category can be established, the feelings their users had at the time. "It was a long time ago in a complicated moment..." "In an uncertainty period." "When I had the courage." The probes showed passage moments, uncertainty, interior fluidity, transformation of identity, in which tattoo is a form of support; the ornament, in many cases, has a reversible character.

What does your ornament mean? How do you feel about them? This question, number 5, was elaborated in order to explore the representation of the ornament for its user. It was possible to discriminate three classes. In the first there are the responses related to representations of ornament as aesthetic: "Only aesthetics as its name says, adornment. I feel good about my tattoo". "My tattoos have no specific meaning, they are only ornaments to complement my beauty." In the second class there are the representations related to the significance attributed to the tattoos' drawings: "one of my tattoos is my sign stylized and the other is a witch who is my tarot number. My tattoos are in my back and sometimes I do not even remember them, but I like them". "There are several free-hand drawings with animals, horoscopes, awesome phrases I made. I'm not an exhibitionist, but I like to look myself in the mirror and see them". In the third class, the answers show the ornaments as representations of moments of life

that have marked their users: “Most of my tattoos have to do with my way of thinking and with several good times in my life and with music.” “Every tattoo is a moment of life or personality that you try to express in the form of an ornament.” It tries to mark, as a drawing so it could be lasting, the figure always in formation of personality, but being subjected to that self-ideal we look for, it is affectively related to life and affection as, in this case, music.

Another factor studied, through the sixth question, is prejudice: *Do you feel prejudice? If so, how is this prejudice?* Half of the interviewed reported having suffered prejudice. “Yes, people look as if I was a rowdy, as someone who has no professional future and other things.” “I do. A lady almost hit me and called me rowdy, and I was right.” “(...) there were times I had to hide it for receptionist jobs at parties, which had an older audience.” These speeches represent a society vision about tattoo and piercing as an rowdy expression, a person with nothing to do and no future, linked to marginalization. But there is also a revealing evidence that prejudice is not only in the other. It is, often, the way one imagines he/she will be evaluate by the other. Hiding his/her ornament in a job with an “older public” reveals the prejudice of the tattooed person with respect to the other. Prejudice is fed by both sides.

The seventh and final question was: *Have you ever regretted having done tattoo and/or piercing?* The answers showed a great identification with the individuals and their ornaments, because they were unanimous in stating that they did not regret having them done.

Final consideration

It can be considered that ornament representation, as tattoo and/or piercing, are not the same for those who have and for those who see them. This multiplicity of representation also happens among the ornaments users. It can be said that in this study, the aesthetic complement, the pre-established significance of the drawing and permanent mark of a significant moment in life, reflect, in general, the representations that tattoo and/or piercing users make to attempt to establish a constant identity and personality marks.

Identification with groups also proves to be a form that generates prejudice attitudes. Individuals are cooperative toward their groups and tended to belittle other groups' members. This psychological process, known as intergroup differentiation, would be one of the main factors that favor the emergence of social phenomena, such as formation of stereotypes and prejudices. Even though the individual circulates through several groups various there are reading shocks.

Identity is influenced by intrapersonal factors (innate abilities and acquired characteristics of the individual's personality), interpersonal factors (identification with others) and cultural factors (social values to which a person is exposed, both global and community). The look is the easiest way to show the individual differentiation,

being, sometimes, the only way for some people because, rationally, they do not know how to do it. Fashion is a perfect instrument in this fleeting identification, because it inserts markers of identity with an expiration date. Not due to incompetence, but due to demand of a world that continuously flows.

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