Constructing One's Self: Becoming a Tattooed Person

A Senior Honors Project
(HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

Before getting a tattoo, a person generally goes through mental processes that include deciding to become tattooed, locating a tattooist, and choosing a meaningful design and a location on their body. They must also consider the consequences that a tattoo may have on future career opportunities and relationships with family and friends. Research from Clinton R. Sanders' book *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, as well as the author's personal experiences, are used to explain and exemplify the mental process that members of the tattoo community have in common.

Three appendices accompany the written portion of the project. The first is a piece derived from a speech by the author, entitled *Things to Consider Before Becoming a Tattooed Person*. The second is a small portfolio of the author's tattoo designs accompanied by explanations of the relevance to the tattoo culture. The third is brief pictorial describing the transformation of a paper design into an actual tattoo.
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An Explanation of “Constructing One’s Self”

The following is an explanation of the process through which this project was developed and the format that organizes the body of the project. The personal and creative aspect of this project dictates a personal approach to its explanation.

Developing this Project

The Honors College at Ball State University emphasizes ‘culture’ in its curriculum, and its classes have taught me to take my cultural investigations out of the classroom. I feel that the senior Honors project is the perfect opportunity to develop an in-depth knowledge and background in the counter-culture of tattoos. My interest in tattoos began with my exposure to them through high school athletics. Furthermore, life in a college residence hall exposed me to a greater number of tattooed people, as well as the freedom to pursue my interest in tattooing. I received my first tattoo two weeks before the winter break of my freshman year, and from that point on there was no turning back.

Tattooing, for the most part, has been an icon of counter-culture, but more recently, it is becoming a part of mainstream pop culture. Tattooing is emerging everywhere, but it is especially popular amongst the college-age population. In my personal as well as academic research of tattoos, I have found very little
information based upon the motivations and the mental processes associated with becoming a tattooed person.

I eventually came across Clinton R. Sanders' book, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, which focuses not only on the process of an individual becoming a tattooed person, but also the process of becoming a tattooist and the tattooee/tattooist relationship. Along with his research are small segments of survey responses or conversations that Sanders uses to exemplify his points. Though useful, these are only small pieces of several individuals' experiences and do not produce a whole picture. Through the reading of Sanders' book, I became aware of my own motivations for getting tattooed and developed an interest in a career as a tattoo artist. In developing this project, I thought a combination of Sanders' research and examples of personal information derived from my experiences, would further my understanding of the tattoo culture and myself, aid me in my career search, and help others to understand tattoos and motivations of tattooed people.

**The Format of this Project**

The body of this project has been formatted in a manner that allows for the separate portions of this project to be read together without confusion, while also differentiating between the components. The basis of the factual information in this project is derived from the research presented in *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. This information is presented in the initial paragraphs under each heading. The headings of each section follow the format
of Sanders' book. The generalizations produced by Sanders' research will be accompanied by personal accounts of my own tattoo experiences. This information will be distinguished by a font change and block indentation.

Along with the written portion of the paper, I have included a portfolio of my personal tattoo designs. I have complied my renderings of historic design themes and their meanings or associations with the tattoo culture, as well as some original designs inspired by the rise of fine art in tattooing.
Constructing One's Self: Becoming a Tattooed Person

Introduction

Before getting a tattoo, a person generally goes through a mental process that includes deciding to become tattooed, locating a tattooist, and choosing a meaningful design and a location on their body. They must also consider the consequences that a tattoo may have on future career opportunities and relationships with family and friends. Through my own personal experiences and talking to others who have tattoos, I have found that this mental process exists as a common thread throughout the tattoo community. Research from Clinton R. Sanders' book *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, as well as my own personal experiences, will be used here to explain and exemplify this mental process.

Deciding to be a Tattooed Person

"When asked to describe how they decided to get a tattoo, the vast majority of respondents made reference to another person or group" (Sanders, 1989: 42). Those around an individual are a dominant influence on whether or not they get a tattoo. Deciding to get a tattoo is not a spontaneous event; the person has often considered being tattooed for an extended amount of time, but has not yet acted on it. "Entrance into the actual tattooing 'event,' however, has all the characteristics of an impulse purchase" (Sanders, 1989: 42).
My exposure to tattoos began during my freshman year of high school. Yearning for another badge, the varsity letter, to proclaim my manhood, I joined my school’s wrestling team. Not long after the start of the season, I noticed that several of the older wrestlers had tattoos. The varsity heavyweight wrestler and the junior varsity heavyweight wrestler were brothers, both highly respected linemen and wrestlers, and each sported several tattoos.

The image I remember most vividly was the grim reaper that the younger of the two had tattooed on the side of his calf. Everyone in the school and the wrestling community respected, if not feared, the brothers. They both had an intimidating physical appearance and presented a tough exterior; I attributed much of this to their tattoos. The brothers were role models to me; I learned a great deal from them. I would have to say that they were one of the primary factors in my developing desire to become tattooed. I wanted to possess all the qualities that I associated with the tattooed brothers; I wanted to belong to their group.

My second significant exposure to tattoos occurred before I left for college, when my older sister was tattooed after her freshman year. She was tattooed with a small red and purple butterfly on the right side of her lower back. Her tattoo revealed how my parents would react to one of their children acquiring a tattoo. My parents were obviously not happy, but they did not overreact; they were more upset with her extreme sunburn.

My sister’s account of the tattoo process was the first I had ever heard; she was the first person with whom I had ever discussed the infamous ‘pain factor’. I decided that if she could be tattooed, and had done so without my parents
disowning her, that I too could be tattooed. From that point on I was determined to get a tattoo even though my parents tried to convince me not to, and I decided that there was no better time to make that body modification then upon entering to college.

The typical first time tattoo recipient has very little knowledge about tattoos or the tattoo event. Even if they have considered getting a tattoo for a reasonable amount of time, the recipient often “drifts” into the tattoo act. Many of the interviewees in Sanders’ research were tattooed when they had nothing better to do, had the extra money to purchase the tattoo, and found themselves in the proximity of a tattoo studio. (Sanders, 1989: 42).

I had decided that I was going to get a tattoo while in college. Much of my free time was spent looking for a design that I could wear for the rest of my life. I knew that there was a tattoo studio right off of campus for I had passed it by many times. Soon after my arrival at school I began to determine what kind of tattoo I would get. Although I had finalized my design decision fairly early in the semester, a Celtic cross of my own design, I waited to enter into the tattoo act because I was not totally sure of myself.

I finally “drifted” into being tattooed two weeks before the end of my first semester at Ball State University. I was attending a Christmas party hosted by one of my friends. During the evening the topic of tattoos came up in conversation. An acquaintance of mine, who was also attending the party, had been tattooed the week before with a small flower on her lower back. We talked
about where she had had it done, the cost, and the pain issue. During our conversation I decided to buy myself a Christmas present and finally get the tattoo I had been planning for months.

Two days after the Christmas party, I went to the Village, the small commercial area adjacent to Ball State's campus, and stepped into the Ouch Gallery for the first time. I showed my design to the man behind that counter and said that I wanted a tattoo. After a few hours of waiting and an hour spent in the process, I was a tattooed person.

"The tattooee conceives of the mark as symbolizing change--especially achieving maturity and symbolically separating the self from individuals or groups (parents, husbands, wives, employers, and so on) who have been exercising control over the individual's personal choices" (Sanders, 1989: 43).

I was tattooed. I was a different person. I was a man. I was making decisions for myself. I had actively and permanently rebelled against my parents, specifically my mother. My parents were not overly strict. They were great parents; it was just that they had made so many decisions for me throughout my life. Now I was making my own decisions. The fact that my mother had attempted to talk me out of becoming tattooed with unconvincing threats of withdrawing my college funding made the process much more appealing.
Locating a Tattooist

"Like the initial decision to get a tattoo, the tattooist one decides to patronize commonly is chosen through information provided by the members of the individual's personal network." Often the tattoo studio that the intended recipient chooses is based solely on one very practical reason; it was the only establishment of which they were aware (Sanders, 1989: 44).

The first time I visited Ball State University during my junior year of high school, I noticed the tattoo studio, the Ouch Gallery, located conveniently near campus. I was planning to pay a visit to the studio before I had even moved to Muncie, Indiana.

During my first semester, I came to know people who had patronized the Ouch Gallery. They all seemed very happy with their tattoos, and none of them had ever had any problems. The studio was close, my friends had been there, and most importantly, it was the only parlor I knew of at that point. Since then I have become aware of several additional tattoo studios in Muncie; I have visited four of them, all of which are within just a few miles of campus.

"Consequently, tattooees usually enter the tattoo setting ill-informed and experiencing a considerable degree of anxiety. Their fears center around the anticipated pain of the process and the permanence of the tattoo" (Sanders, 1989: 44).

The idea of permanence was an issue for me; I wanted to be certain that the design I chose would always have meaning to me. However, I was more
anxious about how my family, friends and other acquaintances would react. The anticipation of pain was definitely a major factor in my anxiety while I waited to be tattooed. I had been an athlete in high school, competing in two contact sports, but I was certain that tattooing was going to be an entirely different type of experience. Would I be able to take it? As the tattoo machine pierced my skin, I knew I could take it. The artist asked the traditional first time question, “That doesn’t hurt too much, does it?” It did hurt but not how I had imagined it. It was more of a burning sensation as opposed to a puncture. I found the outlining of the tattoo to be a very interesting and unique experience. During this time I was mentally envisioning which part of my design he was tracing.

From that point I adopted a psychosomatic opinion of the pain associated with tattooing. If you envision the process as painful, then the actual pain is less than you expect and you can relax through the process. If you enter into the process with the opinion that you are tough and that the tattoo will not hurt, then you will find yourself surprised. The tattoo will hurt more than you were really prepared for, and you will have a hard time relaxing, which makes the process seem even longer and more painful.

Choosing a Design and Body Location

When selecting a specific design for their first tattoo, the majority of those surveyed by Sanders fell into one of three categories. The first category of people consisted of those who were tattooed with designs that were directly linked to a certain individual. The design could be a copy of that individual's
tattoo or an image that was somehow relevant. The individuals with whom the tattoos were associated were mainly people that the tattooees had an intimate relationship with, such as family members or close friends (Sanders, 1989: 45-46). "Vow" tattoos are one specific type of tattoo that is directly and obviously dedicated to an individual. Vow tattoos tend to incorporate the name of the individual, such as 'mom' or the name of a lover.

The second category of people was composed of those who were tattooed with designs that permanently associate them with a specific group (Sanders, 1989: 46-47). A major group consists of those in the military, who get tattoos to forever pledge their allegiance. On the negative side, street gangs often use tattoos to identify their members. Members who end up leaving such gangs are permanently marked.

The third group of people was those who selected images that were "symbolic representations" of themselves, their hobbies, interests, and activities.

I find myself falling into the third category. I wanted to be tattooed so that I could outwardly express myself. I considered a Superman logo, but it was too cliché. The Punisher logo, a skull, was too antisocial. I finally decided on a religious icon, a cross. I decided that my faith in my religion was going to be just as permanent as the tattoo. I was also able to express my creative and artistic side by rendering the design myself. I designed the tattoo using Celtic knot work that I had learned how to draw from Internet websites.
The location selected for a tattoo is directly linked to its purpose. Females often see the tattoo as a sort of permanent body ornament. Their tattoos tend to be located in places that are not normally visible but can still be enjoyed by both the tattooed person and those they have intimate contact with. The public opinion of tattooed women seems to be more negative than that of tattooed men, further encouraging women to have hidden tattoos. Men see their tattoos differently. The majority of men see their tattoos as “identity symbols,” creating a greater desire to have visible or easily exposed tattoos. The most common location for men to be tattooed is the arm, where the tattoo can be shown publicly, but easily covered with a shirtsleeve if the situation requires. (Sanders, 1989, 47-50)

The design I selected was a personal identity symbol, but it was not the type of symbol that I wanted to openly expose. I was tattooed for myself, not for the general public. I selected my shoulder blade, because it was a place that I consistently cover and would be easily hidden from my parents. I also felt that the cross would be more aesthetic if it were placed on a flatter surface than my arm. I used a computer to make sample images of the tattoo on different places on my back. These helped me to visualize my tattoo and to get my friends’ opinions on the proper placement.

Impact on Self-Definition

“Tattooees consistently conceive of the tattoo as having an impact on their definition of self and demonstrating to others information about their unique
interests and social connections" (Sanders, 1989: 51). The tattoo makes each person special in his or her own way. The tattoo helps people express how they see themselves. "Interviewees also spoke of the pleasure they got from the tattoo as related to having gone through the mysterious and moderately painful process of being tattooed. The tattoo demonstrated courage to the self" (Sanders, 1989: 52).

My cross tattoo is a permanent reminder to me of my religious faith. I have not actively practiced my religion since I have been at college, but my tattoo not onlyreminds me of what I believe, but expresses that to others. In a way, it is also a badge of honor; I not only had enough courage to be tattooed and to experience that pain, but I have the convictions to permanently express something about myself.

Interactional Consequences

One of the major positive interactional consequences of the tattooing process is the strengthening of group interactions. The tattoos not only bring the members of specific groups together, but the newly tattooed person also becomes identified with a varied, but strangely close group consisting of all tattooed people. There are instances when casual interactions with people can result in a positive response, such as if another person takes pleasure from seeing the tattoo (Sanders, 1989: 52-53).

If tattoos are seen as stigmatizing marks, then a casual interaction can also result in a negative response. Still today, these negative reactions are fairly
common. It is these negative responses that often cause tattooed people to only reveal their tattoos to those whom they know more personally. Many tattooed people use the reactions they get in response to their body modifications to find their place in society. They fit in with those who accept their body art, while they separate themselves from those who respond negatively. (Sander, 1989: 53-56).

The stereotypical view of tattoos by the general public produces many opportunities to be confronted with negative interactional consequences. Sanders was surprised to find in his research that these negative responses did not produce a high level of regret about being tattooed. If there was regret about the tattoo, it was because of the design, the location, or the quality (Sanders, 1989: 56-57).

I have not had experiences that have made me regret getting my first tattoo. I have since been tattooed with a Ford Mustang fender ornament on my right arm, and I am always considering getting more tattoos. Both of my designs are easily concealed with a short sleeve shirt. In most public situations, both of them are covered and, for the most part, this protects me from negative responses. The semi-public spaces in my residence hall that require them to be exposed, such as the bathrooms, are filled with people my age who are often less judgmental toward body modifications. These interactions either provide no response, or a positive response. All other instances where my tattoos are revealed are intentional and deliberate, and I know I’ll get a positive response.

If I were to change anything about my first tattoo experience, I would change only the location of my cross. I would move the cross to the center of my
back, creating better symmetry, and allowing for a more extensive full back tattoo in the future. Even though I was not educated enough to properly select a tattoo artist, I was lucky enough to get a tattoo of relatively high quality.

**Conclusion: Tattooing, Stigma, Self, and Identity**

The thought processes and motivations behind getting a tattoo are often much more involved than most people think. One must consider the cultural and sociological consequences of becoming permanently marked. Research such as that presented in Clinton R. Sanders' book *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, has shown that throughout the tattooing community there is consistency in the mental process as well as in many of the aspects of the physical tattoo act. Through reading Sanders' book I was not only able to come to a better understanding of my own tattoo experiences, but I was able to better relate to other members of the tattoo culture.
“One out of ten Americans are tattooed.” This was the title of an article in a 1936 issue of *Live* magazine. I have been interested in tattoos since my freshman year of high school. I was tattooed the first time my freshman year of college. In this my senior year of college, I am currently working on several projects involving tattooing, the largest of which is my Senior Honors Project. Through my research and personal experiences, I have learned that the act of getting a tattoo is often spontaneous, but there are several important issues anyone wanting a tattoo should consider before it is too late. Today I will inform you of these issues, including the permanence of tattoos, what design to select, and how to find an artist and studio.

The first issue that must be considered is that, by definition, tattoos are permanent. Before making a permanent modification to your body, you must consider your motivations; you must consider why you are getting the tattoo. Getting a tattoo should be something that you are doing for yourself. Do not give in to peer pressures, and consider your own future.

You must also consider how a tattoo will affect your future relationships. Will a tattoo bring you closer to your family or will it push you away? Will a tattoo
isolate you from your religious group? The general public still carries a negative connotation of tattoos, possibly making it more difficult to find a job in the future if you wear visible tattoos.

Though tattooing is permanent for the most part, with recent advances in technology there are options for removal. In *The Total Tattoo Book* by Amy Krakow, two of these options are discussed. Dr. David Duffy, who has had experience with several different types of tattoo removal, uses the TCA chemical peel. Dr. Duffy prefers the chemical peel because the pigments are actually removed from the skin, but he states that the process is painful, can cause scars and discoloration, and, most importantly, there are no guarantees that one will be satisfied with the results. Alternatively, Dr. Steven Snyder uses a Met-Lite laser to remove tattoos. The laser removal does not leave a scar, but the process is expensive; a good estimate for the price of laser removal would be approximately ten times what was paid for the tattoo initially. The process also takes several treatments with about six weeks of healing time in between. After the first few treatments the client is left with a partially removed tattoo; the results get worse before they get better.

If you decide that you are in fact prepared to make a permanent modification to your body, selecting a design is the next step. Again, the permanence of a tattoo makes it important to select a design that has personal meaning, not a design resulting from a fad or other temporary influence. Samuel Steward, PhD. an English professor who left his academic life to become a tattoo artist, makes reference in his book *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social*
History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors and Street-Corner Punks 1950-1965, makes several references to young clients that wanted the same tattoo as their father's or uncle's. The images they requested were often images that were very specific to a certain generation, and the clients often had little idea of the meanings behind them, they just wanted the same tattoo as their relative.

After selecting the desired image, you have to choose how the design will be rendered. In most tattoo studios, there are racks or walls covered by 'flash.' Flash is commercial tattoo artwork. The same images can be found in many tattoo parlors across the country. Tattoo artists often find doing 'flash' tattoos to be boring and monotonous. All they have to do is trace and shade the design, and they might have done the same design several times in the past. A custom design is often the preferable way to get a tattoo. The design can either be designed by the artist or be brought in by the client. Artists often prefer to do their own work, and often give more respect to personal designs, often producing higher quality work.

The placement of the design is as important as the design itself. If you do not want the tattoo to be visible, make sure it can easily be hidden under all circumstances. Many tattoo artists will refuse to tattoo on what is commonly referred to as 'public skin.' Public skin consists of the skin above the neck and below the wrists. The tattoo needs to be placed on a part of the body where it not only fits, but matches well with the shape and movement of the body. Do not neglect to consider that your body will change over time, and this can affect the appearance of a tattoo.
Having selected a design and a location on the body, it is now time to choose who will do the tattooing and in what studio you will have it done. The artist and the studio are often linked together, but both are equally important. “Tattooing is a lifetime mark. Have it done by an artist.” This piece of advice comes from an unidentified tattoo artist, circa 1950.

The most common method of selecting an artist is through viewing their portfolios. The portfolios usually consist of photographs of fresh tattoos that the artists have just completed. A fresh tattoo is still slightly swollen, the wound is still open, and they are usually covered in Vaseline. All of these factors help the appearance of the tattoo when photographed. These pictures are a good indication of the artist’s overall ability, but if available, photographs of healed tattoo will give you a better indication of the final product. These picture will show how well the tattoos heal, how tight the outline and corners are after the swelling has come down, and how bright the colors stay. These days, many tattoo artists actually have some form of formal art training. Ask the artist about his training or apprenticeship to get a better idea of his experience.

In the tattoo studio you may see that the artists display state certification. Though certification is important, it can also be deceiving. In the state of Indiana, a tattoo artist is not required to be certified in the art or technique of tattooing. The certification that is required only pertains to sterilization practices.

Selecting a tattoo studio or parlor is, as I said earlier, just as important as the artist. The best way to select a studio is to visit it, though its reputation is also something to consider because it can give you an idea of the studio’s overall
attitude and clientele. The appearance of the studio is one of the most important qualities. If a studio does not look clean or sanitary, it is not the place to get a tattoo. J.C. Miller tells us in the article "Safe Tattooing in the 90's" from THINK magazine, a magazine oriented toward tattoo beginners, that "your primary concern when considering you first (or second, or twenty-second) tattoo is you health and safety." The easiest way to promote your health and safety is to make sure the studio is following the most basic precautions. The studio you select should be using an autoclave to sterilize all of the non-disposable pieces of the tattooing equipment, single-use needles, disposable inkwells, and all artists should be wearing latex gloves.

After thoughtfully deciding to get a tattoo, and carefully choosing a design, the time spent finding the right artist and studio will help you to get the best product with the least risks. College may be a time for fun and rebellion, but it is also a time for responsibility. Be sure to consider why you are getting a tattoo, how it will effect your future and relationships, and what design you will wear forever before making a permanent, possibly life altering decision.
Appendix B - Tattoo Designs

Religious icons are one of the most common themes for tattoos. Most people associate themselves permanently to their religion as well as their tattoos. The ichthus-cross was designed for a friend who now has this tattoo on her lower back. The Celtic knot work cross was my first tattoo.
Celtic knot work has been used in many forms of art for centuries. Knot work tattoos are commonly found in the form of basic knots, but they can be more complex. The angel design was an experiment in using knot work to make more pictorial designs. The winged heart was designed for a close female friend.
The dragon is seen by many cultures as a symbol of physical and mental strength. An individual who associates himself with these characteristics can select either an Asian or a European depiction. A collegiate fencer currently wears the dragon wrapped around the saber.
Skulls are a major theme in tattooing. They are more commonly worn by men and represent either an antisocial attitude or his mortality.
Both men and women wear fantasy themes and pin-ups. Advances in tattooing technology and pigments are currently allowing for brighter more colorful designs in addition to increased realism.
Appendix C – Design into Tattoo

The first picture is the outline I drew of a Ford Mustang hood ornament. The second is the actual template used by the artist to apply the tattoo outline. The third is the color rendering of the ornament with metallic shading and flames. The final image is a photograph of the final tattoo, healed after the initial tattooing and one touch up.
Works Cited and Inspirational Resources


