

# Sociology essays - tattooing body mutilation



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## **Tattooing Body Mutilation**

### **Sociology & Cultural Studies**

Question. Undertake a case study of any contemporary cultural practice or set of practices of your choice, explaining what you consider to be their sociological significance.

### **Tattooing**

Body mutilation has long been part of non-Christian cultures as a positive mark of identity, while in many modern Body modification practices are so prolific that an exhaustive account of the practices of body magic and marking around the globe is nearly impossible.

Body mutilation such as tattooing often functions as part of a healing ritual, protection against forces that may cause injury and admission to a social group. Cultural practices of body mutilation are often functionally akin to prayer as a practice that spiritually elevates an individual.

Tattooing is not the hideous custom which it is called. It is not barbarous merely because the printing is skin-deep and unalterable. -Henry David Thoreau. Several major religions exhibit complex attitudes toward self-mutilation and adornment. In the Old Testament, Leviticus 19. 28 prohibits followers of Judaism from marking the body: " Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks upon you." The " Holly Koran" forbids marking the body. The Christian Bible associates body markings with sin as shown in the story of Cain, who was marked in punishment for slaying his brother.

Still, many people apparently have continued to feel a need for confirmation of their religion by marking their bodies. The Judaic custom of circumcision persists. Coptic, Armenian, Abyssinian, Syrian, and Russian pilgrims returning from the Holy Land frequently acquired souvenir tattoos to commemorate their journey. At the turn of the nineteenth century, it was traditional for Gypsies to tattoo these pilgrims, and the tattoo marks became part of the pilgrim's social status.

An example of this is the Armenian title for one who has made the pilgrimage which is *Mahdesi*, which translates as "I saw death." Because only religious pilgrims were tattooed, the religious tattoos were also known as *Mahdesi*. The tattoo is a code indicating a spiritual passage, or at least a religious pilgrimage. Similarly, in Turkey the souvenir tattoos were known by the Turkish word for one who has made the religious pilgrimage, *Haji*.

These religious tattoos became symbols of entry into a higher plane of spiritual existence and exemplify the overlap between Christian beliefs and body magic. First documented by a traveler in 1660, common marks included dots in the shape of a cross at the base of the fingers and crosses on the back of the hand or inside of the wrist. Biblical scenes marked the bearer as a devout Christian, but also served magical purposes.

Women chose Annunciation scenes to ensure fertility, and sufferers of illness placed tattoos on ailing parts of the body to promote healing. Although Greek and Latin Christian churches have criticized these practices, they persist, and many Muslim Arabs tattoo in disregard for the Islamic prohibition on marking the body. Even today, many American tattooees have permanent

religious icons and emblems as well as personal magical symbols inked upon their bodies.

Tattoos are prompted by " the primitive desire for an exaggerated exterior" and are manifestations of deep psychological motivations. They are " the recording of dreams," which simultaneously express an aspect of the self and recreate and mask the body As products of inner yearnings, self-concepts, desires, and magical or spiritual beliefs, designs on the human body formed by inserting pigments under the skin have been crafted by nearly every culture around the world for thousands of years.

Definitive evidence of tattooing dates to the Middle Kingdom period of Egypt, approximately 2000 B. C., but many scholars believe that Nubians brought the practice to Egypt much earlier. There was little anthropological attention to tattooing in the early part of the century because of preconceived notions of its insignificance to cultural analysis. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Maya, Toltec, and Aztec cultures performed tattooing and scarification, and that the practice is thousands of years old in Asian cultures.

Although tattooing was practiced in pre-Christian Europe, the word *tattoo* does not appear in English until Captain John Cook imported it after a journey to the Pacific Islands in the eighteenth century. Although no connection has been made between the words *tattoo* and *taboo* , it seems highly likely that they are related. While enduring the process of acquiring socially meaningful marks, the tattooee is being formed and shaped into an acceptable member of society.

Prior to the completion of the tattoos the person is not only physically vulnerable because of the possibility of contamination during the penetrating process of tattooing but symbolically vulnerable as well. No longer without a tattoo, but without a finished tattoo, the person's body and therefore the self are not yet completed. The person is a liminal entity not yet in society and therefore taboo.

Although the origin of tattooing is uncertain, anthropological research confirms that tattooing, as well as other body alterations and mutilations, is significant in the spiritual beliefs of many cultures. Various peoples tattoo or scarify during puberty rituals. In traditional South Pacific Tonga society, only priests could tattoo others and tattoos were symbolic of full tribal status.

Eskimo women traditionally tattooed their faces and breasts and believed that acquiring sufficient tattoos guaranteed a happy afterlife. In many African cultures scars indicate social status and desirability as a marriage partner. Scarification patterns often identify the bearer as a member of a specific village. Many of these practices are changing and fading as Western influences enter African cultures.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Cree Indians living on the Great Plains tattooed for luck, for beauty, and to protect their health. Cree men with special powers received tattoos to help them communicate with spirits. A dream conferred the privilege of receiving a tattoo, which would be inscribed during a ceremony conducted by a shaman authorized to tattoo.

The ability to withstand the painful and tedious process of tattooing, which often lasted two to three days, confirmed the tattooee's courage. Blood shed

during the process was believed to possess magical power and was absorbed with a special cloth and kept for future use.

The ritual recreates the flesh bequeathed to initiates by their parents and experienced during childhood. The physical change marks a symbolic rebirth into a new spiritual, social, and physical reality as well as a real physical change. This magical use of the body reiterates the idea that physical and spiritual existence and their interactions are deeply entwined.

European "civilizing" cultures often attempted to eradicate body marking practices, often in the name of religion. In 787 A. D. Pope Hadrian I decreed a ban on tattooing. Constantine prohibited tattooing as an act of altering the body that God molded in His own image. Puritans in the New England colonies connected body markings with witchcraft, and those suspected of practicing witchcraft were searched for "devil's marks" as proof of their alliance with Satan.

Quoting the Old Testament interdict against printing or cutting marks upon the flesh, the Puritans also condemned Native American tattooing. By the 1850s many Native Americans had adopted the settlers' customs of dress and began to view tattooing as unnecessary and uncivilized. Africans brought to the colonies as slaves often bore scarification marks of royalty, social standing, or servitude, which were probably perceived by the colonists as heathen tokens of savage cultures.

In some cultures, the elite class marks the bodies of individuals considered pariahs or marginal members of society. In the Near East, slave masters sometimes tattooed slaves as a sign of degradation and branded incorrigible

slaves. In late medieval and early modern Europe, slaveholders branded their slaves, a practice continued in France until the early 1800s and in Russia until the mid-1800s. Runaway slaves in Brazil, the renegade *quilombos* who were branded if recaptured, considered their brands marks of honor and infamy.

In Yoruba, where body markings placed one within society, slave owners denied their slaves distinguishing marks of social status. Exemplifying a much different assumption about body marking, slaveholders in the Americas branded and tattooed their slaves to place them firmly outside mainstream society. During the eighteenth century, prisoners incarcerated in France were physically marked. The use of body markings as positive signs of identification and inclusion in many African societies contrasts sharply with European use of the marks as signs of degradation and marginalization.

The American association of tattooing with exoticism solidified in 1851 when Dan Rice hired a tattooed man named James F. O'Connell to appear in his circus. During this time Rice was also fascinating America with another body image in popular culture, the blacked-up minstrel. The minstrel representation of the black body was replete with complex meanings of manhood, race, and class. The tattooed body on display was probably less familiar but equally intriguing. Without evidence of what kind of tattoos Rice's employee had, or whether or not he performed, or served only as a display object, it is difficult to assess the meaning of his existence.

Perhaps O'Connell conjured images of a white savage, halfway between the articulate, civilized white man and the Native American who expressed his

culture with paint and body markings. Perhaps audiences saw the tattooed man as Melville's Queequeg incarnate; exotic, half-blackened with ink-and half- black, but not without feeling or humanness. P. T. Barnum followed Rice's success by displaying an elaborately inscribed Albanian named Constantine, who was an extremely popular attraction. Barnum was the first to exhibit a tattooed woman, in 1898, which added the erotic element of viewing the female body.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century as the public became more familiar with the art of tattooing through the circus, which was primarily a working and lower-class entertainment, tattoo was also developing commercially. The first known professional tattooist in the United States was Martin Hildebrand who had an itinerant practice during the Civil War and opened a shop in New York City in the 1890s.

At the turn of the century, tattoos showed up in titillating and disreputable places. Tattooing became a shop-front industry in the disreputable Chatham Square area of New York City. Electric tattoo machines made tattooing cheaper and less painful and good tattoos easier to render. With this new technology, tattooing became popular among the lower classes and quickly came to be associated with blue-collar workers and ruffians.

Although tattooing was an upper-class trend for a brief period, by the 1920s the middle class considered it deviant. Tattoos were considered " a decorative cultural product dispensed by largely unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dingy shops in urban slums," and consumers were " seen



as being drawn from marginal, rootless, and dangerously unconventional social groups."

In the 1930s, the American fascination with body alteration as a deviant practice, continued. During this time a psychiatrist and writer named Albert Parry often wrote about the significance of tattoos and embedded stereotypes of deviance in the public discourse. Although Parry was an avid fan of tattooing, and bemoaned its decline in popularity, he called tattooing a "tragic miscarriage of narcissism." He claimed tattooing was a substitute for sexual pleasure, evidence of homosexuality, and a source of masochistic pleasure.

Parry associated tattooing with abnormal sexuality. Although the exhibition of a tattooed woman in the circus in prior decades was tinged with a hint of sexual voyeurism, Parry explicitly constructed images of tattooed women as abnormal and accessible commodities. He claimed that five percent of American women were tattooed and insinuated that beneath their conventional clothes, these disguised women had marked their bodies with signs of desire and erotic adventure. Parry stated that "prostitutes in America, as elsewhere, get tattooed because of certain strong masochistic-exhibitionist drives."

Parry reasoned that prostitutes obtained tattoos because they desired yet another reason to pity themselves and were seeking to be mistreated by clients. He also asserted that they believed tattoos would prevent disease and that they obtained sexual pleasure from the tattoo process. As proof of the prostitute's urge to self-humiliate, Parry described several tattoos of

cynical humor and sexual innuendo inscribed upon prostitutes, such as " pay as you enter."

Conflating racism, homophobia, and the idea of women as a sexual commodity, Parry also claimed that English prostitutes etched names of their pimps on themselves or likenesses of " their Negro lovers, much to the chagrin of American sailors," while French women inscribed the names of their lesbian lovers, and gay men tattooed themselves in order to seduce young boys. Parry relished the stereotype of tattooing as a perverse and deviant activity. His assertions reverberated for decades in the assumptions psychologists held about tattooed man and women.

Tacitly based on the preconception that marking the body is deviant, psychologists have sought to determine a connection between tattoos and psychopathology. Members and potential members of the military who bear tattoos have served as subjects for several studies that correlate tattoos and social adjustment. A study in 1943 concluded that " psychopathology or social or emotional maladjustment is significantly higher among tattooed than among non-tattooed men."

A 1968 study concluded that sailors with tattoos were more likely to be maladjusted, and military men with " Death before Dishonor" tattoos were more likely than non-tattooed sailors to be discharged from the service. Other studies conducted during the late 1960s link tattooed women with homosexuality and masochism and tattooing practices in institutions with high levels of aggression, sexual insecurity, and social maladjustment. These

studies both pre-selected the subject pools and ignored the effects of the institutional milieu on the tattooees.

Other studies of imprisoned populations reveal motivations to tattoo that are similar to the motivations to self-mutilate as a reaction to the surrounding environment. Similar to inmate self-mutilation, tattooing may provide relief from the numbness of incarceration and establish individual or gang identity. A 1964 survey of the public perception of tattooed persons revealed that a majority of people perceived tattooed individuals as physically strong and psychologically aggressive. This survey concluded that whether or not tattoos are indicators of social maladjustment, they may function to enhance the bearer's self-image and integrity.

Returning to the theory of confirmation of the self in a pain-enduring interaction, one can understand the connotation of toughness and integrity that a tattoo confers. One psychoanalytic case study observed that a dominatrix in this relationship bore her tattoos as evidence of her ability to manage the ritual infliction of pain adroitly. This self-mastery and "toughness" earned her the right to control her submissive partners and proved her ability to alter, both own and her partners' consciousness and identity.

The lack of understanding of the functional purposes of both the tattooing process and the final marks have led to a perception of tattooing as barbaric, deviant, and sexually perverse. Dominant American culture has considered tattoos as marks of degradation, criminality, and marginality. Without an understanding of manipulation of the body to inspire "sacred awe" in

viewers and bearers of tattoos and other body alterations, one can not grasp the significance of these alterations as tangible establishment of personal, spiritual, and social identity.

Although body modifications such as tattooing and piercing have been construed as signs of deviance, during the past two decades body alteration has begun to filter into mainstream culture as a popular form of self-expression. Articles about tattooing and piercing proliferate in popular literature. Fashion magazines show models with tattooed ankles and pierced navels, and recruit well-known tattooed musicians for their pages. Children are able to play with tattooed dolls. Exhibits of tattoo art are shown in art galleries. Piercing boutiques and tattoo shops are conducting brisk business.

Several factors have encouraged a "tattoo renaissance" since the 1950s. Post war prosperity along the West Coast combined with a new interest in Asian cultures, many of which revere tattooing. The Japanese, for instance, have a long tradition of tattoo as an intricate body art. New technology and interest in tattooing as a fine art have produced new aesthetic standards, a wider clientele, and an infinite variety of tattoo designs, including "neo-tribal" stylistic forms that are heavily influenced by tattoo traditions of other cultures. Today, as sociologist Clinton Sanders notes, tattooing has become more professional and more of a fine art.

Tattoo artists are much more likely to have formal artistic and academic training than in previous years and to consider their tattooing practice a creative pursuit. A more diverse population is getting tattooed in the past two decades. New tattoo clients are better educated, have more disposable

income, and care more about the decorative and aesthetic elements.

Customer's often custom design their own tattoos and the tattooer-customer relationship is changing from one of service provider and buyer to a collaborative effort. The relationship between a piercer and his or her client may be even more intricate and personal. With or without conscious realization of the significance of body making in other cultures, Americans today are adopting similar practices. To understand these practices as cultural phenomena, we must first understand their significance for individuals.

Tattooing and piercing are not just adornments added to the body surface like jewelry or cosmetics, but they penetrate the flesh. Piercing is a quick process followed by several weeks of tenderness while healing. Tattooing is a tedious, painful process followed by a period of transformation in which the wound heals and the redesigned body emerges. These adornments, like self-starvation and self-cutting, accrue significance from both the process of physical transformation and the final product.

The tattoo procedure is often a " highly social act" in which an individual manipulates and asserts identity within a specific social milieu. Getting a tattoo is often " a social event experienced with close associates," who provide moral support, offer advice, and help pass the " anxiety-filled waiting time." Many tattoo artists and piercers comment on the large percentage of their customers who belong to college fraternities or sororities and get pierced as part of the initiation process. It is rare that these individuals tattoo or pierce alone. Often several associates accompany the initiate to provide companionship and fortification.

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Many cultures attach social status to body alterations and consider pain a crucial element for imparting meaning to body alteration. Yoruban scarification is not only considered aesthetically pleasing but announces the marked individual's fortitude and ability to endure pain.

A Yoruban woman acquires her markings when she is old enough to marry and accept the painful ordeal of childbirth. Her *kolo* cicatrices " exhibit her willingness to bear pain. Aesthetic value is bound up with the value of endurance and the willingness to bear discomfort to accomplish a greater good." Tiv women remark on the ability of scarification to indicate masculinity and the desire to withstand pain in order to be attractive: " What girl would look at a man if his scars had not cost him pain?"

Withstanding the pain of tattooing and other body alterations is also significant in American culture. The tattooee or piercee, like any initiate, vulnerably awaits the pain and new status the procedure will impart. Enduring pain is often considered crucial to gender constructions and demonstration of toughness. Although some tattooees have a difficult time bearing the pain, others see it as a " good pain."

Part of the pleasure of a tattoo is the macho implication of being able to bear the pain, and during the 1950s and 1960s getting a tattoo was a common rite of passage into adulthood for many young men. Still today, withstanding the tedious and painful process with bravado may be required to gain membership in a youth gang, or to demonstrate rebellion against authority. College fraternities may require members to get tattooed or pierced as a sign of their loyalty.

One tattoo artist with many tattoos connects the pain of the process with the pleasure of creativity. " It's a strange metaphor to say that pain is like an orgasm, but it is in a way. And it's like labor too, to go through this pain to create a thing, to get it out of you. The design is inside of you, it just wants to get out." The creative expression of identity is enhanced by the feeling of " aliveness" that accompanies the pain of the process for many people. " This sense of existing, of feeling, of enjoying life, [comes] to many with the touch of the needle." The prolonged pain produces euphoria for many, and pain is also a meaningful and enjoyable element of the piercing process for some piercees as well as people who indulge in body branding or scarification. <sup>62</sup>

Individuals who tattoo and pierce imbue the body with narcissistic or magico-religious powers to confirm identity and connect them to a deeper self-awareness, a social group, or a vision of integration with the cosmos. Similar to the way in which the self-mutilator or anorectic physically demarcates a change in self-awareness and interaction with the surrounding milieu, an individual who chooses to self-mark physically confirms a change in status.

The " badge of admission" may carry personal meaning as well as a message of affiliation with a religion, one other person, a community, a youth gang, a fraternity, a military organization, or any specific group. The complexity of the action lies in the fact that the confirmation of identity is based on distancing the self from a large non-marked portion of the population. Body markings are marks of disaffiliation with the mainstream and " visually proclaim a sense of camaraderie to others so marked." The change in status,

similar to the self-mutilator's change in tension level and temporary "cure" of feelings of fragmentation,

Body alteration functions in similar ways in Western culture, but it accrues a different potency as a deliberate choice of identification because of the stigma it incurs as a rebellion against, rather than an embodiment of, dominant cultural values. American women, fully aware of the stigma attached to tattooing and body alteration that doesn't help achieve standard beauty goals for women, are more likely than men to choose adornment that is not publicly visible and attach more personal meanings to their markings.

In a culture that has taught them to preserve their bodies for the enjoyment of others, women who tattoo themselves are implicitly making a declaration of independence from at least some aesthetic standards expected of them by families, friends, and society. One 21-year-old woman explained the reaction of her mother to her tattoo. "She asks me to keep it covered if we go out in public. It is a sign of disrespect to her." One woman explained, "I did this not for my husband, not for my parents, not for a boss, not for anyone else but me, my internal reason was to make a statement." Women mark their bodies as an act of reclamation of their identity after a divorce, as a gesture of healing from sexual or other physical abuse, or simply as self-celebration.

Body alteration symbolizes "control over and pride in the physical self" for many women. Centuries ago, this tangible evidence of self-control and self-celebration may have been enough to convict a woman of witchcraft and sentence her to death. If a "devil's mark" was found on the body of a woman



accused of witchcraft -whether self-imposed or organic in reality-it was interpreted as a chosen mark that confirmed the woman's autonomous nature and rebellion against prescribed behavior. Her willful desecration of her God-given body proved her collusion with the Devil.

Today, a woman's self-creation carries less formidable consequences. Similar to the ways of punk styles of "leather and metal access forbidden gender symbols and behavior" for women, tattoos and piercing provide a form of gender rebellion also. The 1970 study highlighted this idea when one of the woman subjects proclaimed her motivation to tattoo as "I want to act like a boy ... anything they can do I can do better." Tattooing and body piercing blur previous assumptions about gender roles for both women and men.

Historically considered a salacious and pagan badge by Western cultures, deliberate body alteration proclaims defiance of cultural standards for both men and women, and many body modifiers enjoy the shock value of their adornment and take pride in their stigmatized identities.

Piercers and tattooees reject mainstream norms of adornment while simultaneously embracing subterranean status. This is an especially important component of the body modification trend for adolescents who are trying to establish social identity and autonomy from parental authority. Recreating the body differentiates one from one's previous childhood body, and conventional familial and cultural milieus.

One connection between body alteration and youth and popular culture is explained by Daryl "Bear" Belmares, who had been a professional piercer for nine years in 1996 Belmares attributes the rise in piercing popularity since <https://assignbuster.com/sociology-essays-tattooing-body-mutilation/>

1990 to the influence of media and describes two general motivations to pierce. Some people are entranced by the trends of the look. " They come in and say 'I saw it on MTV.' They've seen the Aerosmith video that has a model with a pierced navel and think it looks sexy." Their main motivation is a desire to be different.

These individuals are likely to let their piercing heal over after a few years. Other piercers are " functional piercers" who spend more time premeditating their decision and pierce for sexual enhancement, to consciously mark a transition in their life, or to heal emotional scars. Although one might think that women are more likely to pierce as a narcissistic use of the body to establish identity, based on the proportion of self-starvers and self-cutters who are women, Belmares denied this gender distinction, noting that his clientele is 50 percent men and 50 percent women.

In 1969, Edward Podvall noted that " not only does the iconography of self-mutilation appear continually on the landscape of our culture as something seemingly more honest, authentic, pure, or disciplined, but it can be found as an unexpected posture within one particular developmental epoch." He concluded that individual self-mutilation is an attempt to fend off developmental anxiety, and its prevalence may indicate " exoneration and approval by the surrounding culture."

As a cultural phenomenon, the iconography of self-mutilation may be interpreted in several ways. Podvall's depiction of self-mutilation as part of a developmental process, like Turner's delineation of body marking as a resolution of an initiation process and like psychoanalytic theory of body

narcissism and self-mutilation as attempts to combat fragmentation of the ego, reveals the cultural significance of body modification.

Self-starvation, self-cutting, performance art, and painful, permanent body adornment are potent expressions of rebellion, desire for autonomy, and need to disseminate tension. They are attempts to self-heal, self-initiate, and self-symbolize. Self-mutilation may augment self-awareness, provoke euphoric feelings of spirituality, and resolve a state of liminality by culminating in marks of identity.

In the context of culturally sanctioned rituals, these marks incur social inclusion and demarcate social status. In American society, which has considered body alteration practices barbaric and has few formal coming of age rituals that mark the body, the perception of these marks as deviant or perverse has been changing as they have become more common.

**Conclusion:**

Although the extent to which contemporary Western society accepts self-mutilation is debatable, many forms of self-mutilation are becoming increasingly popular as real and symbolic forms of self-creation. The public and private, individual and social spheres in which body alteration is significant are entwined. Self-mutilation cannot be separated from the culture in which it exists. As David Napier points out, American culture is obsessed with "coming of age" as a never-ending process. This struggle to achieve identity is reflected by the implosion of self and identity into the physical symbol, and reality, of the body.

The human body is an accessible and viable pathway to holistic integration of self and is a terrain upon which to carve and etch one's deepest desires for identity and meaningful connection to both earthly and spiritual realms. At times altering the body is a form of play and adornment, assuming a mask, playing a role, at other times it is a desperate attempt to feel alive and combat a feeling of alienation and disassociation. Altering the body is an exploration of limits and boundaries of the self, whether in the arena of staged art, subculture, or the local tattoo shop. As individuals test their own limits, they test and change the limits of society.

Although still considered distasteful and non-mainstream by many people, body piercing and tattooing are being adopted by individuals seeking to fulfill spiritual and social identity needs. In contrast to societies in which body marks are inscribed according to cultural tradition, the self-chosen marks of today's modern cultures are marks of disaffiliation with convention and historical values.

Finally, as individuals modify their bodies as exploration of their individual identities, the culture composed of these individuals begins to explore what it means to be human and what role the body plays in civilization. Tattooing is an act which is very much painful in some cases so why should someone get the tattoos even when they are so terrible. This is society's responsibility to set such standards for such unusual things so that every body can have clear mind about these weird things.

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