

# A Tattoo Is For Life:- A Sociological Study Of The Changing Significance Of Tattoos.

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'Many a dangerous temptation comes to us in gay, fine colours that are but skin deep'  
Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

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## The Unrecognised Art: An Introduction

Tattooing has existed in the world for many centuries and has spread to all the corners of the earth from ancient Egypt to New Zealand, from North America to Siberia, from Greenland to the Pacific Islands, from Alaska to Japan and many countries in between, *Skin Deep* (April 1999:3). More recently there has been a dramatic increase in the number of men and women getting tattoos. In particular there are now far more women getting tattooed nowadays than ever before. I believe this change in society is significant in itself and one for further investigation. Interestingly, there has been little or no sociological research into the subject of tattooing. This dissertation aims to provide an introduction and insight into what for some would seem the ‘exotic’ world of tattooing, and hopefully encourage further investigation into this subject.

Initially I endeavour to illustrate that there is a connection between identity, appearance, fashion and tattoos. Fashion acts as a means by which people can communicate an individual or group identity. Appearance can be altered through various different means today and having tattoos can actually alter an individual's social interaction as well as altering appearance and portraying identity.

Gender is a constant theme of this dissertation. I believe it is very interesting to note that many people in contemporary society are taking an interest in tattooing, and the amount of women with tattoos is particularly significant. I shall be asking why more and more women are getting tattooed at present. In addition to the most important and common question of all regarding tattooing, that is, why a person decides to get a tattoo, I shall be asking why. I will be examining if there are different reasons

between the sexes for getting tattooed. I will also be discussing tattoo design and placement and if there are any differences in design choice or placement of the tattoo between men and women. I will also investigate whether the masculinity or femininity of the bearer is affected by having a tattoo. Lastly, I shall discuss social class and any effect class may have on who gets a tattoo and who does not.

In order to examine these questions I have reviewed literature on stigma, appearance through fashion and gender, appearance announcing identity and identity as a member of a subculture. I then discuss the methodology including selection of the sample, issues of access, interviewing, aspects of questionnaire structure, ethical issues and methods and coding of the analysis.

Hopefully, this dissertation will serve to clarify any misconceptions the reader may have about tattooing. Who knows, maybe after reading this dissertation **you** may feel the urge to get tattooed!

## Chapter One - The Body As Canvas:-Tattoos Inscribing Identity

In all societies from tribal to western cultures the body is dressed whether it be with clothes, jewellery or paint. Dress and adornment play symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles in the presentation of the self. According to Wilson (1985:3) dress is 'unspeakably meaningful'. The earliest forms of clothing or means of covering the body were adornments such as body painting, jewellery, scarifications, tattoos, masks and constricting of the neck and waist. Many of these practices served to deform, reform and modify or sculpt the body in a desired way. It was not just women who practiced these modifications but men and children too. There appears to be a widespread human desire to stretch the limitations of the body in aid of appearance.

Wilson believes dress in general serves to fulfil a number of aesthetic, social and psychological functions, tying them together and expressing them all simultaneously. This is true just as much in relation to modern dress and fashion as it was of ancient dress and particularly relevant when discussing tattooing for the purpose of this dissertation.

Fashion is considered to be essential to the world of modernity and mass communication. Wilson (1985:12) visualises fashion biologically as a kind of connective tissue of our cultural organism. It is in this way that fashion acts as an outlet for the expression of individual or group identities. However, a paradox exists between expressing one's own individual 'unique' identity by way of dress (in copying a particular style), thus following others. How can one project the image of a unique identity, for example, by purchasing a pair of the newest mass produced Nike training shoes?

Appearance matters greatly to most people and as a result there exists many tools available to shape, modify and perfect it. Altering appearance can be achieved by the use of cosmetics, clothing, exercise, body piercing, scarification, tattooing or even surgery. In our everyday encounters we are subconsciously visually scanning people we come into contact with in order to make sense of possible interactions that could arise at any given moment. So our perceptions of others and in fact ourselves is central to our understanding of part of the social world that is human symbolic interaction. Uniforms serve as an adequate example of identities that are announced and displayed visually for all to see. Stone (1962:93) provides an example of a policeman's uniform as unmistakably announcing his identity and shaping people's interaction accordingly. Tattoos operate in similar ways to uniforms, they display an individual's membership to a particular group in society that have tattoos, however within this group there is wide differentiation. Having tattoos can sometimes ostracise the individual from other members of society who see the people with tattoos as deviant, however they can also open up a new world of people with a common interest, a select group.

Clothing and adornment are significant according to Steele (1985:45) because of their intimate connection with the self. Clothing projects a particular image of the physical body, the individual's self-awareness and his or her social being. Steele states that recent anthropological studies suggest that clothing and adornment function to improve on nature, make the body more beautiful and in some way more human. Tattoos share an even greater intimate connection with the self, as they are very personal and unique between individuals. Tattoos are an expression of an individual's

personal and inner identity that is displayed on the skin and becomes part of who the person is or would like to be. Just like clothing, tattoos for some individuals serve to beautify the body and improve on nature's mass production of the plain human body.

Tattoos can be aesthetically orientated just as clothes can but can also communicate and express national identity or patriotism. Wilson (1985:179) believes that in earlier times dress could signal direct nationalist or political rebellion. In the sixteenth century, for example, the English prohibited the Irish from wearing their traditional dress. In the eighteenth century after the battle of Culloden and the pacification of the Scottish Highlands the Highlanders were forbidden to wear the kilt and the plaid. In this way becoming tattooed with nationalist emblems such as the thistle, lion rampant, shamrock, British bulldog etc. is a way of expressing belonging to a specific culture or people that can never be taken away. Being stripped of what may be seen as oppositional dress in some instances will not suffice as the tattoo acts almost like a birth mark and cannot be removed without surgical treatment.

In the nineteenth century fashion became one of the many elaborate forms of classification in industrial culture. It was no longer adequate to be recognised as a member of a particular class. Individuals began to immerse themselves in a process of self-announcement as dress became a means by which individual personalities could be displayed. Initially dress symbolised masculine or feminine and then a variety of secondary information was presented depending on the interests of the wearer. Tattoos share a similarity with this concept of fashion displaying gender and announcing identity. However, where fashionable clothes can be removed or changed when one wishes to move with the times, tattoos cannot. Tattoos announce an

identity that will remain constant and be displayed until the individual dies or has the tattoo(s) removed. It is this important factor about the endurance of tattoos that makes most people think extensively before choosing to be tattooed or not. Grumet (1983:488) notes that a major reason for the unhappiness that many individuals experience is simply that tattoos reflect bygone identity struggles which may no longer be relevant. One's quest for self-definition at eighteen years old is likely to be completely different at forty years old. Tattoos also tell a story of past or present identity, a journey of sentimentality and memories.

Increasingly more women are being tattooed nowadays much to the disgust of some people. This could quite possibly be because visually violating male/female gender categories can be seen as threatening to a potential observer. The observer's sense of personal identity and social hierarchy can be challenged; thus creating a response that can be abusive in nature (Chapkis 1986:129). In the case of women who have tattoos it has been reported that tattoo placement is of the utmost importance. Having tattoos in certain places on the body can attract unwanted attention and in some instances verbal abuse. Sanders (1988:414) interviewed one woman who was tattooed on her right bicep. The woman expressed her regret when she was wearing a sleeveless dress and the tattoo was visible. She felt she was no longer as feminine as she was prior to getting the tattoo and subsequently some people thought of her as deviant and 'loose'. According to Sanders (1988:415) men are less inclined than women to define the tattoo primarily as a decorative and intimate addition to the body. The male tattoo is more of an identity symbol, a public announcement of interests, associations and a display of freedom from normative constraints of everyday society. Sanders

advocates that the tattoo most importantly of all represents masculinity. This claim however remains to be substantiated.

Chapkis (1986:129) believes that feminism has been built on a confrontation between sex appropriate behaviour and gendered appearance. Women who experienced their imposed gender role as ill fitting began to challenge the role rather than blaming their anatomy. In this way it is perfectly understandable that women should be tattooed if they so wish. However, it is one thing to walk into a tattoo studio and be tattooed in what may only be an hour or two and another to completely alter societies preconceptions or misconceptions about tattooed women. One would think that society's present thoughts and ideas about tattooed women should be more relaxed due to the increased number of women being tattooed. I shall be investigating if this is true or not, however it is important to note that tattooed individuals are still regarded as a minority although vastly increasing in numbers. No research has been conducted regarding numbers of tattooed women over a period of years so it is impossible to establish accurate numeric comparisons. However, the tattooing of women remains a significant subject to investigate.

Schur (1984:68) states that sociological and feminist critiques of 'the cult of female beauty' have particularly emphasised the fact that physical appearance is much more central to evaluations of women than it is to evaluations of men. The beauty norms used to evaluate women and determine how attractive/unattractive they are remain excessively narrow and unrealistic which can lead to women feeling deficient with regard to their appearance. This pressure by society and indeed the media through

television and magazines could quite possibly lead to some women rejecting pressure to look or dress a certain way and incline them towards being tattooed.

The idea of being judged by one's physical appearance may seem to be an example of injustice in its basic form, however, the use of appearance as an indication of character is widely practised as I have previously mentioned. A vast amount of research produced in the past twenty years supporting the widely held belief that appearance counts. According to Sanders (1988:395) a person's physical appearance affects his or her self-definition, identity and interaction with others. Goffman (1959:24) believes that people use appearance to categorise each other, thus aiding in the anticipating and interpretation of behaviour and helping to co-ordinate social activities.

Sanders suggests that how closely one meets society's criteria for beauty regarding physical appearance is very important. Being defined as physically attractive has an enormous impact on our social relationships. Jones (1984) Cited by Sanders (1988:395) found that attractive people are thought of more frequently, defined as being more healthy, given greater appreciation for their work and are found to be more appealing to interact with. It has also been found that attractive people are more inclined to establish relationships and enjoy more pleasant sexual interactions than those who are not as physically appealing. Their chances of economic success are greater and they are generally perceived as being of high moral character. In addition to this attractive people have more positive self-definitions due to the frequency of their pleasant interactions. They express greater feelings of overall happiness and

possess higher levels of self-esteem according to Berscheid (1973) et al cited by Sanders (1988:396).

A great number of studies carried out over the years have repeatedly confirmed a body halo effect, that is the more attractive a person is perceived to be, the more likely he or she will be attributed with other positive characteristics such as wisdom, intelligence, generosity etc. Finkelstein (1991:49) advocates that being influenced by the physical features of an individual is a basic fact of sociation. Finkelstein also believes that physically distinctive individuals will be socially differentiated perhaps to the point of exploitation and can be regarded with intolerance.

Reading character from physical appearance is still common in today's society even though our understanding has developed enormously. Physical abnormalities and deviations can occur naturally as well as being self inflicted and are not believed to be visitations of the devil or signs of impending disaster anymore. However, there still exist some stereotyped images about people who have tattoos.

This dissertation focuses on tattooing as a form of permanent body alteration and adornment in contemporary society. Choosing to adorn one's body in this way changes the individual's experience of his or her physical self and can alter social interaction (depending on if the tattoo is visible or not). Goffman (1963:65) states that perceptibility of a particular stigma, in this instance tattoos, has an important bearing for individuals in everyday social interaction. In relation to tattoos the level of which the tattoo is visible in everyday encounters will quite possibly shape the way in which people react to the individual. Due to the historical nature of tattooing in the

West the tattoo is mainly defined as an indication of the bearer's alienation from mainstream norms and social networks (Grumet 1983:485). Sanders (1988:397) suggests it is voluntary stigma that symbolically isolates the bearer from mainstream society. Since this deviant labelling is self inflicted it is thought especially discrediting to engage in this practice.

The world of the tattooed and self-stigmatised individual appears to exist as a vast and ever growing subculture in society. Subcultural theories can be used and applied to explain the so-called deviance in terms of the subculture of a specific group. These theories argue that certain groups develop norms and values that in nature are different to those held by other members of society, Hebdidge (1979:102). For example, some groups of criminals may develop norms that encourage and reward criminal activity. Other members of society may believe that such activities are immoral and could strongly disprove of them. Getting tattooed is still frowned upon by many people today especially by employers. Due to tattooing's past image and the stereotypes attached its reputation has not been very favourable i.e. criminals in Japan used to be tattooed as a sign they had committed a crime and during the war prisoner of war camps used to tattoo numbers on prisoners. Criminals and prisoners are quite often depicted in films as having tattoos. Martial arts films love to show heavily tattooed mean-looking *Yakuza* gang members dealing in drugs, guns and killing people.

This raises the question how is getting a tattoo related to becoming part of a subculture? It is easiest to answer by providing an example of tattoos as membership of a particular section or regiment of the armed forces. Coe et al (1993:199) state that

tattoos identify males who are members of highly co-operative groups such as the military and that tattooing is frequently done socially and as a process of male bonding. Males who are members of a particular group tend to acquire similar or identical designs on a specific part of their body i.e. marines often get a blade overlain by a skull on their left shoulder. This common practice among members signifies the seriousness of an individual to join the group. In the case of tattoos pain is the connection and commonality between the members. Each individual goes through the pain of acquiring a tattoo as a show of masculinity and commitment to the group in this rite of passage practice. As well as the pain an individual endures while obtaining a tattoo, the mark of the group is present for the rest of the individual's life. In this way joining a group and having a group tattoo shows lifelong commitment between members. The most striking example of group tattoo membership is the *Yakuza* gangsters. These Japanese men are part of an organised crime syndicate not unlike the Mafia in Italy. Richie (1980:80) states that *Yakuza* members can be instantly recognised by their full body tattoos containing traditional iconography such as various flora and fauna, religious motifs and assorted heroes and folk figures, see over for examples. For the *Yakuza* 'the tattoo is a symbolic costume' according to Raz (1992:219). These gangsters are on a quest for group identity as opposed to personal identity. However, there is a connection between personal identity and group identity. In striving to join a particular group the individual's personal identity exists as a member of that particular group and his or her actions and beliefs are adopted in alignment with that of the group.

Just as fashion through cosmetics or clothes can enhance or display gender, so too can tattoos. Due to very little research being conducted regarding gender and tattoos I

shall endeavour to gain an insight into possible explanations of why more and more women are getting tattooed nowadays. In addition to this I believe it is of the utmost importance to find out why both men and women decide to get tattoos. This is very important as Weber cited by Albrow (1990:99) states, one can explain changes in society with reference to what people do and why they do it. I will be investigating if the reasons are different between the sexes. For example, one could hypothesise that some women get tattoos to enhance their femininity and men get tattoos to enhance their masculinity or display possible group alignment. Many people believe that men are not concerned with their appearance or at least not as much as women are i.e. some men are described as having rugged good looks, a natural and rough beauty. However, this is not entirely true, in recent years there has been more emphasis placed on men's appearance. For example, special skincare products have been formulated and advertised for the male population and special aftershave gift sets now also include various skincare lotions and potions. More and more men seem to be taking an interest in their appearance than in previous years. This could have a significant affect on tattoo styles. In the past tattoos of snakes, skulls, lovehearts and daggers etc. were very popular especially for sailors and men in the military (Coe, Harmon et al 1993). More recently the popularity of such designs is decreasing and more and more men are choosing contemporary designs and Celtic or tribal bands around the bicep etc. as an alternative to symbols of death and violence, p.t.o. for examples. This concept of changing tattoo styles is another interesting topic that I will be examining in my research.

I have endeavoured to explain some themes related to tattoos such as stigma, appearance through fashion and gender, appearance announcing identity and identity

as a member of a subculture. In the third chapter I intend to find out in more detail through questionnaires and interviews with tattoo artists, why people get tattooed and if the reasons differ between the sexes. I intend to find out if tattoo placement and design is different between the sexes and if so why this is the case. I will be attempting to find out if more women are being tattooed nowadays and if so why? Finally I will be examining the connection (if there is one) between social class and those who get tattooed.

## Chapter Two - Designing A Tattoo Study

This dissertation focuses on important questions surrounding the art of tattooing and aims to answer the most important question of all – why get a tattoo? To answer such questions I needed to choose appropriate methods of gaining the knowledge and insight that was required. For the purposes of my research I decided upon structured interviews with tattoo artists and questionnaires that were to be completed by both tattooed and untattooed respondents.

### Selection of the Sample

I decided to select my sample through my own personal experience and knowledge of places that I term as tattoo conscious areas. Tattoo conscious areas are basically places where there is a likelihood of seeing tattooed individuals. I knew from my own experience that the local gym has many (mainly male) clients who were tattooed and the rock night-club where I work has many patrons with tattoos mainly because of the heavier music policy of the club.

I decided to distribute the majority of my questionnaires through the rock nightclub in a small town in central Scotland and the local gym, as these places would yield the highest proportion of tattooed individuals. I chose not to interview patrons in the nightclub as the music was too loud and it simply was not practical. Questionnaires were also distributed in both the Edinburgh and West Lothian tattoo studios.

Approximately fifty questionnaires were distributed in total amongst the two studios, the nightclub and the gym. Ten untattooed individuals completed a questionnaire with these individuals being selected from the gym and the nightclub. From the forty

tattooed individuals who completed a questionnaire, twenty-two were male and eighteen were female.

McNeil (1985:15) raises the issue of representativeness and whether or not the group of people or situation one is studying is typical of others. If they are then one can safely conclude that what is true for the particular group studied is true of others. If the group is thought of as not entirely representative then one cannot claim that one's conclusions have any relevance to anybody else. The questionnaires were not designed to be representative of society as a whole because this was not possible with such a limited distribution and constraints of time and money. The nightclub, gym and tattoo studios were in my opinion tattoo conscious areas and the questionnaires could be completed efficiently in these places. Standing in the street and asking people if they had a tattoo or not was not a viable option to me as it simply was not practical and could arouse suspicion or make people very defensive or aggressive. How representative the sample actually is can be debated: however, as will become apparent tattoos are not confined to a certain class or type of people anymore.

### Issues of Access

Issues of access have to be dealt with in a very appropriate and careful manner as research can be terminated before it has begun when permission has not been granted. The gatekeepers with whom I had to negotiate access with were the head tattooist in the Edinburgh studio and the tattooist in the small town studio. My boss at the nightclub and the receptionist at the gym had also to be consulted. Access was negotiated with relative ease. In the instance of the nightclub I have been a DJ there for three years now and know all the barstaff and doormen well. I have known the

boss for an even greater amount of time as I used to work for him when he owned a local mobile disco company. I consulted my boss and asked him if I could distribute my questionnaires from the DJ booth in the nightclub when people came to request songs. He said he wouldn't see it as a problem as long as I still did my job. People were more than happy to complete the questionnaires and spoke to me about tattoos and tattooing for some time when they came to the booth. This did create a slight problem as I still had a job to do and on more than one occasion had to dash to the CD players to change the CD. The doormen and barstaff also showed great interest in my research and completed questionnaires and gave their opinions. Ethnomethodology indicates that researchers need background understanding to make sense of quantitative data. Cicourel (1964:111) states that 'a detailed analytic knowledge of common-sense meanings as used in everyday life becomes fundamental for the construction of fixed-choice questionnaires'.

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of clientele in the nightclub have tattoos. There are only two well-known and established nightclubs in the town, the other being a dance superclub. The rock nightclub is the only place for rockers to go for miles around and many do have tattoos.

The other main area of questionnaire distribution was the local gym. Again access was no problem as I am a known face and have frequented this gym for five years now. I negotiated access with the receptionist at the gym and was granted it. I informed the receptionist that I knew many of the men at the gym and I didn't think that they would object to answering my questionnaire. In fact I was later informed by some of the men that completion of the questionnaire was a welcomed break in their

rigorous weightlifting session and it gave them an opportunity to take a proper rest in between exercises.

It is very important to bring to attention the fact that the gym seldom receives any female clients as they are more inclined to attend the hi-tech room facilities. The gym is another tattoo conscious area and tattoos are particularly common amongst the bodybuilders and weightlifters. It is difficult to say why many men who bodybuild have tattoos but I believe the answer lies in the art of body sculpting whether it be by moulding the body into a particular shape by lifting weights or decorating the body with tattoos again changing it visually.

For some time I have been contemplating doing my dissertation on tattooing and when I got my second tattoo in a studio in Edinburgh I spoke to the young tattooist working in the studio about interviewing him at a later date. This laid the essential groundwork almost one year before I was to interview him. When I was having my second tattoo done (one year ago) I talked to him and found out he frequented the rock nightclub now and again. This provided us with a common talking point and I met him two months later when he came to the club. My cousin then had two tattoos done by this tattooist and I was present on both occasions getting myself better known by the artist. Thus, the issue of access was being dealt with for a number of months and trust and friendship was being formed between the tattoo artist and myself.

### Interviewing the Tattoo Artists

When I went to conduct the structured interview with the young Edinburgh tattooist I was surprised to find that a woman, who used to mind me as a child on occasion, had

become a tattoo artist and was working from that studio. She recognised me instantly and agreed to take part in a structured interview. This provided me with the opinions of a female tattoo artist. Before I carried out the two taped interviews it was suggested that I ask the head tattooist who owned the studio. I did so and he agreed to let the other two artists take part in my research. The head tattoo artist was not asked to take part as he was so busy.

After the interviews the young male tattooist suggested that I spoke to a friend of his who owned a studio in a town in central Scotland. He also agreed to be interviewed and I visited his studio directly after interviewing in the Edinburgh studio. I mentioned that I knew the young Edinburgh tattooist and this immediately facilitated conversation which lasted some time. As luck would have it this tattoo artist also visited the rock nightclub and more areas of common interest were identified. Access was instantly granted to anything I wanted from a loan of tattoo magazines, books etc. to dropping in anytime to hand out questionnaires in his studio or simply for a coffee and a chat.

Through the young Edinburgh tattooist I met the town tattooist: thus a snowballing effect had initiated and granted access for me. Due to the overwhelming demand for tattoos of late, tattoo artists have very busy schedules. Snowballing in this case is particularly useful when desirable subjects may be sceptical of the intentions of the researcher according to Hedges (1979:242), Arber (1993:74). The snowballing effect did not stop here. The town tattooist phoned another female tattooist from the West of Scotland and asked her if she would speak to me. She agreed and I asked her if I she would mind if I sent her a copy of the structured interview. She didn't see any

problem with this and the body piercer from the town tattooist just happened to live in the same area as this woman's studio so he handed in the interview papers. I enclosed a SAE for postal return.

Access would have been far more difficult if I hadn't known any tattoo artists or even if I had no tattoos myself. In addition to already having tattoos, snowballing proved a useful method in building rapport between myself and the tattoo artists and is widely used in research according to May (1997:120). If I had not been a known face at the gym I would have not perhaps been treated the same and perhaps the men would have been less inclined to complete the questionnaires.

### The Questionnaire

The questions in my questionnaire were devised in a way that introduced the respondent to both myself and the research that was being conducted. The research topic of tattoos was then introduced asking the respondent to describe how many she or he had and where they were placed on the body. All the time the questionnaire was leading up to the important and interesting question of why did you decide to get tattooed? The questionnaire needed a logical flow introducing new themes within the topic of tattooing such as gender, class, etc.

The questionnaires had to contain both closed and open-ended questions. For example closed questions such as gender – male or female, age range 18-25 etc. and increase or decrease in the number of women being tattooed nowadays compared to the past. Open-ended questions ranged from why did you decide to get tattooed? to what do your friends and family think of your tattoos? Closed structured questions,

according to Newell (1993:101) have the advantage of being less time consuming for the respondent to complete. However, it must be brought to attention that such questions have the disadvantage that they force the respondent to choose between the answers previously provided. This did not prove to be a problem in my research as all my closed questions had only two or three possible answers that existed.

Ranges in questionnaire answers can be very useful if a question is liable to be of a sensitive nature, for example, how much money do you earn in a year? or age?.

Ranges such as £10,000 - £15,000 per year regarding earnings or 36-45 or 56 and over regarding age can be less inhibiting. I used age ranges in my questionnaire, as I believed exact age was not crucial.

The questionnaire was piloted on my family and friends. Approximately ten questionnaires were distributed to my uncle, cousins and friends. At the time the questionnaires did not give rise to any joke answers or problems such as questions which may be interpreted as offensive in any way.

#### Ethical Issues and Issues of Confidentiality

Ethical issues and issues of confidentiality are of great importance in any research undertaken by sociologists. Questioning people about their tattoos may not seem to unearth any sensitive feelings or uneasiness on the part of the researched. However, it is important to note that if a person regrets their tattoos or their tattoos reflect a past identity that has now been discarded then the person may become upset. I was aware of this problem before conducting my research and luckily I did not encounter it.

Confidentiality should always be assured to anyone partaking in a study or research. Although some people may enjoy having their photograph or name mentioned in the research it is not everyone who would want this. This is especially true if the person is involved in illegal activities; however having a tattoo is not illegal as long as the person is over eighteen years old. One girl did complete the questionnaire putting her age down as under eighteen and having a tattoo. I asked her how old she was when she got the tattoo done and she replied fifteen years old. I assured her that the questionnaire was confidential and her name would never be mentioned as the tattooist who done the tattoo in the first place could get into trouble with the authorities.

On interviewing the three tattoo artists I assured them that their names and studios would not be mentioned in the research unless they so desired.

Sensitive questions are an important consideration in any research and I had hoped that my questionnaire would not give cause for complaint or insult any of the respondents. From all the questionnaires that were completed I received one complaint from the owner of the Edinburgh based tattoo studio. He believed the question on tattoos increasing or decreasing a women's or man's femininity or masculinity was offensive. He stated that it was this stereotypical image of people with tattoos that one was trying to change. I spoke with the tattooist and we both came to an amicable agreement that the questionnaires closed questions on tattoos affecting men's and women's masculinity or femininity should include increase, decrease or **do not affect**. Once the questionnaires were amended with or **do not affect** the tattooist was satisfied.

The three structured interviews with the tattoo artists were all conducted in the two separate studios. A micro cassette recorder was placed on a table in between myself and the artist during the interview. The questions were asked from a guide sheet prepared prior to the interviews (see appendix for copy of questions). The interviews were structured yet carried out in an informal and relaxed manner not unlike a regular chat. Nachmias and Nachmias (1996:239) outline the importance of making the respondent feel at ease thus perhaps facilitating greater flow of conversation and information. Although interviews proved very useful to me and were essential to my research, the understanding gained through participant observation provided valuable guidance in both interviewing and interpretation.

#### Methods of Analysis

My analysis was guided through my own background knowledge of the context of tattooing. This was achieved through participant observation. Participant observation played an important role in setting the scene for my research and laying the foundations for the preparation of my whole project. Through past experience of being tattooed I have learned first hand the process by which people go through from initially choosing a clean and reputable studio to design and placement of the tattoo itself.

Participant observation was most prevalent during my research when I was being tattooed myself. During the course of this dissertation I received my third tattoo and once again experienced first hand the tattooing process from design choice to the finished product. I was not too apprehensive about conducting my interviews with the

tattoo artists as I had previously visited studios and knew they were not places to fear. The immaculate tattoo studio has replaced the image of the seedy tattoo parlour. There has been a movement away from the word parlour, and its connotations, to studio, emphasising and recognising the artistry in tattooing. Tattoo studios often resemble food take-away shops, thus one enters and purchases a tattoo to take away. The one difference being that the meal only last ten minutes and the tattoo last forever.

### Coding the Analysis

Mason (1996:107) advocates the importance of using a system of sorting, organising and indexing data that is consistent across the whole data set in any research. The same system was used when analysing questions in the questionnaires. All the possible answers were looked at and where necessary the respondents were subdivided by gender and whether or not they had a tattoo. A tally was made of how many males and females with tattoos answered the prospective possibilities. The next stage was to look for groups of answers with a connection or common theme. Unique responses were not regarded as significant.

The interviews with the tattoo artists and the questionnaires proved very successful indeed and covered all the questions that needed to be answered for my research on tattooing. The next chapter focuses in detail on the main questions of this dissertation and derives the answers from the research that was carried out.

## Chapter Three - Decoding The Marks On The Body:- an analysis of tattoo choice

Tattooing could be seen as a process in which individuals pass through various barriers. From my own experience of being tattooed (three times now) I can describe firsthand what it is like to get a tattoo. One must initially pass through the outer barrier of the studio that is of course the door. Then one must look at the tattoo flashes (design boards) on the walls and decide what design it is that is desirable unless one already has an idea in mind. One must then talk to the tattoo artist about the viability of the design and where it is to be placed. Once this has been settled the issue of cost may perhaps be raised as this is a purchase just like any other. The next thing a person normally asks is if the tattoo can be done that day. It depends on how busy the studio is at that time and what time the client enters the studio as there may be a whole studio full of people waiting to be tattooed first.

This brings one to the next barrier that must be overcome – that is one's patience. It is not uncommon to wait in a studio all day to be tattooed i.e. anything from one or two to five or six hours. It all depends on how intent and keen the client is on being tattooed that day. Courage has to be built up and that courage may not last two or more days if one has to come back. An interesting observation regarding tattoo studios is the style of music that is played. In Edinburgh heavy rock music was played but in the town studio a variety of music was played from Elvis to Frank Sinatra to punk and heavy rock. This was done to put the customer at ease and dispel the myth that tattoo studios are full of bikers and play loud heavy metal music all the

time. In the town studio the client could choose his or her own music to listen to whilst being tattooed. This makes for a better tattooing environment for the artist working on the relaxed client who may not squirm or move around as much in a more relaxed state.

The pain barrier is perhaps the final obstacle to be overcome in the process of being tattooed. Second to asking the question of cost is the question of pain and does it hurt? On a personal level the degree of pain will vary between individuals as everyone's pain threshold is different. However, one thing is universal and that is it does hurt! The process involves a needle vibrating in and out at an incredible speed dipped in ink creating an indelible mark on the skin that will withstand all the elements and remain there for a lifetime. Why on earth do people go through this perhaps stressful (to some) and painful (to all) process?

At the beginning of this dissertation I stated that there was a connection between tattooing and fashion. On interviewing three tattoo artists it has become clear that differences and similarities exist regarding tattoo and fashion trends in tattooing. I would like to emphasise that unlike popular trends in clothes, hairstyles, piercing etc. tattoos capture fashion at a particular moment in time like a snapshot of tattooing in a certain era due to their permanence. All three tattoo artists believe that tattoos have undergone a change from the early designs of swallows, anchors, snakes and daggers etc. to more artistic and sometimes unbelievably detailed designs ranging from complex Celtic, tribal and contemporary pieces to portraits. Any photograph can be

replicated exactly onto skin, see illustrations overleaf. Tattooing has borne witness to the artistic capabilities of certain individuals who have pioneered cutting edge designs, thus pushing the boundaries of what is possible to the very limit in the world of tattooing. One of the tattoo artists thought it was very interesting to note that 'old school' tattoos such as the previously mentioned swallows, skulls, snakes and daggers etc. may never have gone completely out of fashion but merely become less or more prominent at a certain time. If this is true then the indelible mark of the tattoo will never go completely out of fashion although fashion is ever changing. One of the tattoo artists believed that the tattoo designs would go full circle and move from anchor, loveheart and name scroll etc. to gothic, tribal, Celtic etc. and back again. Old school designs such as lovehearts etc. are also being done nowadays in a contemporary style, p.t.o. for examples. To a great extent tattoo fashion is only limited by the imagination of the people. These people may enter tattoo competitions displaying their unusual and artistic designs for all to see. In turn readers of tattoo magazines such as Savage or Skin Deep may see photographs of the award winning tattoos from the conventions and competitions all over the world and want the same design done in their local tattoo studio. Tattooing is at the forefront of technology now with numerous websites on the Internet dedicated to the tattoo fans displaying all the weird and wonderful designs possible. This is undoubtedly far removed from the stereotypical images of old depicting seedy, dirty tattoo parlours strewn with the unsavoury members of society. Tattoo parlours have been renamed to tattoo **studios** emphasising the artform, thus creating a more professional image of tattooing in moving with the increased professionalism of many tattoo **artists** today.

Perhaps one of the most important and interesting questions of all is the question – why did you decide to get a tattoo? The answer to this question depends on the individual and reasons can be extremely varied indeed. The tattoo artists gave many reasons why they thought their clients got tattooed. Some people are not happy with the way they look and are bored of looking at plain skin, some do not want to conform to the rest of society so do something extravagant to get away from the mainstream i.e. get tattooed. Many people get tattooed to express individuality, “a desire to demonstrate a personal and unmistakable identity” Schiffmacher and Riemschneider (1996:15). One tattooist believed that “some younger adults’ parents are not very nice to them so they do something a bit extravagant, a bit naughty like get a tattoo” (tape 1:022). In this instance the shock value is the main reason and the tattoo artist himself got tattooed mainly for this reason. Originally in western society Lundry and Dubouis-Bonnefond (1988:63) state that tattoos were used as a rite of passage into highly co-operative groups such as the army, navy and French Foreign Legion etc. showing that a boy had made the transition into adulthood and was now a man. Nowadays all the tattoo artists believed the main reason for being tattooed was fashion. Many famous pop stars and actors have tattoos and people see them on these influential people and want the same.

Questionnaire respondents were asked why they decided to get a tattoo, thirty-nine respondents answered this question (twenty-one males and eighteen females) with the results being very varied indeed. The most common answer (five males and nine females) was because tattoos looked good, that they were aesthetically pleasing and that they simply liked them. The next most common answer varied between the sexes: for men four got a tattoo because of their friends influence, four because of

friend's influence in the army and four because they appreciated the artwork that goes into tattooing. Women's next most common answer to why they got a tattoo was because they felt like a change (two females) and because the tattoo was a birthday present (two females). One male got tattooed because he was bored of plain skin, one on impulse, one to achieve an image and one to see how sore it was, an indication that he could stand the pain. The remainder of female respondents answered the following – friends' influence (one female), cover-up of unwanted tattoo (one female), admiration of the artwork that goes into tattooing (one female), attractiveness of tattoos (one female) and on impulse (one female).

In summary, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to get a tattoo because of a friend's influence and in particular instances because of army friendships. Female respondents gave a variety of reasons why they got tattooed as one can see but none are as numerically as significant as the answer relating to how tattoos look good, an admiration of the art and the attractiveness of tattoos. Many respondents were not truly aware of why they got tattooed and perhaps there still exists somewhat of an air of mystery surrounding the question – why? One thing is certain: tattoos can be bright and colourful, amusing and uplifting adding a degree of pzazz and flare into life and onto an otherwise plain body.

I stated previously that more and more women were getting tattooed nowadays and questionnaire answers confirmed this. When asked – do you think more women are getting tattooed nowadays than in the past? Respondents were unanimous on their answer. Ten untattooed respondents answered yes with no one answering no. Forty tattooed respondents answered yes with no one answering no. When asked why they

believed more and more women were getting tattooed nowadays the results were a little varied. Untattooed respondents were very widespread in their answers – three thought tattoos were a beauty statement, one male thought it was due to fashion, one thought to show strength and one male did not know why. One female thought more women were getting tattooed to strive for equality (because men had tattoos so women could too), one female thought tattoos were a beauty statement and one female did not know why.

Tattooed respondents were slightly more definite as to why they thought more women were getting tattooed nowadays. Nine males gave fashion as the reason, six thought tattoos were more socially acceptable nowadays and two males thought that more women were getting tattooed to demonstrate total equality. One male thought women have less inhibitions nowadays, one male thought tattoos are more artistic than macho nowadays and one thought more women got tattooed so they could reveal it in nightclubs. One male did not know why and one male said he thought more women were getting tattooed because they (tattoos) were ugly, although I think he may have misinterpreted the question.

Eight tattooed female respondents gave fashion as their reason for the increase in women getting tattoos, three thought tattoos were more socially acceptable nowadays and three respondents did not know why. One female thought tattoos expressed individuality and one female believed women were stronger now and could do anything men could do. One female respondent thought that the smaller more intricate designs of today enticed more women to get a tattoo as opposed to the larger

designs that men have. One respondent thought more women were getting tattooed because they seen their friends with them.

In summary of the findings, fashion seems to be the most common reason why more women are being tattooed nowadays. Tattoos are being seen as more socially acceptable now and have become another part of women's make-up just like earrings, bracelets etc. One of the tattoo artists believed that women have just extended their facial make-up onto their bodies in an adornment and beautification process. All three tattoo artists believed that society has become more open to women having tattoos but it still depends on what design is tattooed for the tattoo to be classed as visually suitable or not. In looking closely at what designs most women choose, for example, the dolphin or oriental symbol one can see that feminine designs are common and most women prefer them to gothic or large patriotic 'male' tattoos, see overleaf for more examples.

I previously touched on the notion of tattoo design and placement and how this could differ between the sexes. Closer examination through the questionnaire and interviews with the tattoo artists has found that tattoo choice and placement on the body does in fact differ between men and women.

I shall outline the most popular tattoo designs and styles which women get and compare them to the one's men choose. According to the tattoo artists women tend to choose smaller more intricate and feminine designs to men. It is not to say, however, that men never get teddy bear or butterfly tattoos but these type of tattoos are not as common as others are. Women are more likely to choose less fierce or threatening

animals than men, for example, dolphins, unicorns, butterflies etc. Cute cartoon characters and lovehearts tend to be popular for women today but the most popular tattoo of all is the Chinese or Japanese symbols. The tattoo artists believed they could do these tattoos in their sleep they are so popular (tape 1:045). It was suggested to me by one of the artists that the popularity of these tattoos is due to the media influence and in particular to the influence of female pop groups such as the Spice Girls or the All Saints etc. Women see these pop icons with tattoos and want the same. The media is a powerful influence especially where tattoos are concerned. One of the tattooists is currently tattooing a full tribal armpiece on a male who had seen the design on the actor George Clooney in the film Dusk 'Til Dawn. Of course the tattoo was painted on the actor for the film and not really tattooed.

The image of women with tattoos as being butch or deviant is slowly changing and it is becoming increasingly more acceptable for women to have tattoos. Tattooists are reporting greater numbers of women being tattooed and many designs are being seen as aesthetically pleasing and feminine such as tribal ankle bracelets, cute animals i.e. dolphins, flowers, lovehearts etc. p.t.o. for examples of these designs.

According to one of the tattoo artists men can choose almost anything (with the exception of lovehearts on their buttocks or other effeminate designs (tape 1:438)) but they tend to choose more aggressive or patriotic tattoos than women. Men can choose traditionally masculine tattoo designs such as snakes, lion rampants, panthers, devils, oriental tattoos, skulls, tribal and Celtic etc. see examples overleaf. One of the tattooists stated that men still get cartoon character tattoos just like women but size differs between the sexes. Men get tweety bird, thumper etc. but very large ones. For

example, a man would get a large thumper (approx. 5 or 6 inches) on the shoulder compared to a woman who would get a small thumper (approx. 2 to 3 inches). The most popular style of tattoos for men today is the tribal or Celtic designs. This could be attributed to the talent of tattoo artists today, better equipment, better equipment and a current surge in the popularity of tribal styles in the West through the media i.e. tattoo magazines, films and popstars such as Robbie Williams who recently got a tribal armpiece tattooed.

Tattoo placement varies between men and women. The most common places for women to get tattooed are the shoulderblades, ankles, hip and stomach according to the tattoo artists. The questionnaires also reflected this choice of site on the body. When asked why women chose to get tattooed in these places more so than the arms, chest, legs etc. the tattoo artists believed this was because tattoos on the shoulderblades etc. could be hidden by most clothing and shown when required. For example, by wearing a shorter t-shirt in a nightclub etc. to make the tattoo visible. Men's tattoos tend to be mostly located on the arms and the shoulders according to the tattoo artists and questionnaire respondents, although men can get tattooed everywhere. Men like to show off their tattoos more than women do and this is reflected in the places they get tattooed. This displaying of tattoos is particularly prominent in Japan among the *yakuza* gangsters. These men like to show off their tattoos in bathhouses and during festivals etc. displaying their allegiance and connection with the syndicate to which they belong, Richie (1980:37).

Two questions were asked to respondents regarding tattoos affecting their femininity and masculinity. Forty respondents answered these two questions, twenty-two were

male and eighteen were female. The questions were as follows:- do you think tattoos increase, decrease or do not affect a woman's femininity? And do you think tattoos increase, decrease or do not affect a man's masculinity? Seven tattooed male respondents said no effect, no effect and ten tattooed female respondents said the same. Six males said it depends on tattoo placement and design and tattoos can increase a woman's femininity and increase a man's masculinity. Four female respondents said tattoos decrease or do not affect a woman's femininity and increase a man's masculinity.

Two untattooed male respondents answered decrease to a woman's femininity and no effect to a man's masculinity. Three untattooed male respondents said no effect to a woman's femininity and increase or no effect to a man's masculinity. Two untattooed female respondents said no effect to both a woman's femininity and a man's masculinity

In summary, a significant number of tattooed and untattooed male and female respondents said that tattoos have no effect on a man's masculinity or a woman's femininity. No one said that tattoos increased a woman's femininity and decreased a man's masculinity, however one tattooed male respondent said decrease to femininity and increase to masculinity and two tattooed female respondents answered the same. Thus, there is mixed beliefs about whether tattoos affect the bearer's femininity or masculinity but the majority of respondents in this study said tattoos had no effect regarding this issue.

I believed that social class should be given some consideration regarding who gets tattooed. Schiffmacher (1996:20) states “In the Western world tattoos are mainly associated with those belonging to a lower social class – criminals, sailors, whores, soldiers, adventurers, perverts and the like – and at the other end of the scale with the eccentrics of high society, the rich and aristocratic, intellectuals, artists and all those who make life more colourful”. Tattoos have had somewhat of an ill reputation over the years being associated with charlatans and the like. However, as will become apparent social class does not determine who gets a tattoo and who does not.

Forty tattooed respondents answered the class question – do you think tattoos are confined to a particular class of people? Twenty-eight respondents answered no, seven respondents answered yes and five respondents answered that they used to be confined to a particular class but not now. Ten untattooed respondents were asked the same question on class. Eight respondents answered no, one answered they used to be but not now and one respondent did not know.

In summarising the views on tattoos and social class one can state that tattoos are not confined to a particular class in society anymore. The three tattoo artists were asked the same question on class. One artist believes that anyone gets tattooed nowadays from working to upper class, for example, he has tattooed doctors, lawyers, etc. One artist stated that the clients in the studio were from all social classes but in particular most clients were working class. He believed this was due to the location of his studio and believed if he was located in a city he would get more of a diverse range of classes frequenting the studio.

In today's society tattoos are not confined to a particular social class, age or type of person as long as they are over eighteen! It is interesting to note, however, that tattoos on a person's forearms or hands are not generally acceptable in most higher paid employment so those persons with tattooed forearms or hands will be more likely in manual jobs or the armed forces.

## Marked For Life? - A Conclusion

Tattooing has now become mainstream and has resurrected its image, yet there has been little or no research conducted into this artform. Tattooing has not been taken very seriously, whether as artform, subculture or social 'problem', which may have been in part responsible for its lack of investigation. Tattooing has been hindered by stereotypes and falsifying myths that have tarnished its reputation. Hopefully, this dissertation has provided a greater insight into tattooing and dispelled some of the stereotypes that society has constructed.

In contemporary society people are very much concerned with their appearance and identity. Tattooing in particular is enjoying an immense and ever growing popularity as I have endeavoured to illustrate. Tattoos are no longer confined to a particular social class. There are tattoo designs and styles available to appeal to every possible taste. Identities, alignments and interests are proclaimed for all to see on the body of the tattooed individual. Of course tattoos are not to everyone's taste but to those who have a genuine interest in the art tattoos can bring a great amount of joy and pleasure.

Fashion has had a significant impact on tattooing over the years just as it has affected clothing styles. There has been a noticeable change in the designs people are getting nowadays compared to fifty or so years ago. Tribal, Celtic, oriental and contemporary tattoos are now very popular compared to very simple designs such as skulls, roses, hearts and animals etc. of the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s. This change in style has been mainly due to the introduction of better equipment and to the customer demands for particular new designs.

Tattoos share a similarity with fashion displaying gender and announcing identity. This identity can be of an individual or group orientated nature. Just recently I observed four young men all getting football badges tattooed on their persons. Two got a Rangers badge and two got a Hearts badge. In this instance the men were displaying group membership of their favourite team and group membership of the tattooed population, p.t.o. for examples of these tattoos. Just as Steele (1985:45) believes clothing can project a particular image of the physical body, the individual's self-awareness and his or her social being, so can tattoos. Tattoos have become a means by which individuals can express their personal and unique inner identities by displaying them on their skin. Amongst sociological theorists, Goffman's ideas have been especially useful regarding appearance and how people use appearance to categorise each other, in turn interpreting behaviour and helping communication. Just like clothing, tattoos are a means of decorating nature's mass-produced plain human body.

#### Regrets – they've had a few

The stereotyped view of tattoos is that they later become a source of regret. In my research I wanted to transcend this stereotype. It is true that some people wish they had not been tattooed in the first place or wish that they had chosen a different design but this is not applicable to everyone. My focus was especially on why people chose to have a tattoo of a particular kind in the first instance.

People are now constructing their own identities through various means whether it be by dress, jewellery and adornment such as piercing, tattoos and perhaps more

extremely plastic surgery. People's appearance no longer needs to be fixed as it was before. Numerous tools exist that can serve to alter a person's appearance and image, thus projecting an identity they are happy with.

Gender has been of great concern in my research and therefore an area I shall focus on for the remainder of this conclusion. The noticeable increase in the number of women being tattooed at present urges one to ask why this may be the case. Fashion was stated as the most common reason why an increased number of women are being tattooed. In addition, tattoos are being seen as more socially acceptable and have in many instances become another part of a woman's make-up just like a piece of jewellery. Women are now challenging stereotypical essentialist gender roles regarding appearance. Women need no longer adhere to such narrow cultural norms of what is seen as beautiful or attractive as this idea of what is physically or sexually appealing is being redefined as we enter into the twenty first century.

Men and women alike find tattoos aesthetically pleasing, contrary to Sanders' (1988:415) view that men are less inclined than women to define the tattoo primarily as a decorative and intimate addition to the body. Sanders also believes that for men tattoos above all represent masculinity. However, it seems that tattoos are no longer so closely identified with masculinity anymore. Perhaps in previous years the tattoo designs of skulls, snakes and daggers etc. were particularly masculine at the time, but changing styles have altered views and many males and females do not see tattoos as having any affect on masculinity or femininity.

This dissertation has aimed to spark interest in the world of tattooing and possibly initiate further research on the subject. Greater resources would be required to conduct an increased number of in-depth interviews with more tattooed and untattooed respondents and tattoo artists. In turn, more time and money would also be required. It would also be interesting to interview older people, as I believe they would highlight differences between the generations. A cross-cultural comparison could also be done between two or more countries examining any possible differences that may be present in relation to various cultural and religious practices and approaches to tattooing.

In conclusion, tattooing is not for everyone but I hope that this dissertation has provided a greater understanding of the subject. More importantly if after reading this dissertation you are thinking of getting a tattoo remember – a tattoo is for life and not just for Christmas!

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## Appendices

1. Example of questionnaire
2. Example of structured interview with tattoo artists

### 1. Questionnaire:-

I am a Sociology student from the University of Stirling and currently conducting a study on tattoos and appearance for my final year's dissertation.

Your completion of this questionnaire would be greatly appreciated.

I thank you in advance.

Q1. Do you have a tattoo?

Yes / No (please circle)

(If **no** please go to question 6).

Q2. How many tattoos do you have?

Q3. Please describe your tattoos and where they are placed on your body.

Q4. Why did you decide to get tattooed?

Q5. What do your friends and family think about your tattoos?

E.g. did they act differently towards you once you got your tattoo(s)?

Q6. Do you think more women are getting tattooed nowadays than in the past?

Yes / No (please circle)

Q7. If yes, why?

Q8. Do you think tattoos increase, decrease or do not affect a woman's femininity?

Increase / Decrease / No Effect (please circle)

Q9. Do you think tattoos increase, decrease or do not affect a man's masculinity?

Increase / Decrease / No Effect (please circle)

Q10. What do you think about people with tattoos?

Q11. Do you think tattoos are confined to a particular class of people?

Q12. Are you male or female?

Male / Female (please circle)

Q13. Age under 18

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56 and over (please circle)

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Would you be willing to take part in a more in-depth interview at a later date?

If so, please leave your name and telephone number or contact address below.

Thank you.

Tony Lawrence

Undergraduate – University of Stirling

## 2. Structured Interview:-

Q1. Why do you think people decide to get a tattoo?

Do you think impulse purchasing is quite common?

Q2. Do you think there has been an increase in the number of women getting tattooed nowadays compared to 10 or 20 years ago?

If so, why?

Q3. Has there been an increase in the number of tattoo studios in Scotland in recent years?

Q4. Has there been an increase in clients coming to your studio for tattoos?

Q5. Do you think the clientele has changed over recent years?

Q6. Are there many female tattoo artists in Scotland?

- Q7. Do women choose different designs to men?
- Q8. What do women tend to choose?
- Q9. What do men tend to choose?
- Q10. Are tattoo styles changing?  
Eg.. are tattoos related to a particular fashion?
- Q11. Where do women tend to get tattooed?
- Q12. What is the most common place for women?
- Q13. Where do men get tattooed?
- Q14. What is the most common place for men to get tattooed?
- Q15. What is the most common age of clients in your studio?
- Q16. Are most of your clients from the same class in society i.e. middle, working or upper class?
- Q17. Do you think society's attitudes are changing towards men and women with tattoos?

